

FROM THE PASTOR'S



All Saints Day November 1, 2009 B

SAINTHOOD IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Devotion and veneration of saints are a distinguishing dimension of Catholicism that intrigue and confuse Christians of other denominations. They wonder why we give such attention and honor to other fallible human beings. Does not such honor take away from the honor due to God alone? Non-Catholics wonder why we ask saints to pray for us when the Bible states that Jesus *alone* is our Mediator before God (1 Timothy 2:5). There are many other questions that one might ask about saints. What is a saint? What kind of life does a person have to live to become a saint? How does the canonization process work? What is the role of statues, relics, images and medals in veneration of the saints? In this bulletin I will attempt to respond to all of the above questions and some others as well.

Who or What is a Saint?

In the New Testament, St. Paul calls *every living* member of the Body of Christ (i.e., the church) a “saint.” Addressing the church at Ephesus, he writes: “You are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19). Paul called every member of the church a “saint” because each had been consecrated (i.e., made holy) to God by baptism, and sanctified by the presence of the Holy Spirit. But as time went on, Paul came to realize that not everyone who was consecrated to God through baptism actually *lived* a holy life. Hence, sometimes rather than call all his readers saints, he used a more cautious phrase, “*called to be saints*” (Romans 1:1, 1 Cor. 1:2).

As time went on, the term “*saint*” was reserved for those who had actually *lived* very holy lives on earth and had gone on to eternal glory in heaven. “By and large, we do not know for sure who is in heaven, though we do presume that a person who lived a good and holy life on earth is in heaven or safely on the way to heaven through purgatory. Occasionally, someone’s holiness is so evident that the church will, after careful investigation, ‘canonize’ the person as a saint. This is in effect an affirmation that the person is surely in heaven, and deserves to be venerated and invoked.” (The *Catholic Vision*, Edward O’Connor, C.S.C.)

In Catholic Tradition, saints (canonized and uncanonized) are our family heroes and heroines. They are men and women who had a very single-minded

devotion to God and the things of God. They are people who witnessed gospel values in their lives to an extraordinary degree.

“*Communion of Saints*”

In the Apostles Creed, we find the words: “We believe in the *communion of saints*.” The phrase “*communion of saints*” refers to the bond of unity which exists between *all* the members of the Body of Christ—those still alive, those in purgatory, and those in heaven. When Catholics profess their faith in “the communion of saints,” they are professing their unity with all the followers of Christ, living and dead. At the transfiguration, Jesus demonstrated to Peter, James and John, how the “saints” of the Old Covenant, Moses and Elijah, were still alive (Luke 9:28-36). In that event, Jesus shows that the “veil” that separates the “saints” on earth from those who have died physically, is a rather thin one.

“*Patron Saints*”

A “patron saint” is one with whom we have a special kinship because we are named after him/her, or to whom we may feel a special attachment because of his/her spirituality or ministry while living on earth.

The Canonization Process

The canonization process cannot begin until 5 years after the “holy” person has died. It is started by someone or a group approaching the local bishop in the diocese where the person lived, with a formal request to consider the person for sainthood. If the bishop finds compelling evidence of the person’s holiness and virtue, a request to open the cause is submitted to the responsible Vatican authorities. The church then appoints a “Promoter of the Faith,” popularly known as “Devil’s Advocate” whose task is to question and challenge the evidence of holiness that is presented.

During all this time, people would have started to pray to the potential saint, seeking prayers and intercession. Reports of “miracles” (e.g., healing of some incurable disease) through the holy person’s intercession are investigated by the church. If it can be shown without reasonable doubt that miracles have indeed occurred, the church would then “beatify” the person, declaring him/her “Blessed.” Further reports of miracles as a result of the intercession of the “Blessed” person are scrutinized which, once proven, would

qualify the person for canonization. The Pope, in a special ceremony, performs the canonization of the person as a “saint of the church.” The church has canonized thousands of saints but only about 140 feast days of saints appear in our church’s liturgical calendar.

Some Limitations of the System

Most of the church’s canonized saints are clerics and other religious men and women. Is this because clerics and religious have some inside track on holiness? Not really. The reason why the church has predominantly canonized religious men and women is because they had the big advantage of belonging to a Religious Order familiar with the canonization process and had the people-power to promote “their saint.” Things always move faster when one “knows the system” and has the people-power and expertise to move one’s case through the necessary channels. Secondly, the church tends to promote the canonization of persons who reflect her limited and sometimes narrow view of things. For example, for centuries the church believed and taught that the religious unmarried state was superior to the married state. With such a mindset, we should not be surprised that the vast majority of the church’s saints were religious and unmarried.

Today the church needs to seek to canonize people from all walks of life: married, single, social activists, politicians, etc. We need a wide spectrum of saints who will speak to the life of the average Catholic. In the meantime, we will continue to “canonize” by popular acclaim men and women of outstanding holiness, e.g., Pope John XXIII, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day.

The Catholic Church does not canonize non-Catholics simply because they do not share our beliefs and understanding of the gospel.

The Halo

The halo surrounding the heads of saints in pictures and on statues has a pre-Christian history. The Romans and Greeks used the halo as a symbol of divinity for their gods and goddesses, in particular for Apollo, the Sun God. The halo symbol, like other Jewish and pagan symbols, was adapted by Christians around the 4th Century as a sign of sanctity in images and mosaics.

Veneration and Intercession of the Saints

Veneration and intercession of the saints developed very spontaneously in the early centuries of Christianity. It was first given to martyrs—the first people to be called “saints.” Martyrs were regarded as perfect Christians. They lived heroic lives of virtue and then died a violent death like Jesus their Master. Most of these people were considered saints while they were still alive. After they died, the faithful continued to honor

them by visiting their graves and praying there, building churches near their graves and celebrating the anniversary of their martyrdom.

