

An aerial photograph of a large, multi-story house with a complex garden and a driveway. The house has a mix of brick and light-colored siding with dark wood trim. The garden is terraced with stone walls and features various plants, including tall grasses and small trees. A large tree stands in the center of the property. A paved driveway leads from the bottom right towards the house.

ONE HOLY MESS

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Over almost two decades, a garden behind a monastery on Weston Road was, according to a cluster of Catholics, the site of multiple miracles. Last August, a developer bought the property to build condos. He says he's addressing the housing crisis. The worshippers say he's the devil in disguise



ON OCTOBER 4, 2004, Father Basil Orestes Cembalista was busy clearing brush in the terraced backyard garden of his monastery when he felt a piece of debris pierce his right eye. The property at 3100 Weston Road—16 acres of floodplain and woodland sloping toward a hairpin turn in the Humber River—had been owned by the Order of St. Basil the Great since 1959.

That congregation, an international order of the Eastern Catholic Church that once flourished in Toronto, was in decline: at age 64, Cembalista was one of just three aging priests and a bishop still living at the monastery. He was an editor of Ukrainian religious material and spent nights poring over manuscripts. His vision was already deteriorating, and the thought of losing it entirely was overwhelming. At the spark of pain, Cembalista let out a prayer: “Mother of God, save my eye.”

The debris caused a corneal abrasion, and Cembalista’s doctor referred him to an optometrist named Mathias Boermans. But, by the time the priest saw Boermans two days later, his vision was fine—in fact, it seemed to have improved. A photocopy of a pair of driver’s licences provides evidence of the change. In the first, an X marks Cembalista as needing glasses to drive. In the next, nothing. Boermans, speaking to the *Catholic Register* in 2008, stressed that he believed in science, not miracles. But, while the eyesight of a man in his 60s could improve on its own, it was far from normal. There was, he said, “no explanation scientifically speaking” for Cembalista’s reversal.

The priest had his own explanation. “I understood that God had miraculously saved my eyesight,” he wrote in a volume he published recounting the incident. “Had even a speck of dust remained in the eye after the injury, the resulting infection could have led to blindness.” His prayer to Mother Mary had been answered.

In the summer of 2005, Cembalista decided to set up an altar in the garden at the site of the miracle. He bought a marble statue of the Virgin Mary and enlisted a volunteer to build a stone pedestal. He added a metal icon of the Last Supper and finished it off with a multicoloured crucifix from his own collection. He called the altar the Marian Shrine of Gratitude.

That summer, the priest prayed at the statue often, alone or with a few faithful. It was, he wrote, a place “that imparts a special serenity.” The shrine might have remained just that, a quiet spot to worship. Then Cembalista met Angie Carboni.

Every miracle needs its evangelists. Any act of God we know of today, anything that has outlasted the skepticism of non-believers and the erosion of history, has survived only because of the people who tell and retell the story.

Angie Carboni was the ideal messenger. “I believe in miracles,” she told me one afternoon last fall. “I’ve experienced many myself.” Blond and diminutive, with a habit of holding your gaze a beat longer than expected, the 63-year-old grandmother speaks with measured self-assurance. She is the daughter of Italian immigrants and was raised Catholic, though she was not always devout. In her early 20s, as a social worker running a charity for children and young adults with developmental disabilities, she witnessed things at some of the institutions she visited that made her question her faith. “They were treated like cattle,” she says. Why wasn’t God protecting these children?

One rainy day when she was 26, Carboni was driving through Mississauga when the cars in front of her swerved out of control. As she screeched to a halt, the car behind her slammed into her at full speed, and “everything shattered,” she says. Glass exploded onto the road, and Carboni felt her soul leave her body. There was her earthly figure, down amid the wreckage of her car, but her spiritual essence was high in the air, floating above the chaos and pain.

When Carboni came to, she was in the hospital with internal bleeding. She was bedridden for a year. And in that time she started researching near-death experiences, studying the literature with the zeal of a convert. Shortly afterward, her father died, and Carboni was shattered all over again.

