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(This is the second in a three-part series on the people and process behind the effort to elevate Buffalo's Father Nelson Baker to sainthood.)

Monsignor Robert Wurtz gets a bemused smile when he thinks back to his childhood. His mother, like so many others from his era, threatened to send him away to become a "Baker Boy" with just one more misstep. Little did Wurtz know he would indeed live his mother's words. He just didn't expect it would be as an adult.

Today, Wurtz shovels the coal, collects the tickets and sits in the engine driving the Father Baker train. As CEO of Our Lady of Victory Institutions, his time is understandably divided. Still, walking quite literally in Baker's footsteps creates an unavoidable passion and drive evident in his words.

"I spend a good deal of time every day thinking about it," he said. "Most of the things I do around here touch on his life and what he began so you are constantly thinking about the man. I feel like I know him really well. I really do. The young men that were here in his time when he was living referred to him as Daddy Baker. It is with great reverence I find myself using that terminology quite frequently, privately."

In more than 15 years of trying, enthusiasm and hope have far too often been dashed by disappointment and despair. It's hard to get to two miracles when everyone is still looking for the first. Religion is easy, so the saying goes. Faith is the hard part.

Like many, the miracle story of a steel mill worker turned from potential to pretend after years of high hopes.

"Tom apparently worked in the mills, and his arm became engaged in a metal saw, so much so that it severed the arteries and muscles. The arm was limp," Msgr. Wurtz said, recalling one of the early disappointments. "When Father Baker died, according to the story, Tom rubbed his arm on Father Baker's casket. A few nights later, while sleeping with his wife, his arm goes flying over and gives her a black eye, and from that day on he had complete use of his arm. The only thing that was left was an ugly scar.

"We go charging out like Grant – it took us several years to even find out who Tom was, because there was no last name given – we're going to get this pinned down," he continued. "By the time we found out who he was, Tom was deceased. That kind of fell by the wayside."

Tough stuff, this miracle business.

"I always say that Sainthood shouldn't be an easy thing to get, but when you are part of the team behind it, it's hard to be patient," said OLV's Director of Public Relations and Special Events Beth Donovan. "We want it as a community to happen so badly."

Since accepting the challenge, Wurtz has looked into maybe two dozen "leads" that for one reason or another had strong merit. Barely a single day goes by without some contact from someone telling of a Father Baker miracle.

From one standpoint, the Vatican has made it easier on the Baker team, having reduced the Sainthood process from four steps to three. The first came in 1987, when Rome declared Baker a Servant of God. Stage two is beatification, and stage three is the finish line.

Modern day political correctness, however, may be hampering the effort. Recently enacted privacy laws have made getting already difficult medical information more difficult than heisting the keys to Fort Knox.

"One of the most important aspects of any case is the testimony of the doctor, it's absolutely key," Wurtz offered. "I've got two cases now if I handed them to you to read you'd say 'OK, fine. Boy, this is a cure.' But I cannot get the doctors to put their John Hancock on a piece of paper."

(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers (WIN) of Western New York. WIN is a consortium of 19 community weekly newspapers in Erie and Niagara counties with a combined paid circulation of 75,000 homes, providing collaborative advertising and editorial support for member publications. For more information on WIN, or to provide feedback on this column, visit our website at www.wnynewspapers.com. Opinions expressed here are those of the author.)