Then the church began to consider these holy men and women as inspiring models of Christian virtue. They were admired, loved and venerated for their holy lives and for the way they were willing to die a cruel death rather than deny their Master. Gradually, the faithful not only venerated and honored their holy martyrs, but also started to seek their prayers and help. Etched on the walls of the catacombs in the early centuries were words that read: “Vincent, you are in Christ, pray for Phoebe.”

But Isn’t Jesus our One and Only Mediator?

Non-Catholics think that when we ask saints to intercede for us that we are being unbiblical since based on 1 Timothy 2:5, Christ is the *only* mediator between God and ourselves. Catholics believe with other Christians that Jesus is our only mediator before God, but Catholics also believe that *all* the members of the Body of Christ, living and dead, *share* in the intercessory ministry of Jesus. If on earth we do not hesitate to ask our imperfect brothers and sisters to pray for us, why would we hesitate to ask our brothers and sisters who are in heaven, and much closer to God than we are, to pray for us and intercede on our behalf.

When other members of the Body of Christ (here and beyond) pray for us, they do not pray in isolation from Christ. Rather they pray *in* Christ. In 1 Cor. 12:27, St. Paul tells us: “You then are the Body of Christ. Every one of you is a member of it.” Each and every prayer is made to the Father *through the whole Christ*—both the head and members. What a consolation to know that we have available to us, not only an earthly family of intercessors, but also a heavenly one, *all joined to Christ* through baptism, pleading our cause before the throne of God. How foolish we would be not to ask these holy ones of God in heaven to pray for us in and with Christ.

Wording of prayers, a potential problem

We Catholics usually pray to the saints or, to state it more accurately, ask the saints to pray for us, by prayers or novenas (9 days of prayer for a special intercession composed in honor of a particular saint). When non-Catholics read some of these prayers, they may have a problem with them because they often imply that the saint (or Mary, the Mother of Jesus) is the one who is the source of spiritual blessings and who has the power to release or withhold them. Despite the sometimes poor choice of words, the intent is never to imply that anyone other than God is the source of all spiritual blessings and that anyone other than Jesus is our mediator before God. Since Vatican II, prayers in honor of Mary and the saints

have much more been carefully worded.

Relics, Images, Medals and Statues

Relics. In Catholic tradition, a *relic* is something that has been closely associated with a saint during his/her life on earth, e.g., a particle of the saint's bone. From the earliest days of Christianity, Christians have expressed great respect and honor for the remains of the martyrs and holy people. This is a very human response which we continue to do today, i.e., retaining keepsakes of loved ones who have died.

In early Christianity, there was also a spiritual reason for wanting to keep a saint's relics. Miracles often happened to those who came into contact with the remains of saints. This should not surprise us when we consider the fact that people were healed by touching the outer garments of Jesus (Mk. 5:25-34). In the Acts of the Apostles, we read how exorcisms and healings occurred when people touched handkerchiefs or aprons to Paul's body and brought them to the sick (Acts 9:11-12). Catholics believe that God comes to us in a "sacramental" way—in a visible, tangible way through people and things.

One important cautionary note is to realize that relics, in and of themselves, contain no powers. God and God alone is the source of all healing and blessing. But in his infinite wisdom, God can and does sometimes choose to release to us his touch through a person or thing.

Images, Medals & Statues. Images, medals and statues are all tangible reminders to us of the heroes and heroines of our Catholic family in heaven. Catholic use of such things is similar to a family's use of pictures and other remembrances of a departed loved one. Catholics do not believe that statues, images or medals have any spiritual power in and of themselves. When we kneel in prayer before statues, we are not worshipping them. We are merely using a physical reminder of the saint to aid us in our prayer. Catholics wear medals of saints just like we carry pictures of family members in our wallet. We also hope that the prayers of the saints will protect us from harmful and evil ways.

Is Catholic Devotion to the Saints in Decline?

Catholics do not pray as much to the saints today as they did before Vatican Council II. At the Council, the bishops of our church called on Catholics to develop a spirituality that is both Christ-centered and biblical. Since Vatican II, the church has placed new emphasis on the *humanity* of Christ (how he is *like us*) to balance out the pre-Vatican II emphasis on the *divinity* of Christ (how he is *different* from us).

During an era when the divinity of Christ was only

stressed, Catholics looked more to Mary and the saints because they seemed more human and like themselves. With the rediscovery of the humanity of Christ, Catholics have found it easier to go straight to "the boss" rather than through his "inner circle." But of course it is not a question of going to either Jesus or the saints. We can and should go directly to Jesus with our needs and also ask the saints, and of course each other here on earth, to pray for us. It is a question of seeking the help of the whole Christ—the head (Jesus) and the members (those here on earth and those who have gone to the other side).

Every Christian is called to be a saint

In the past, the church often gave the impression that only clerics and religious, and especially those living in monasteries, were called to a life of holiness. Today the church stresses that "Jesus, the divine teacher...preached holiness of life to each and every one of his disciples, regardless of their situation in life" (Vatican II, document on *The Church*, Art. 40).

How Do We Become Holy

We become holy through prayer, love, fidelity to one's state in life, and by developing a single-minded attitude for God and the values of God.

All Souls Day - November 2nd

Tomorrow is All Souls Day, a day we gather to remember our deceased loved ones. We will have a beautiful Mass Monday at 7:00 PM during which we read out the names of parishioners who died this past year. The reading of the list will be interspersed with the chanting of the Litany of the Saints.

Have a blessed week,

