

## THE CANONIZATION OF SAINTS

This article is a brief description of the Church's process for canonizing saints and the meaning of that designation. The term "saint" comes from the Latin word *sanctus*, which means "holy one." There is a universal call to holiness and, using the broad definition of the term, every person in heaven is a saint. However, the Church also canonizes certain people as official saints, and therefore models of Catholic life, worthy of veneration by the whole Church. This article will describe what canonizations mean and how they came about.

### I. WHY DOES THE CHURCH CANONIZE SAINTS?

For the first millennium of the Church, there was no formal process for declaring people to be saints. It was simply a matter of public recognition that certain people, such as Mary, the Apostles and the martyrs of the early Church, were saints. Recognizing a person as a saint meant affirming that he is certainly in heaven and, by martyrdom or a life of heroic virtue, a model of Catholic life. It does not mean that the person's life was always holy; many saints, such as St. Augustine, experienced dramatic conversions; rather a saint, by the time he died, became holy enough to go straight to heaven; and on earth he is worthy of devotions, such as being added to litanies of saints and having churches and Masses in his honor.

As time went on, different areas were developing extensive and varied lists of saints and people wanted more certainty and clarity about who could be venerated as a saint. And so, in the tenth century, the Popes themselves started declaring certain people as saints so that all peoples in the world could know of the fittingness of their devotions. In order to avoid confusion as more people were being venerated as saints and standards were extremely varied, Pope Alexander III decreed in 1170 that, in the future, only the Pope himself would declare any new saints. A diocese or religious order could still venerate a deceased holy person as a "blessed," and then present that person's life as worthy of canonization; but only the Pope would declare a person to be a saint. In 1234, Pope Gregory described the distinction more clearly and set forth a defined process for canonizing saints.

In order to unite the Church more, with a clear set of people who can be venerated as saints and blessed, Pope Sixtus V decreed in 1588 that, from then onward, the Pope would authorize all declarations of people as blessed or saints. There is, however, a crucial difference. The declaration of a person as a blessed, which may be given by the Pope himself or a bishop with the Pope's approval,

is a recognition that a person is in heaven and worthy of veneration as a model of Catholic life either because of his martyrdom or heroic virtue. If a person is declared blessed, he or she can be invoked in public veneration; and Masses in his honor can be celebrated in his area and other places associated with him, such as the houses of a religious order of which a blessed was a member. A decree of canonization, the declaration that a person is an official saint, is issued only by the Pope. It is a use of papal magisterium, or teaching office, and makes it above doubt that the person canonized is in heaven, a powerful intercessor for us, and worthy of general veneration because, and that by the end of his life, become a model of Catholic life. Many saints are on the universal calendar of the Church, which means that Masses and other liturgies in their honor are set forth in universal liturgical books. For any saint, however, there can be public veneration, such as Masses in their honor and the addition of their names to litanies of saints.

## II. THE CURRENT PROCESS FOR CANONIZING SAINTS

The current process the Church uses to canonize saints is set forth in the 1983 apostolic constitution *Divinus Perfectionis Magister*. The procedures are lengthy and detailed to establish with clarity that a person should be venerated as a saint. Because a saint must be a model of Catholic life, he or she must have been in the Church before the end of their life. For that reason, the Church would not canonize the likes of Ghandi, William Wilberfoce, who spearheaded the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, or Dietrich Bonhoffer, the great Lutheran theologian who heroically opposed Hitler to the death. They may have been holy in their own religious traditions, but they would not be *Catholic* saints. In addition, canonization is based upon either martyrdom or heroic virtue, not upon the fact that someone did many good things for the Church. Thus the Church has canonized such people as Pope St. Celestine V (1294), who was a very holy monk but rather unsuccessful Pope, but has not canonized the Roman Emperor Constantine (312-337), who legalized and greatly assisted Christianity, but waited until his deathbed to be baptized.

