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Faith Around the State News



At left, Father George Maniangattu (pronounced money-in-got) of Ocala holds a small copy of the icon of the late Sister Alphonsa, now St. Alphonsa of Kerala, India. At right, Frances Falvey, of Ocala, left, gets ready to hug Father Maniangattu. (JANNET WALSH | FC)

A saint in the family

BY JANNET WALSH

Posted: 10.24.2008

OCALA | One of the world's newest saints, St. Alphonsa Muttathupadathu of Kerala, India, has a Florida connection — she was the great-great-aunt of Father George Maniangattu, parochial vicar of Our Lady of the Springs Parish here.

Father Maniangattu traveled to the Vatican to witness the Oct. 12 ceremony at which Pope Benedict XVI canonized the former Clarist nun.

"I can tell with all my heart that I never had a deeper and (more) spiritual experience in all my life than this," Father Maniangattu told the Florida Catholic by e-mail Oct. 14. "I've attended different ceremonies. But this was unique and my heart was filled with joy."

Father Maniangattu's cousin, Brother Jino John Muttathupadathu, who is studying theology at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome, participated in the ceremony.

"For me to serve the pope (at) the altar was just like a dream come true, and a special blessing from St. Alphonsa," Brother Muttathupadathu said, also by e-mail.

St. Alphonsa was born in 1910 and died in 1946. The new saint was a mystic and proved by the Vatican to have miraculously cured a young boy who suffered from clubfoot the same day he visited her tomb.

"She is in heaven, so she can help always. That is how miracles are happening. One hundred thousands of people are going to her grave because she is helping, blessing and

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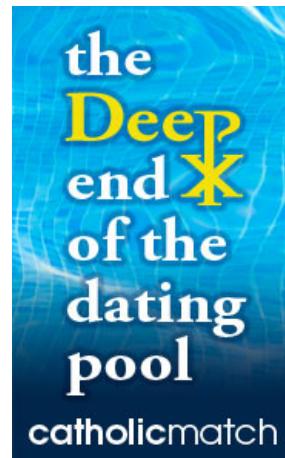
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giving consolation,” Father Maniangattu, who is a native of Kerala, said in an interview in the weeks before the canonization.

When asked what it is like to have a saint in the family, Father Maniangattu said, “It is wonderful, joyful, excellent. I don’t have any words to express it, all of our family.”

Father Maniangattu, 44, as Our Lady of the Springs parochial vicar, also serves two remote missions in the Ocala National Forest. Since parishioners are sometimes unable to pronounce Father Maniangattu’s last name (“Money-in-got”), he is known fondly as “Father George.” He is an ordained priest from the Diocese of Palai in the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, a Catholic rite in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church.

The Syro-Malabar Rite is rooted in the evangelization of St. Thomas, who is believed to have brought Christianity to India.



“We are honored, blessed and very happy that Sister Alphonsa is from my mother’s family. ... Sister Alphonsa is a direct blood relative. She is helping or making the way for me, I am absolutely sure of it, when I was 15 in the seminary and afterwards also,” said Father Maniangattu. “From my childhood onwards, I heard about Sister Alphonsa’s stories, my mother always told, of her total dedication, total devotion.”

St. Alphonsa is the first woman born in India to be named a saint, and was named at birth Annakutty Muttathupadathu (pronounced “moot-ta-tu-parda-ta”). She was raised by an aunt because her mother died when she was very young.

It was her desire to become a nun at a young age — so much so that she burned her feet, leaving her handicapped, to keep her aunt from arranging a marriage for her.

St. Alphonsa was inspired by the stories from the life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and was believed to have had a vision of St. Thérèse asking her to pursue a religious life, according to one of the few English books on the saint, titled “Sister Alphonsa” by Chevalier K. C. Chacko. The tomb of St. Alphonsa is now known as the “Lisieux of India.”

There are other Ocala connections to this story. Father Maniangattu noted that while he was anointing 93-year-old parishioner Lillian Hurley, she said she had a saint in her family named St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Her granddaughter Paula Thomas of Tallahassee noted that the reference was the family history, from the Martin side of their family.

“Sister Alphonsa always had a wish to imitate St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Maybe Alphonsa inspired me to anoint this woman. ... Without asking, she told how she is related to the saint. ... It is all God’s work. ... It is mysterious,” said Father Maniangattu.

When asked if St. Alphonsa is doing the miracles or God, Father Maniangattu replied: “It is God that does the miracles. They (the saints) are interceding for our cause. God always raises such people from time to time. They are closely walked through Jesus, in the footsteps of Christ.”

The new saint, who lived in obscurity and spent most of her life ill and in bed, is most notably known for offering up her suffering, and the suffering of others, to Christ. “She suffered for the safety of the church, for Christ. When we opt for the kingdom of God, we have to suffer,” said Father Maniangattu.

Do the prayers of Father Maniangattu work like those of his saintly relative? In an area known for Florida black bears, 15-year-old William Hamilton, an altar server at St. Hubert of the Forest Mission in Astor, was missing for about 36 hours earlier this year. Sue Harrelson of Astor decided to call for divine intervention. “I called Father George and asked him to put in some knee time,” she said. About 30 minutes after her request for the special

prayers, the boy was found in the Astor area.

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