

Beatification cause opened for Polish doctor known as ‘mother of lepers’

The beatification cause of a Polish missionary doctor known as the “mother of lepers” is now open.

Bishop Damian Bryl inaugurated the diocesan phase of the cause of Wanda Błęńska at Poznań Cathedral, western Poland, Oct. 18, the feast of St. Luke, patron of doctors.

Błęńska spent more than 40 years in Uganda caring for sufferers from Hansen’s disease, also known as leprosy, training local doctors, and turning St. Francis Hospital in Buluba into an internationally respected treatment centre.

Following the opening of her cause, Bryl preached at a Mass in the cathedral, describing Błęńska as a woman of faith whose actions were rooted in prayer.

“From the very beginning of choosing her life path, she began to cooperate with God’s grace. As a student, she was involved in various missionary works and was grateful to the Lord for the grace of faith,” he said, according to the website of Poznań archdiocese.

The archdiocese reported that there was “thunderous applause” when it was announced that Błęńska could now to be referred to by the title “Servant of God.”

Bryl, an auxiliary bishop, was standing in for Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki of Poznań, who had been due to celebrate the Mass but tested positive for the coronavirus Oct. 17. The archdiocese said that Gądecki, the president of the Polish bishops’ conference, was self-isolating at home following the positive test.

Błęńska was born in Poznań on Oct. 30, 1911. After qualifying as a doctor, she practiced medicine in Poland until her work was disrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War.

During the war, she served in the Polish resistance movement, known as the Home Army. Afterwards, she pursued advanced studies in tropical medicine in Germany and Britain.

In 1951, she moved to Uganda, serving as chief physician at a leprosy treatment centre in Buluba, a village in eastern Uganda. Under her care, the facility expanded into a 100-bed hospital. She was named an honorary of citizen of Uganda in recognition of her work.

She passed the leadership of the centre to a successor in 1983, but continued

to work there for the next 11 years before retiring to Poland. She died in 2014 at the age of 103.

In his homily, Bryl recalled that Błęńska often said that doctors must love their patients and not be afraid of them. She insisted that "The doctor must be a friend of the patient. The most effective cure is love."

"Today we remember the beautiful life of Dr. Wanda. We give thanks for it and ask that the experience of meeting with her moves our hearts. May the beautiful desires with which she lived be awakened in us too," the bishop said.