First, the Church usually waits five years after a person's death to begin the process of canonization. That waiting time, which used to be 50 years, is meant to allow time for calmer emotions or more objectivity. (The waiting period was waived for Blessed Mother Theresa and Pope John Paul II to build upon their example more rapidly.) After the waiting period, the bishop of the diocese where the person either died or is buried, or sometimes another bishop with an important connection, allows for an investigation to begin and, if it is going well, asks the Congregation of Saints in Rome to give its permission to proceed. If the Congregation officially allows the process to continue, the person is called a Servant of God. Some American Servants of God are: the great American preacher

Archbishop Fulton Sheen; Frank Pareter, a holy Richmond seminarian who died young in 1920; and Father Vincent Cappadano, a priest who was killed in 1967 while ministering to dying soldiers in Vietnam. The bishop appoints a postulator for the cause and a tribunal to investigate the person's life. Thus, Father Daniel Mode, an Arlington priest and Navy chaplain is the postulator for Father Cappadano. The tribunal interviews witnesses, evaluates written evidence, and reads the person's writings to get a sense of his life and spirituality, and to be sure that there is nothing heretical. If the bishop, with the tribunal's advice, concludes that the cause should advance, he forwards the tribunal's report and evidence in a document called a *transumptum* to the Congregation.

If it accepts the cause, the Congregation then appoints its own postulator and tribunal to gather more information, both about the person's life and about any miracles that have occurred through his intercession. The postulator prepares a report called a *positio*, which he presents to a panel of nine theologians. If the six of the theologians vote in favor of advancement, the case is then goes to a panel of cardinals and bishops. This panel carefully asks whether the person was a model of Catholic life and whether he either died as a martyr or demonstrated heroic virtue. If two thirds of that panel vote for advancement, they forward to *positio* to the Pope. If he agrees, the individual is declared Venerable. Father Michael McGivney, the founder of the Knights of Columbus, was declared Venerable in 2008 and Popes Pius XII in 2010.

When, the Pope issues a decree declaring a person to be Venerable, the evaluations continue in preparation for the person being declared a "blessed." The investigation into the person's life continues, but the focus shifts to confirming whether any miracles have been performed through the candidate's intercession, and to whether the person died as a martyr. The Congregation assigns a relator, or expert, and his staff to investigate whether they can authenticate that miracles have been performed through the candidate's intercession. There may be another relator assigned to confirm whether the Venerable died as a martyr, i.e. one who voluntarily gave his life for the faith or heroic charity. A miracle is a divine favor, which is generally but not always a healing, that could not have occurred naturally. A person who was not a martyr (called a confessor, meaning a living example of the faith) must have a confirmed miracle through his intercession before being declared blessed. A martyr does not need a miracle for this beatification but does for a canonization.

Once the Congregation completes its investigation and, for a confessor, confirms at least one miracle, it sends a request to the Pope to declare the person blessed. If the Pope approves, he or a bishop then publicly declares that the person is Blessed. The Blessed can then be on the local liturgical calendar within his area and in other places such as religious houses associated with him; and priests can celebrate Masses in his honor in these places. Furthermore, anywhere in the world, there can be official public devotions to him, such as statues or shrines and inclusion in litanies. For example, Pope John Paul II declared Pope John XXIII and Mother Theresa

of Calcutta Blesseds in 2002 and 2003 respectively. Mother Theresa is on the calendar for India and the houses of her order, the Missionaries of charity; Pope John XXIII is on Italy's liturgical calendar.

At that point, the Congregation investigates in an attempt to confirm another miracle performed through the Blessed person's intercession. That miracle is required for canonization, regardless of whether the person is a martyr or a confessor. If the Congregation can confirm another miracle by his intercession, it then sends a request to the Pope to declare the person a saint. If the Pope agrees, he then signs a formal decree of canonization, which is an infallible declaration that the person is in heaven and was a model of Catholic life. Sometimes, with the advice of the Congregation on Rites in Rome, the Pope places the person on the universal liturgical calendar. In any case, he can be included in litanies of the saints and Masses in his honor can be celebrated anywhere in the world.

This article has brought up two other questions: (1) how does the Congregation for the Causes of Saints authenticate a miracle; and (2) what are the universal liturgical calendar and local liturgical calendars and what does it mean for a saint to have a day on them. Other articles on this site address these issues.