

U.S. bishops to vote on new sainthood causes, both from Louisiana's Cajun country

The U.S. bishops will be getting acquainted with the heart of Louisiana's Cajun country this week through hearing about two of its best. That's because, according to canonical norms, the body of bishops will be consulted and asked to voice their consent in moving forward with two causes for canonization recently opened in the Bayou State's Diocese of Lafayette.

Lafayette's Bishop J. Douglas Deshotel, who opened both causes together in 2020, will make the case why the Church should consider declaring two saints from his diocese whose lives looked as different as their holiness and bond to Christ looked the same. They are Charlene Richard, a girl who died of leukemia at age 12, and Auguste Pelafigue, a pious educator devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, who died at 89.

At the bishops' last assembly in June, they voiced consent for another cause for canonization sponsored by the Diocese of Lafayette, a priest military chaplain killed inadvertently in 1942 by U.S. fire while a Japanese prisoner of war. The bishops' consent to moving forward with these causes is a formality, but it is an important step that expresses the importance of collegiality and communion in the pursuit of canonizations.

Finding her own 'Little Way'

It was reading the life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux that changed the ordinary, average life of Charlene Richard, whose Catholic faith was no less ordinary before that transformative encounter with the saint of the "Little Way." While attending Mass and praying the Rosary were about the extent of

Charlene's faith life during her childhood, the Little Flower's story compelled young Charlene to ask her grandmother if it might be possible for her to become a saint, too, by having a prayer life similar to the saint's. It seems that, by God's grace, this providential encounter with St. Thérèse was preparing Charlene, and even those around her, for the difficult road ahead.

After her mental status indicated the need for a close medical examination, an accelerated battle with leukemia was announced to her by the newly ordained hospital chaplain. In the face of great pain, Charlene faced her death not just peacefully, but cheerfully, as attested to by many of those around her as she lay dying. Charlene remained intent on achieving holiness and resolved to make her death less about herself and more of an opportunity to pray for others and their salvation – similar to St. Thérèse, who faced her last illness and untimely death at age 24.

Charlene's fame quickly spread, along with a cult of devotion. Over the decades since her death in 1959, Charlene's grave in her hometown of Richard, Louisiana, has attracted an increasing number of people who seek her heavenly intervention for a variety of needs. These included the bishop of Lafayette when Charlene died, who often referred to her as a saint.

The heart of a teacher

Auguste Pelafigue emigrated with his parents from France in 1889 when he was a year old. "Nonco" – a nickname originating from the French word for uncle – made his home in Louisiana for nearly nine decades, during which time many came to love him for his avuncular style.

Pelafigue committed himself to the life of a teacher, serving in both public and Catholic schools. He lived in a simple two-room bedroom in Arnaudville, Louisiana, surrounded by a wide array of animals he raised. A strong devotion to the Sacred

Heart of Jesus shaped his life from his days in college. It was at that time that he became active in helping spread devotion through his lifelong commitment to the Apostleship of Prayer. Traveling on foot, Pelafigue went door to door spreading the Gospel and encouraging pious devotion. The zealous forerunner of the New Evangelization was awarded the *Pro Ecclesia Et Pontifice* medal in 1953 by Pope Pius XII. A daily Mass attendee, he lived a life mirroring the Sacred Heart he shared with all he met. In God's providence, the day Pelafigue died – June 6, 1977 – was the solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

The stories of such holiness are welcome news for Catholics around the nation, but they take on special significance for the faithful in the diocese itself. In the 1980s, the diocese was ripped apart spiritually and financially as it became one of the first dioceses affected by the modern-day clergy sexual abuse crisis. One former priest and serial pedophilic offender, Gilbert Gauthé, grew to national notoriety after admitting to abusing 37 children and cost the diocese more than \$20 million. The stories and witness of holy men, women and children remind us of the true purpose and mission of the Church in the face of such evil perpetrated in its name – namely the salvation of souls. These causes are a much-needed reminder that, although some seed falls on rocks and thorns, others certainly fall in fertile soil and bear much fruit.

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