

Michigan stigmatic on path toward sainthood

An unassuming husband and father who carried the wounds of Christ for nearly two decades could be declared a saint in the not so distant future. Bishop John F. Doerfler of the Diocese of Marquette, Michigan, opened the cause for canonization in early November of last year for Irving C. “Francis” Houle.

“Everyone I spoke to about him unanimously spoke in witness to the holiness of his life,” Bishop Doerfler said. “The life of Irving Houle gives a good example of what a holy husband and father looks like. He laid down his life in loving service and sacrifice for others.”

Follow the Cause

For more information about Irving C. “Francis” Houle and his cause for sainthood, visit: irvingfrancishoule.org

Houle was born in 1925 in Wilson, Michigan, and was raised in a devout Catholic family. He was the sixth of seven children. After graduating from St. Joseph High School in 1944, he served overseas in the Army during World War II. He married Gail LaChapelle in November 1948, and they raised five children. Irving worked a variety of jobs over the years, including positions at Montgomery Ward and finally as a plant manager at Engineered Machine Products in Escanaba before retiring.

He and his family attended St. Joseph and St. Patrick Church in Escanaba where he was a Knight of Columbus. His wife described him as a quiet man who practiced the Faith in a similar manner. He was devoted to the Stations of the Cross and could be found praying them daily at 3 p.m. at the parish church. Over the years, Houle developed a reputation as a holy man and often was asked for prayers by those who had specific needs.

A miracle

Deacon Terry Saunders, a retired state-police detective, certainly can attest to the holiness of Houle's life. Saunders claims that more than 25 years ago he was healed from cancer through the touch of Houle. Today the deacon is the head of the Association for the Cause of Sainthood for Irving "Francis" Houle.

"In December 1992, I was diagnosed with an intramuscular tumor in my leg that had metastasized to my lungs," said Saunders, who is a member of St. Anne Catholic Church in Escanaba. "My physician had given me six months to live. I was obviously devastated, as I was just 36 years old and had three young children."

During his sickness, ladies from his church who were bringing him holy Communion knew of Houle and his healing ministry, "The ladies asked me if I wanted Francis to come pray over me," Saunders recalled. "I said, 'Why not?' It couldn't hurt, as I had nothing to lose. I was dying."

At the time, Saunders described himself as a Sunday Catholic at best.

"The very first time he came to our house, he (Irving) told me that Jesus loved me and he cried," Saunders said. "He told me how sad he was about the situation, and he said he was going to ask Jesus to heal me. He then prayed with me. No one had ever told me that Jesus loved me, nor was I used to seeing someone cry over me."

Over the following months, Saunders went on to receive some experimental chemotherapy. Houle would visit Saunders upon his return home.

"One week after coming home, I did not have the same level of discomfort as I had in the past. In fact, one day I was walking down a road, and I thought, 'Maybe I am getting

better,'" Saunders related.

"I came to learn that (Irving) had been in bed the whole week, but he had prayed to take my suffering. I should have been the one knocked out in bed."

In July 1993, Saunders went into surgery, and the doctors removed several lesions from his chest.

"That's all they could find," he said. "Where before there were thousands of lesions, there was no more cancer."

The stigmata

Deacon Saunders witnessed firsthand Houle's reception of the stigmata – the flesh wounds of Christ.

"A few days after Easter in 1993, Irving came to my house for his normal visit, and he looked tired and haggard," Saunders told Our Sunday Visitor. "I asked him what was wrong, and he raised up his hands. He had two small, purple marks in the center of each hand, and he said they were painful. When I saw them, I fell down on the couch. I knew it was the marks of Christ, and I thought, 'Thank you Jesus for dying for me.'"

Saunders added that Houle was as confused as everyone else as to why he received the stigmata.

"Irving later told me that he was given a dual mission from Jesus and Mary to suffer the Passion every night between midnight and 3 a.m. to save sinners and to touch his (God's) children," Saunders explained. "His entire suffering was for the conversion of sinners."

The ministry

The stigmata launched Houle into a public healing ministry until his death in 2009, a span of 16 years. It was a ministry practiced across the United States, mainly focused in the

upper Midwest. Hundreds of people would line up to be touched and prayed over by Irving, usually after a healing Mass. Saunders has heard testimonies of the blind being able to see, the crippled being able to walk and babies being born after years of miscarriages or infertility.

“While the physical healings are incredible, it was the spiritual healings that moved Houle the most,” Saunders said. “People went to confession after decades of being away from the sacraments or began praying the Rosary or attending Eucharistic adoration. The love of God and the truth of the Catholic Church suddenly became real for so many people who were touched by Irving. That was certainly true for me.”

Members of the association noted that it is not the stigmata that is the reason for the petition for sainthood, but rather it is Houle’s everyday sanctity.

“We petitioned because of his holiness, devotion to God and dedication to others,” said Saunders, who worked with Houle for the last 16 years of his life.

“He was a family man who got up every day and went to work to put food on the table and provide for his family just like me and you. God then chose him to be a conduit to bring peace, love and joy to people, and he did.”

Eddie O’Neill writes from Michigan.