It was then that she met a woman who, despite being a stranger, seemed to know things about Carboni and her accident. The woman, Carboni stressed, was not a psychic but someone who “had a gift from God.” She told Carboni that she needed to change her life: God wanted her to work for him, to start a faith-based charity.

In 1990, Carboni launched a care agency called St. Bernadette’s Family Resource Centre. It initially served kids and eventually grew to include an art school and a

day program for adults with disabilities. When Carboni went looking for space, she found it at 3100 Weston Road. The Basilian Fathers had once run a high school called St. Basil-the-Great on that site but had leased the building to the city, which opened the Carmine Stefano Community Centre there in 1999. Carboni often took the kids from St. Bernadette’s down to the soccer field, and she’d noticed the tucked-away garden with the statue of the Virgin Mary. One day in 2005, she decided to knock on the front door of the monastery.

Cembalista answered, and she knew immediately that she had found a kindred spirit. “He was the kindest, gentlest soul you’ve ever met—like a boy. He was so full of love,” she remembers. The two became instant friends. When Cembalista told Carboni about his miracle in the garden, she wasn’t skeptical. Instead, she wondered how she could help spread the word.

Later that year, Carboni visited Lourdes. For most of its history, the French town had been a sleepy place in the Pyrenees. Then, in 1858, the 14-year-old daughter of a local miller saw a vision of the Virgin Mary. The “Marian apparition” appeared to the girl 18 times in total, and soon thousands of religious pilgrims were making

SOMETHING ABOUT MARY: The Marian Shrine of Gratitude began in 2005 as a simple marble statue



their way to the town, turning it into one of the holiest places in Christendom and a bustling centre of religious tourism. Praying in a sea of people at Lourdes, the smell of roses in the air, was an ecstatic religious experience for Carboni. She felt Mary speak in her heart: “You need to bring this to Toronto.”

When she returned home, she went straight to Cembalista with an idea: Why not bring the ceremonies of Lourdes to their corner of Toronto? The father, she says, couldn’t have been more enthusiastic. The two of them decided to hold a rosary procession, a religious ceremony in which congregants say a series of prayers while walking. Carboni figured a few dozen people might show up, but that first procession drew 500 people, filling the garden with prayer and life.

Over the following months and then years, Cembalista’s place of contemplation grew into a religious destination. They held another procession, then another, then began holding services on the first Friday and Saturday of the month. The crowds got larger—hundreds of people a day, cycling through. At one event, more than 1,000 people spilled out of the garden and down the hill. The Archbishop of Toronto, Thomas Collins, celebrated mass there at a youth event. The story of the Basilian priest’s miraculous healing made its way outside the neighbourhood and then outside the country. A bishop came from Australia, and worshippers arrived from as far as the Philippines and Ukraine.

While Carboni had no official role in the church, as word of the shrine spread she became more and more intertwined with the monastery. The people she cared for were there constantly. She hosted retreats for Catholic high school students. She was given keys to the monastery and told that she could come and use the chapel or library as she pleased. In the community centre, Carboni opened a gift shop called Our Lady of Gratitude that sold religious notions like crucifixes and statues of the Virgin Mary. It was, she explained, a way for the adults in her program to get experience doing retail work, with all proceeds going back to the charity.

And then other worshippers started reporting miracles. In 2003, a Toronto teenager named Nadia Kirtil had a rare form of lung cancer diagnosed. She had one lung removed, then found out three years later, at the age of 21, that the cancer had spread throughout her body. When



IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER: Born in Brazil in 1941, Basil Orestes Cembalista moved to Canada in his late 40s

she was offered only palliative care options, Kirtil went overseas for treatment and began taking oral chemotherapy. For years, she continued that therapy, but the cancer remained. In 2012, she heard about the shrine and started dropping by the site regularly. During her visits, Cembalista and Carboni prayed over her. “I would feel burning sensations,” she says—a sensation that something was changing within her. When she was told, in 2014, that her insurance would no longer cover chemo, her visits to the shrine took on a new desperation. “If it’s your will that I die, then I accept your will,” she prayed in front of the statue of Mary. “But if it’s your will that I live, please heal me.” She couldn’t afford the treatments, she says, so this was the first time she had put all her faith into prayer. The next month, following a medical scan, she was told that the cancer was gone.

