



All Saints Day A November 1, 2020

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 the realization that not everyone who has been consecrated to God through baptism actually *lives* a holy life. Hence, sometimes, rather than calling 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 among *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 affirm 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” who are living from those who have died, 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 to the canonization process. The following are the steps to canonization:

Step One: SERVANT OF GOD. The process that can lead to sainthood known as a “cause” cannot usually start until five years after a person’s death. In some but rare cases, the five-year waiting period can be waived if there is overwhelming evidence that the person under consideration lived a holy life. Pope John Paul waived the five-year waiting period for Mother Teresa of Calcutta who died in 1997, and Pope Benedict waived it for the sainthood cause of Pope John Paul II who died in 2005. After the *Congregation for the Causes of Saints* accepts the name of a candidate for sainthood, that person is given the title “Servant of God.”

Step Two: VENERABLE. This step involves intense study of the candidate’s life and his/her writings, as well as interview of witnesses who knew him/her. If after careful study, the Congregation deems that the candidate lived a life of ‘heroic virtue’ (phrase coined by St. Augustine to describe the life of highly virtuous persons), the candidate is declared ‘Venerable.’

Step Three: BLESSED. For the candidate to be declared ‘Blessed,’ one miracle attributed to him/her is required. Miracles are not performed by prospective saints but by God. The Church believes the person is in heaven and can intercede with God to perform a miracle on earth for someone who has prayed to the prospective Saint. The Church does a thorough investigation of each miracle, working with the scientific community and medical experts to determine that, for example in the case of the healing of a person with a terminal illness, there is not a natural explanation for the cure. Once the Pope confirms that a miracle has taken place, the candidate is declared ‘Blessed’ and in heaven. Catholics can now privately venerate the Blessed person and seek his/her intercession.

As for martyrs (those killed for defending their faith), there is no requirement for a miracle for them to be beatified, but at least one miracle must be

attributed to them prior to canonization.

Step Four: SAINT. The final step towards canonization requires a second miracle attributed to the candidate, which is also rigorously investigated. While the general norm for a candidate to be declared a saint is the accomplishment of two miracles, in the case of Pope John XXIII, Pope Francis waived this requirement based on his virtuous, model lifestyle, and because of the good which had come from his having opened the Second Vatican Council.

Saints are assigned a special Feast Day that all Catholics can celebrate at Mass.

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 these Religious Orders 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 their 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.

In recent decades, the Church has become much more welcoming of saintly lay men and women—married and single persons. Two examples are Louis and Zelig Martin, the parents of Thérèse of Lisieux (the Little Flower). For a wonderful article on married couples who are saints, google: Allentown Diocese: Discussing the Challenges of Married Saints and Holy Couples, by Tara Connolly.

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

The halo

By the fourth century, halos were widely used in

Christian art as a symbol of holiness, spiritual power and innocence. At the beginning, only God, Jesus and Mother Mary were depicted with halos, but over time, other saintly figures had been shown with similar ray of lights emanating from them.

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 that saint to intercede for us with God.

But isn't Jesus our one and only Mediator?

Non-Catholics think that when we ask saints to intercede for us, 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

1) *Blessed Among Us - Day by Day with Sainly Witnesses* by Robert Ellsberg

As I have stated in previous bulletins, this book has become a favorite of mine. For each day of the year, the author gives a short description of two witnesses. While many of the witnesses are canonized saints, not all are. And while the vast majority of the witnesses are Catholics, some are not, e.g., Dr. Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi. A great number of the witnesses are from the past century and only died in the past 50 years.

2) *Making Saints* by Kenneth Woodward

This is a fascinating look into the process of saint-making in our Church. Woodward, a Notre Dame graduate and former religious writer for *Newsweek*, had unprecedented access to Church officials and medical people involved in the canonization process.

Help us to keep these brothers and sisters in mind as we vote.

May people be elected at all levels of government who will best serve the common good of all people in our nation.

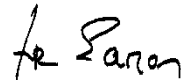
May we have the fortitude to accept the outcome of the election.

Bless us, Lord, and bless our nation.

This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.

- Fr. Eamon

Have a blessed week,



ELECTION PRAYER

*God of Mercy and Help,
as we approach another Election Season,
our nation is faced with many challenges.*

*May your Holy Spirit help each of us to discern
whom we should vote for at all levels of
government.*

*Loving God, we know you favor no one
except those in greatest need,
those with little or no voice,
the pre-born, the poor, the immigrant, and the
unwanted.*