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by The Associated Press

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The Roman Catholic bishop of Erie has announced the opening of the canonization process for Gertrude Barber, founder of what is now called the Barber National Institute for adults and children with disabilities.

Bishop Lawrence Persico said December 17 he had begun the formal process to begin investigations concerning possible sainthood for Barber, who died in 2000. He said he was "particularly pleased" that Barber's work would be more fully known throughout the region and beyond.

"She was driven by her faith to reach out to people, young people and adults, who were considered on the periphery of society, and she brought them into society," Persico told WICU.

The Barber National Institute, founded in 1952 in Erie as the Exceptional Children's Center, has as its mission providing services for children and adults with autism, intellectual disabilities or behavioral health issues. The institute says it currently serves more than 6,300 children and adults and their families.

Barber, born in Erie in 1911, studied education and pedagogy at Edinboro and Penn State, and worked as a teacher and administrator in Erie schools. Institute president John Barber said in a statement that his aunt "established the philosophy" the institute lives by, which is "all children are welcome here."

Barber "oversaw the expansion of services that span the lifetime, from early intervention services for infants and toddlers to the opening of a center for adults in their senior years," and opened residential group homes and adult day services in the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh regions, the diocese said.

Persico said Monsignor Thomas McSweeney would be the diocese's point person for the formal inquiry. After the inquiry is completed, the bishop will have to consult with the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops, which would decide whether to move the cause to the Vatican.

Bishop Persico reminded those present that the canonization process would likely be a long one.

"To be very honest with you, this is likely the beginning of a decades-long effort," Persico said. "So let us take tremendous joy in this wonderful moment today, one that we shall surely remember for the rest of our lives. May we use it to find inspiration in the work each of us has been called to carry out in our daily lives."

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