After a devastating car crash in 2010, Roksana Rak—the daughter of a man Cembalista had recruited to work in the garden—was paralyzed on the left side of her body. Cembalista came to pray over the 22-year-old several times in the hospital and then, every night, at the shrine. Five months after the accident, Rak’s parents drove her to the shrine. They pushed her wheelchair next to the statue and helped her to her feet. “My father said, ‘Take a step or two,’” says Rak. “And that’s when I took my first steps since the accident. After that, I went there weekly.”

Over the years, visitors reported other miraculous events—the sun dancing in the sky over the shrine, visions of the Virgin appearing before them and dozens of healings. In Cembalista’s publication about the shrine, he includes a list of visitors and the illnesses they were cured of: “a two-month coma”; “a six-year illness in the hip”; “cancer in the eyes, bones, liver

and lungs”; “a severe and hopeless condition”; ulcerated sores; diabetes; paralysis; eye infection.

To my mind, being cured of an eye infection does not necessarily constitute a miracle. A bad hip can heal on its own. Even cancer acts in ways that can’t always be explained by science. If, like me, you’re someone who isn’t inclined to see the hand of God at work in the daily lives of people in North York, then the story of a miraculous eye poke is unlikely to move you.

While reporting this story, speaking with people who—sometimes in tears—told me about their illnesses and their cures, I often got a tentative query in return: *Was I Catholic?* It was a fair question, an attempt to find common ground. It was also a stand-in for a more uncomfortable question: *Did I believe them?* I explained that I wasn’t religious. I was raised and remain an atheist. Miracles don’t really fit into my world view. Still, talking to the followers of the Marian shrine, it wasn’t hard to see what they’d found there. A quiet spot in the middle of the city, filled with flowers and apple trees, where a community of believers prayed for your health and happiness. A physical location where your faith could be concretized. A place where you could go when you were feeling low, at any hour of the day. That was invaluable.

When I spoke with Roman Sokolik, a computer programmer who worked with Cembalista for years and helped the priest set up a website for his writing, he told me how important the shrine was to the community. Five minutes after we hung up, he called me back, sounding flustered. His wife had overheard the conversation and had insisted that he tell me about his family’s own miracle.

A few years ago, Sokolik's one-year-old son received a diagnosis of liver cancer. "The doctors gave him 50-50 odds," said Sokolik. They removed 70 per cent of his liver, and he spent a year getting chemotherapy. During that time, Sokolik and his wife brought their son to the shrine often. "The place helped us a lot—spiritually, mentally," said Sokolik. What the doctors had done, he acknowledged, was incredible. But the Marian shrine, which had held them aloft when they were at their very lowest, had done its work as well. "Our son is three and a half now and goes to daycare," said Sokolik, struggling to explain what it means to have a child who had been on the verge of death return to the mundane realities of life as a pre-

schooler. It may be that the chemotherapy did its work and his son landed on the good side of the odds. Sokolik says there was more to it. "I think this is a miracle."

The Catholic Church is built on miracles—from the Immaculate Conception to the Resurrection to the miracle that occurs every week at mass, when a wafer becomes the body of Christ.

Healings are the most common purported miracles, with Catholics the world over reporting mystical cures. Marian apparitions also have a rich history in Catholicism. Lourdes is perhaps the most famous modern example, but throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, visions of Mary were recorded all over the world.

In Fátima, Portugal, in 1917, following the prophecies of three shepherd children, thousands gathered and witnessed the sun spinning and dancing toward them before zig-zagging back to its place in the sky. In the Zeitoun district north of Cairo, starting in 1968, thousands of onlookers reported witnessing repeated appearances of the Virgin Mary atop a Coptic Church.

