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Eileen O'Connor takes next step towards sainthood

Australia is one step closer to getting its next saint with the Vatican advancing the cause for Sydney woman Eileen O'Connor to the title Servant of God.

The significant announcement comes just months after Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, Most Rev. Anthony Fisher OP, began the formal process for the beatification of Eileen when he appointed Rome-based priest Father Anthony Robbie in March as postulator - the person who guides the cause for beatification or canonisation through the Church's rigorous processes for recognising a person as a saint.

"Eileen's was a life of immense suffering and judged by today's standards many would have viewed it as lacking in dignity, value or hope," said Archbishop Fisher. "That she is on her way to possibly being our next saint shows even a short life, marked by incredible suffering, can be an inspiration to all and reminds us of the dignity of every human life."

Fr Robbie said this significant declaration of the Holy See means the task of formally presenting Eileen to the world as an outstanding Australian example of holiness and charitable care can now begin.

"With every passing year since her death a century ago, Eileen O'Connor has grown in the love and devotion of the people of Sydney and of all Australia. Always thinking of others in need despite her own severe hardships, she is an outstanding role model for today's Australian youth and for the lay apostolate in particular," he said.

"May she inspire many others to devote themselves to the needs of the outcast and forgotten as her own life becomes better known."

Born in the inner-Melbourne suburb of Richmond on 19 February 1892, Eileen Rosaline O'Connor suffered a crippling break in her spine at age three and lived her short life in constant nerve pain from what was later diagnosed as tuberculous osteomyelitis.

The O'Connor family moved to Sydney when Eileen was aged 10 and despite her poor health and immense suffering, she co-founded the religious order of Our Lady's Nurses of the Poor with local priest Father Edward McGrath MSC in April 1913.

At a time when no publicly funded health care was available, the order was dedicated to caring for the sick and dying poor in their homes. More commonly known as the Brown Nurses because of their distinctive brown cloaks and bonnets, the order's work continues to this day.

Unable to undertake the work herself, Eileen supported the nurses with prayers and counsel. At just 115cm tall, the nurses lovingly referred to Eileen as "Little Mother."

Former congregational leader and Eileen O'Connor Project Leader, Sister Margaret Mary Birgan oln said news of Eileen's advancement to Servant of God was "wonderful news and my sister companions and I are extremely happy that Eileen has been recognised in this way".

"Eileen has always belonged to the people of God, not us, and we pray that she becomes a ray of sunshine to the faithful today as she was in her short life."

Eileen died in 1921 – a month short of her 29th birthday. In 1936, 15 years after her death, Eileen's coffin was moved from Randwick Cemetery to the chapel at Our Lady's Home in Coogee, where the order currently resides. At the time, her body was found to be incorrupt. It has not been verified since.