



All Saints Day November 1, 2015 B

Sainthood in the Catholic Church

- ◆ Patron Saints
- ◆ Canonization Process and its Limitations
- ◆ Veneration of Saints. Is it wrong to pray to saints?
- ◆ Relics, Medals and Statues

Devotion to saints and our veneration of them 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 (1Tim 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 column, I will attempt to respond to all of these questions and some others as well.

Who or what is a saint?

Addressing the church at Ephesus, Paul writes: “*You are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God*” (Eph 2:19). Paul calls *every living* member of the Body of Christ (i.e., the Church) a “saint” because each has been consecrated (i.e., made holy) to God by baptism, and sanctified by the presence of the Holy Spirit. But as time goes on, Paul comes 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 uses a more cautious phrase, “*called to be saints*” (Rom 1:1, 1Cor. 1:2).

In the course of time, 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. Fr. Edward O’Connor, C.S.C., writes: “*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 demonstrates to Peter, James and John, how the “saints” of the Old Covenant, Moses and Elijah, are 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.

Canonization process

Canonization, the process by which the Church declares someone a saint, has only been used since the tenth century. For hundreds of years, starting with the first martyrs of the early Church, saints were chosen by public acclaim. Though this was a more democratic way to recognize saints, some saints’ stories were distorted by legend and some never existed. Gradually, the bishops and, finally, the Vatican took over the authority for declaring sainthood.

In 1983, Pope John Paul II made sweeping changes in the canonization process. It begins after the death of a Catholic whom people regard as holy. Often, the process starts many years after death in order to give perspective on the candidate. The local bishop investigates the candidate’s life and writings for heroic virtue (or martyrdom) and orthodoxy of doctrine. Then a panel of theologians at the Vatican evaluates the candidate. After approval by the

panel and by the cardinals of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, the pope declares the candidate “venerable.”

The next step, beatification, requires evidence of one miracle (except in the case of martyrs). Since miracles are considered proof that the person is in heaven and can intercede for us, the miracle must take place after the candidate’s death and as a result of a specific petition to the candidate. When the pope declares the candidate beatified or “blessed,” the person can be venerated by a particular region or group of people with whom the person holds special importance.

Only after one more miracle will the pope canonize the person (this includes martyrs as well) and give him/her the title of saint. This title tells us that the person lived a holy life, is in heaven, and is to be honored by the universal Church. Canonization does not “make” a person a saint; it recognizes what God has already done.

Canonization of a person, which takes a long time and a lot of effort, is infallible and irrevocable. So while every person who is canonized is a saint, not every holy person has been or will be canonized. You have probably known many “saints” in your life, and you are called by God to be one yourself.

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 the Church has canonized predominantly 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.,

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, like other Jewish and pagan symbols, was adapted by Christians around the fourth century as a sign of sanctity in images and mosaics.

Patron saints

Patron saints are chosen as special protectors or guardians over areas of life, such as occupations, illnesses, churches, countries, causes—anything that is important to us. Records show that as early as the fourth century, people and churches were named after apostles and martyrs. Popes of recent times have adopted the names of patron saints. And so have other individuals and groups. Patron saints are often chosen today because an interest, talent, or event in their lives overlaps with the special area. For example, Francis of Assisi loved nature and so he is patron of ecologists. Francis de Sales was a writer and so he is patron of journalists and writers. Clare of Assisi was named patron of television because on Christmas, when she was too ill to leave her bed, she saw and heard Christmas Mass, even though it was taking place miles away. Angels can also serve as patron saints. A patron saint can help us when we follow the example of that saint’s life and when we ask for that saint’s intercessory prayers to God.

Veneration and intercession of saints

The veneration and intercession of saints developed very spontaneously in the early centuries of Christianity. Martyrs were the first to be called saints and were venerated. They were regarded as perfect Christians who lived heroic lives of virtue and died a violent death like Jesus, their Master. Most of them 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.

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 us. Catholics believe with other Christians that Jesus is our only Mediator before God, but Catholics also believe that *all* 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.

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 and 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 touch us through a person or thing.

Images, medals and 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 worshiping 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 and bring us closer to God.

Two books

- ◆ *My Life with the Saints*—James Martin, S.J.
Fr. Martin is one of the best loved writers and speakers in our Church today. In this book, Fr. Martin shares with us his relationship with canonized and uncanonized saints, such as Joan of Arc, Thérèse of Lisieux, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, St. Peter, Thomas Aquinas.
- ◆ *Making Saints*—Kenneth Woodward, former writer for *Newsweek*.

From inside the Vatican, the book that became a modern classic on sainthood in the Catholic Church

Working from Church documents, Kenneth Woodward shows how saint makers decide who is worthy of the Church's highest honor. He describes the investigations into the lives of candidates, explains how claims for miracles are approved or rejected, and reveals the role politics—papal and secular—plays in the ultimate decision. From his examination of such controversial candidates as Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador and Edith Stein, a Jewish philosopher who became a nun and was gassed at Auschwitz, to his insights into the changes Pope John Paul II has instituted, Woodward opens the door on a 2,000-year old tradition.

Woodward had unprecedented access to theologians and doctors (who examined the miracles) who served on the saint making committee.

Have a blessed week,