A miracle has the potential to bolster religious faith in profound ways. But it can also destabilize it, empowering charlatans and bringing ridicule to the Church. "The Catholic hierarchy tends to be very cautious about miracles," says Hillary Kaell, a professor of anthropology and religious studies at McGill. There is an official investigative process for healings, in which multiple doctors not associated with the Church must find that there is no natural explanation, and the Church must ensure that the seers are upright Christians and free of ulterior motives. The vast majority of purported miracles, however, are never investigated. Instead, the Church might passively indulge local practices without granting official approval. The site of a miracle will often "continue to flourish on a local level, for a number of years even," says Kaell. "And then usually people disperse or, frankly, die off."

On the surface at least, the Basilians indulged the Marian shrine and its worshippers for years. The hand-built monument had a certain off-the-books quality—accepted by the order's Canadian leadership in Winnipeg if not officially endorsed. Then the leadership changed, and that tacit acceptance disappeared. In 2016, the word came down: Winnipeg was closing the monastery, shutting down the shrine and putting the property up for sale. For Carboni, who believed the shrine wasn't just offering comfort but actually saving lives, the decision was devastating. One day she was locked out of the library and the church. The leadership told her to shut down her website promoting the shrine. And then they announced they were transferring Cembalista to Brazil.

Carboni reacted swiftly. She wrote a letter to Pope Francis explaining the situation. She and other followers gathered documentation of the alleged miracles and set up a petition, garnering 1,500 names. And in September of 2016, Carboni used her Aeroplan points to book a trip to Rome with a few other believers and Cembalista, to request that the shrine stay open and that the priest be allowed to stay. The

FOREVER FAITHFUL: Angie Carboni
plans to keep vigil indefinitely at 3100 Weston Road



Marian Shrine of Gratitude could be another Lourdes, another Fátima, and they were going to shut it down? The followers met with Father Genesio Viomar, the Superior General of the Basilian Order in Rome and the boss of Carboni's antagonists in Winnipeg, and begged him to launch an official investigation into Cembalista's miracle.

The group returned to Toronto, and Cembalista was moved to Brazil. An investigation wasn't launched, but the sale of the monastery was put on hold, and Viomar sent Carboni a letter that said the shrine area could be used for personal prayer. It wasn't an endorsement of the shrine—far from it—but it was something. After that, Carboni would brandish the letter like a passport to those who questioned her right to access the property.

If the order in Winnipeg had abandoned them, Carboni and the worshippers would plot their own religious course. Power and water to the garden had been cut off, but there were enough tradespeople in the group to muddle through. Someone replaced the spotlight with solar lighting. A groundskeeper created a system to pump water from the pond up the hill to irrigate the plants. And in the absence of a priest, Carboni led the prayers.

At first, she brought Cembalista in over FaceTime to preach from Brazil. Then, on November 30, 2018—14 years after his miracle in the garden—the priest died. Carboni and the others were crushed. "He was like a second father to me," she says. Things got worse still. When St. Bernadette's lease came up at the Carmine Stefano Community Centre, Carboni got a letter from the city: the landlord, the Order of St. Basil, had told them not to renew her lease. She scrambled to find a new home, eventually securing space on the property of a church at Lawrence and Jane.

Through it all, the faithful continued to visit the shrine. They went to mourn a dead parent, to pray for a sick child, to enjoy a peaceful day in the shade of apple trees. It felt like it was their place. Each statue and plaque had been purchased by a true believer. Each path had been cleared by a volunteer, each plant watered by a member of the community. Ownership might lie in Winnipeg and, ultimately, Rome, but it was clear to whom the space really belonged.

Then, last summer, the believers noticed activity in the house for the first time in years. Some got their hopes up

AT THE SITE OF THE SHRINE, THE PEDESTAL THAT HAD ONCE HELD THE VIRGIN MARY HAD HUGE GOUGES IN THE STONWORK, AND THE GROUND WAS LITTERED WITH BROKEN STATUARY, LIKE A CITY THAT HAD BEEN SACKED

that the Basilian Fathers were returning at last to preside over the processions and prayers that still took place in the garden, but it was quite the opposite. On August 16, Carboni and the rest of the followers received a message signed by the order's leadership in Winnipeg—Father Gabriel Haber, provincial superior, and Father Zachary Shwaluk, provincial secretary and treasurer. "Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ," it began, "a purchase agreement for the entire property at 3100 Weston Road has been reached and is in its very final stages of completion." In five days' time, any public access to the monastery grounds would be restricted, and all religious items would be removed. "In other words, the 'Shrine' is permanently closed," it read.

