News
Religious Life



Servant of God Sr. Blandina Segale, nicknamed "The Fastest Nun in the West," will soon be declared "Venerable," an important step toward canonization, revealed a press conference in Albuquerque, N.M., Jan. 3, 2025. Segale is pictured in an undated portrait. (OSV News/New Mexico History Museum)

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A religious sister who befriended Billy the Kid, calmed a lynch mob and testified against human trafficking is one step closer to canonization. Servant of God Sr. Blandina Segale — an Italian immigrant who ministered during the days of the Wild West — is close to being named "Venerable," said Allen Sánchez, the petitioner of her cause, at a Jan. 3 press conference.

Like Jesus Christ, Segale reached out to the peripheries, said Santa Fe Archbishop John Wester at the press conference held in Albuquerque, New Mexico, a place where Segale served for years.

"Jesus was her everything," he said.

Sánchez said he believed the spirituality of Segale can be summed up in one sentence: "Who are the vulnerable and what do they need from me?"

According to Sánchez, Vatican historians recently have reviewed the "positio," a vetted record of her life, and voted yes to advance her cause.

So far 49 people credit Segale with a miracle due to her intercession, explained Sánchez. After one of those occurrences is officially deemed miraculous by the church, the soon-to-be Venerable Blandina Segale will be on her way to beatification. A second verified miracle would be needed to advance her cause to the final step: canonization.

In an interview with Global Sisters Report, Sánchez said the continued process toward Segale's canonization demonstrates that church officials have "found heroic virtue in her life."

"She helped people find courage," he said, adding Segale's witness and ministry can continue to inspire the faithful, particularly at a time when the issue of immigration and migration are at the forefront of national and international politics.

Without wanting to take sides on contentious political issues, Sánchez said it is clear "that the immigration system is broken," and in that context, "people need consoling."

"Saints arise for the occasion," Sánchez said, and in this current moment, Segale's life and example are proof that "the saints are still active in the afterlife."

"When a church acknowledges a saint, it is acknowledging the fulfillment of Jesus' promise of our resurrection."

In an email, Sr. Monica Gundler, the president of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, told GSR that "Sister Blandina was, and remains, an inspiration for the profound impact a woman of faith and commitment can have on those around her.

"Her determination, love for the people she served, and desire for justice are evident in her ministerial history, whether she was serving Native Americans, outlaws, or immigrants. Today, our Sisters of Charity ministry continues to honor her legacy of loving service."

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Maria Rosa Segale was born Jan. 23, 1850, in Cicagna, Italy, and moved with her family to the United States in 1854. (Sánchez indicated that, if canonized, Segale would be the patron saint of immigrant children). After graduating from school, she joined the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, who trace their roots to St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. Segale received the name Sister Blandina in honor of St. Blandina, a martyr during the Roman persecution.

Throughout her life, Segale founded numerous institutions, including public and Catholic schools and hospitals in Santa Fe and Albuquerque. In Cincinnati, she and her biological sister, Sister Justina, founded a resettlement home for newly arrived Italian immigrants called the Santa Maria Institute. Her life is filled with larger-than-life feats, many of them captured in her diary. The diary was meant to be an account for her sister. At the urging of New Mexico's governor, Segale's diary was published in 1932 as "At the End of the Santa Fe Trail."

Once, Segale persuaded a dying young man to forgive his killer, whom she publicly escorted past an angry mob so he could beg forgiveness in person. Her courageous efforts prevented the mob from executing the man and allowed justice to take its course instead.

Another time, she provided medical care to a member of Billy the Kid's gang. Later, when the notorious outlaw attacked a stagecoach Segale was in, he recognized her and let the travelers go in peace.

She frequently was an advocate for people who were disadvantaged. According to a Jan. 2 press release, "Sister Blandina and a young woman she saved from the hands of criminals trafficking young girls for prostitution were the first women to testify in the United States Congress on human trafficking."

Since Segale's death in 1941, stories of her life have been featured in books, magazines and on screen, including the show "Death Valley Days" (Episode "The Fastest Nun in the West") and a CBS documentary called "Sister Blandina, a Saint for Cincinnati."

A biography from the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati notes that the courageous and hard-working religious sister was seen as sainted in her own time. It relayed how a Cincinnati Post journalist wrote in 1931 about Segale's return to Italy after 77 years: "Four years old ... when she left her native land; at 81 she returns. She is going to

see the Pope about placing Mother Elizabeth Seton among the saints, but people say that S. Blandina is saint enough herself, canonized by 60 years of faithful doing."

Editor's note: *This story has been updated throughout with interviews by Chris Herlinger, GSR's international correspondent.*