

## Was His Recovery a Miracle?

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Tom Siemers' doctor pulled him aside 20 years ago and told him he should be dead. The doctor, a neurosurgeon, said every attempt he'd made to fix a massive hemorrhage in Siemers' brain in 1989 had failed. Surgery. Drugs. Cutting-edge technology. Nothing seemed to work. Despite his grim prognosis, Siemers not only survived but fully recovered.

"So what happened?" Siemers asked.

The doctor just shook his head and pointed heavenward.

A team of investigators from the Catholic Church now is trying to determine whether divine intervention is indeed the most likely explanation for Siemers' recovery from a ruptured aneurysm, which left him unconscious and near death for more than a month.

Siemers, the chairman of Franklin Savings, is the star witness in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati's first-ever investigation into a possible miracle attributed to someone under consideration for sainthood.

The prospective saint is Blessed Sister Frances Schervier, founder of the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor and the person Siemers' family credits for his survival.

"It's just a strange sensation," said Siemers, who is convinced a miracle saved his life. "It's spooky when I think about it."

The challenge to church investigators is to gather evidence, listen to testimony and review medical records that may or may not support the family's claim.

Their mandate is not to debate whether miracles happen, because the Catholic Church presumes that they do. The task before them is to find out whether a miracle occurred in this case and, if so, whether Frances Schervier, who died almost 133 years ago, is responsible for it.

The investigators will turn for answers to doctors grounded in the scientific world, and to true believers convinced the hand of God touches lives every day.

They then will send their findings to Rome, where a small group of religious scholars at the Vatican will try to answer a question that is daunting even to the faithful: Did a 19th century German nun intervene with God to save the life of a middle-aged businessman from Cincinnati? "The faithful have a right to know the truth," said the Rev. Chris Armstrong, a Cincinnati priest and a member of the tribunal investigating the claim. "As far as humanly possible, we have to be sure."

## Odds against recovery



**Sister Mary Jacinta Doyle (left), S.F.P., and Sister Joanne Schuster, S.F.P., stand next to a portrait of Blessed Francis Schervier at The Franciscan Sisters of the Poor**

Siemers, now 75, met with the tribunal a few weeks ago and explained how Schervier had entered his life long before he fell ill.

The strange relationship began in the early 1970s when he spotted a portrait of the nun at a charity auction. He said he didn't know anything about the painting, which had hung in a hospital lobby for years, and had never heard of Schervier.

"For some reason, I had to have it," Siemers said of the portrait. "It's hung in our house ever since."

A few years later, a guest familiar with Schervier noticed the portrait and began talking to Siemers' wife, Susan, about the nun's story.

She explained how Schervier had been born into a wealthy family in Aachen, Germany, but chose to live her life among the sick and poor.

After becoming a nun, Schervier founded the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor and sent nuns to Cincinnati to establish a convent here.

Susan Siemers was intrigued by the story and, later, received a prayer card in the mail from her former houseguest. It included an image of the nun and a novena - a series of prayers said over nine days - devoted to her.

She put the novena in a drawer and didn't think much about it again until February 1989, when her husband woke up with a powerful headache and was rushed to the hospital.

An aneurysm had ruptured at the base of Siemers' skull, causing heavy bleeding.

His surgeon, Dr. John Tew of Cincinnati's Mayfield Clinic, gave Siemers a 10 percent chance of survival and virtually no chance of surviving without severe brain damage.

"I just didn't think there was any possibility he would come out of this intact," Tew said. "I thought he would be permanently impaired, at best."

Tew performed surgery and placed a graft around the rupture to contain the bleeding, but Siemers' condition worsened. Subsequent procedures proved "technically unsatisfactory," according to medical records submitted to the tribunal.

As Siemers lay unconscious, his wife asked Tew if he thought praying might help. She had found the novena to Schervier and decided to ask her for help. Tew, a Catholic, told her the medical staff needed all the help it could get. "I believe in the spiritual side of medicine," he said. Still, he didn't have high hopes. Siemers was in such bad shape that life with brain damage seemed to be the best-case scenario. But on the day his wife finished saying the novena, Siemers said, he regained consciousness and began a yearlong journey to a full recovery.

Medical and psychological tests in the years that followed showed no lingering effects of the aneurysm that nearly killed him. Siemers said he didn't use the word "miracle" much until Tew told him a year later how close he had come to dying, and how medicine could not explain everything that had happened. "That's the first time it really hit me," Siemers said. "I still can't believe it."

## Investigating a 'miracle'

The church got involved about a decade later, when Siemers' wife contacted the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor and told them her husband's story.

Schervier had been beatified in 1974 - a step below sainthood - after the Vatican determined she had led a life of "heroic virtue" and was responsible for at least one previous "miraculous intercession." To become a saint, however, another miracle was required. The sisters did not plan to pursue sainthood, but they reconsidered after hearing about Siemers' recovery. "They had really considered his condition fatal," said Sister Mary Jacinta Doyle, a member of the order who is acting as an intermediary between the tribunal and the Vatican. "He was that bad."

The sisters filed paperwork with the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints, which makes recommendations to the Pope in cases for canonization. The congregation then instructed Cincinnati Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk to form a tribunal to investigate the claim. The tribunal consists of two priests and a medical doctor and operates a bit like a court, taking testimony from witnesses and gathering evidence.

There is no argument, per se, but the tribunal solicits testimony from at least two outside medical experts as well as the treating physicians. "My understanding of the process is that it's very thorough," said Tew, who has provided medical records to the tribunal. "I think it's very well done."

Armstrong said the tribunal's work addresses two questions: "Did a miracle take place? And if a miracle did take place, was it through the intercession of this person?"

He won't comment on Schervier's case or the work of the tribunal, which is done in secret. But the process is expected to take months and the Vatican may need many more months to review the tribunal's findings and make a final decision.

If all agree Schervier worked a miracle to save Siemers, she will become a saint.

Tew takes no position on sainthood, but the doctor doesn't think medical science can explain what happened in Siemers' case. "I believe prayerful intervention can help, and I believe it did in this case," Tew said. "I don't think there's any question there was something else at work."

Siemers believes that, too. Although he was unconscious through all of the surgeries and prayers, he is convinced he got the best that his faith and medical science could offer. All he can do now, he said, is be grateful for it.

"I thank the good Lord every day," he said.