The letter continued with a terse rebuke of Carboni and her ilk, who had been fighting in the name of the shrine for seven years. "Once again, as I did in 2016, I implore you to harness that energy that you are currently using 'to save a monastery and/or shrine' and to put this zeal and passion into the pastoral activities and outreaches within your own parishes."

Among the shrine's followers, rumours and conspiracies began flying around about the details of the deal, about what the Basilians' motivations might be, about possible shell companies. The truth is probably far simpler. The order, like many other religious congregations across North America, was downsizing and divesting itself of valuable property. There are few, if any, young men who want to sign up to

be Basilian priests in Toronto these days. Why would the order hold on to an empty mansion when it could be putting those millions of dollars to other uses?

And with that effort to sell the property, Carboni and the other followers went from devout community members to shunned outsiders. In an email that has been widely circulated, Shwaluk called the shrine supporters "squatters" and the so-called shrine nothing more than "a garden with a statue." Shwaluk and the Basilian Fathers in Winnipeg declined to speak for this article, instead directing me to the statement sent to the supporters.

On August 20, two days before the sale, Shwaluk—who had arrived from Winnipeg—began dismantling the shrine. Outside the fence, held back by security, the faithful prayed and wept as workers pried the plaques and icons away from the stone. "I hope to God he repents, because he's really going to go to hell for what he did," one follower told me of Shwaluk, weeping at the memory. "I pity these poor sinners. They don't know what kind of punishment they'll have."

That night, Carboni and other worshippers convened at the now decimated site, standing watch outside the garden and praying in what would soon become a nightly vigil. A few days later, the new owners took over.

When Samuel Babarinde looks at the property at 3100 Weston Road, he doesn't see the site of dozens of miracles. He sees what it was originally: the grand summer retreat of the wealthy Gardiner family. And he sees what it will be: the future home of thousands of people in the midst of a housing crisis.

Babarinde is the CEO of AvranceCorp Developments, a company with a modest office in a plaza not far from the shrine. Forty years old, with a tidy goatee, he believes in the power and righteousness of real estate development. He came from England as a young man and moved to Mississauga, where he lives today with his wife and four kids. His father was an urban planner and a professor at various universities. "I was kind of born into this," he told me.

Babarinde says his company began looking at 3100 Weston Road back in the fall of 2022. In December, AvranceCorp and a numbered corporation entered into an agreement to buy the property. The Basilians, Babarinde says, knew that if



THE NIGHT WATCH: Worshippers gather on the soccer field below the garden in December of 2023

and he'd ignored it, but as he learned more about the shrine, he came to believe that "she was behind it all." Carboni was, he said, a huckster duping followers with a fake shrine, and her fight to keep it open was about keeping her former gift shop in business and profiting. (Carboni says all money from the gift shop went directly to St. Bernadette's, a registered charity with audited financial statements.)

Babarinde is Christian, but for him, this fight isn't about the Virgin Mary or miracles or religion. It's about land: the followers want what he has. According to real estate records, AvranceCorp paid the Basilians \$16.5 million for the property. "You think I'm gonna let you use my property for free, doing this foolishness?" he said. "What planet do you come from?"

We left the community centre and walked over to the former site of the shrine, ducking under caution tape. The pedestal that had once held the Virgin Mary had huge gouges in the stonework, and the ground was littered with broken statuary, like a city that had been sacked. From inside the former monastery, you could hear the percussive sounds of construction work. "There's a lot of statues left in the house," Barbarinde said. Many of them were still attached to the ground, "so you have to bang them out."

Babarinde climbed unsteadily onto a chair in the garden and reached into the branches of one of the orchard trees. He handed me a pale-green apple. I took a bite: it was sweet, a little tart and genuinely delicious. Babarinde munched noisily. "Like the Garden of Eden," he said.

As soon as the property changed hands, Carboni and other worshippers started coming every night at 8 p.m. to pray and protest on the soccer field below the garden. One night in September, as the shrine supporters gathered in the dark outside the gates, Babarinde emerged from the former monastery. A shouting match ensued, with footage taken by supporters showing a wild-eyed Babarinde confronting the protesters before heading back toward the property. "You're gonna burn in hell," someone shouted. Babarinde wheeled around. "Burn in hell? That's what you're saying?" he yelled. "You guys are a bunch of hypocrites. You guys aren't Christians. Jehovah's in heaven—he's not here," he yelled, gesturing at the property. "Stop fooling yourself. You're acting like a bunch of fools!"

the sale was announced there would be protests, so it was all done quietly. When AvranceCorp took over the land on August 22, it was with the understanding that this was a "clean property" with no encumbrances. Put another way, he was sure that the pesky shrine business would be easily swept aside.

I met Babarinde at the Weston Road property on a warm fall day. In pink Nikes, green cargo pants and an elegant grey overcoat, he sauntered into the community centre as if he owned the place—which, of course, he did.

He told me that AvranceCorp's plan is to build four condominiums and a rental apartment building. In total, the company wants to build 2,400 units in a part of the city desperate for housing. Its other goal is to transform the monastery back into a single-family residence and return the terraced garden to what it was originally: a luxe swimming pool. Any trace of the Basilian priests and the shrine will be erased.

As a developer, Babarinde is used to opposition. He had just come from overseeing a project in Meaford, where he'd faced protests from residents concerned about the development's height and potential environmental impact. The project would bring jobs and property taxes, he explained, but the locals just couldn't understand it. "The way I see it, it's like with babies," he explained. "When you

have a kid and you try to tell them what's good for them, and the kid doesn't see it—and then eventually, years later, they realize, 'Oh, my dad was right.' That's exactly how I see these folks."

But the shrine's followers, in Babarinde's opinion, were actually worse than babies. They were squatters, possibly scammers. "We are the owners of the property," he said, leaning forward. "We pay the mortgage. You guys are lounging on someone's property for free."

When AvranceCorp took possession, the company hired security guards to keep people away. In an email to the worshippers on August 21, the company adopted a hard line. The shrine was now private property. "Trespassers who fail to adhere to these clear instructions will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, both criminally and civilly."

AvranceCorp has been operating only since 2016 and has not yet completed a building. And while the company has a few mid-rise and townhouse projects in pre-construction in Wasaga Beach, Georgian Bay and London, the property at 3100 Weston Road is its first foray into Toronto and its most ambitious development to date. When Babarinde thinks about the people who are standing between him and his plans, he zeroes in on one culprit—Angie Carboni. She had emailed him before the sale was finalized

But the worshippers were unrelenting. On the evening of October 13—the anniversary of the miracle at Fátima—Carboni held a special candlelight procession, drawing a larger crowd than usual. More than 200 people were out, snapping together folding tables on which they placed religious artifacts and Tim Hortons coffee cups. There was a chill in the air, and the grass was wet with rain, but no one seemed bothered.

At the top of the hill, five security guards hired by AvranceCorp watched over the proceedings, standing at a slight distance from eight police officers. The cops had been called to help maintain an uneasy territorial truce: the worshippers could stay on the city-leased property, down on the soccer field, but security was under strict instructions to prevent anyone from laying a foot on AvranceCorp land. The local city councillor, Anthony Perruzza, had brokered the agreement. As a child, Perruzza had attended St. Basil-the-Great, tobogganing down those same hills in the winter. The Basilian Fathers, he said, have an important legacy in this city.

After the sale of the property, Perruzza had contacted AvranceCorp to see if they could come to some kind of compromise. The city, after all, was already leasing the soccer field and the community centre. What if it could include the shrine as well and leave it open for the people? Babarinde gave Perruzza the same hard-line answer he had given Carboni: absolutely not.

So Perruzza put forward a motion at city hall asking staff to prioritize evaluating the property for heritage designation. NDP MPP Tom Rakocevic wrote a letter in support. The former home of the Gardiner family had been on the city's list of heritage properties since 1997, but in early October, city staff submitted a report to the Toronto preservation board recommending that the designation now include the shrine, the community centre, the river bank—the whole thing.

Perruzza's intervention enraged Babarinde. Here was a city councillor, who talked about a housing crisis, holding up much-needed new buildings. Babarinde argued that Perruzza, as a former student on the site, had a conflict of interest, and he intended to file a complaint with the Office of the Integrity Commissioner.

Still, the city's zoning and permitting bureaucracy, like the Lord, works in mysterious ways. If Babarinde gets around the possible designation, Perruzza has

been musing about the fact that the shrine is on a floodplain and could fall under the purview of the Conservation Authority, which restricts development.

Carboni, meanwhile, has continued to appeal to her highest authority. Out on the field that October night, dressed in a dark woollen poncho, she took the microphone. "I thank you for persevering," she told the crowd, a mix of Italian Canadians, Polish and Ukrainian immigrants, devout Filipinos, and neighbours with no specific religious affiliation who were just there to protect a favourite local spot from becoming privatized. "If we bow down to the devil, he'll crush us. But if we stand up, Our Lady will declare victory." Singing "Ave Maria" in a strong, clear voice, Carboni invited Mother Mary to bless the assembled and give them strength.

In Babarinde's view, the people showing up each night were fighting a losing battle: "Even if they designate this entire property as heritage tomorrow, we'll go straight to the province, and we're gonna appeal." And decisions at the Ontario Land Tribunal overwhelmingly favour developers. "There will never be a shrine," he said. "We're gonna excavate it to put in a pool."

Carboni continues to come to Weston Road each night, despite the gripping cold,

ALL BUSINESS: The site's new owner, Samuel Babarinde, is set on completing his project, miracles and worshippers be damned



the dwindling number of worshippers and the new metal fencing around the property. When she speaks about her years at the shrine—describing the miracles, the crowds, the community, and her and Cembalista at the centre of it all—her face glows. "It was the most exciting thing I could ever do," she told me. "It was like being in a fairy tale." She wasn't prepared to let it end.

The fate of the property at 3100 Weston Road remains unresolved. But it's unlikely that the worshippers will end up happy, even if Perruzza prevails. When I spoke with Nadia Kirtil, the woman whose cancer had disappeared after she'd prayed at the shrine, she said her fervent hope was for the Marian shrine to be restored "back to how it was when Father Basil was there."

That version of the shrine—a place with the legitimacy of a member of the Catholic church leading the community in prayer—is never coming back. It disappeared years ago, when the Basilian Fathers made it clear that the so-called miracles of an aging priest and his devotees did not fit into the larger vision of their order. Even if the entire property is designated a heritage site, there is no designation that can force the owners of private land to allow the public to pray on their property. The garden at Weston Road will never be the Lourdes of Toronto. And the truth is that for every Lourdes—where a purported miracle transforms a town and a lowly seer is sainted—there are thousands of wishful healings, pseudo-miracles and sites of meaningful personal experience that are tolerated for a time and then eventually stamped out. A frigid vigil on a floodlit soccer field may be as close as the followers of the Marian Shrine of Gratitude ever get to praying once more in the Toronto garden they fervently believe is touched by God.

Still, Carboni has persisted—and so, she says, have the miracles. One day she sent me an email with the subject "As you can see God is on our side." Two photos were attached. One was of the shrine in its former glory, the statue of Mother Mary that Cembalista had lovingly chosen nearly 20 years ago sitting in the centre of the frame. The second was a zoomed-in image from the first photo. It took me a minute to realize what I was looking at—a fuzzy cloud formation high in the sky. If you stared hard enough, and if you wanted to believe, it looked like a cross. ■