

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Canonization of Saints

56. Who is eligible to become a saint?

The short answer to the question is that *you* may become a saint. God calls all of us to be saints in the sense that he wants all of us to be holy and to live with him eternally in heaven.

Yet probably few of us will be canonized saints. The Church calls upon the faithful to honor and imitate these models of holiness, not only because of the way they lived their lives on earth but also because of what we know they are doing in heaven, that is, praying for us.

The Church does not make saints; it only observes and acknowledges the fact that from time to time people ask these heroes of faith to intercede for them, and those prayers seem to result in miraculous events that only the Lord could bring about. In naming people saints, the Church is proclaiming that these individuals are with the Lord.

The Church has come to understand and teach that since baptism is necessary for salvation, it obviously would be a criterion for sainthood. It has also been our tradition to refer to the great models of Old Testament faith as saints (Saint Moses), as well as others who may not have been baptized before Christ instructed his disciples to do so (Saint John the Baptist).

57. Whom does the Church recognize as a saint?

The decision as to who is welcomed into the kingdom of heaven belongs to the Lord. Nonetheless, we can say that an exemplary Christian life, characterized by heroic virtues and holiness, is an obvious prerequisite for sainthood. There are also certain extraordinary qualities that the Church has come to identify as good indicators of sainthood.

If a person offered his or her life in defense of the faith, the Church may recognize the person as a martyr. We can be sure that the Lord looks upon this act of fidelity with favor. The Church gives to the martyrs the utmost admiration. The martyrs include Saint Stephen, Saint Peter and Saint Paul.

Another possible sign of sanctity that has occurred on occasion throughout history is the *stigmata*: that is, a person develops the wounds that Christ endured in his Passion. Those who have received these marks witness, even before their death, to the great sacrifice the Lord made for us. Some stigmatics have been canonized, including Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Pio of Pietrelcina.

Another extraordinary quality of some saints is the gift to advance and teach the Catholic faith. Some holy men and women have stood out for their practice of this gift when it was sorely needed in history. These individuals are referred to as doctors of the Church. They include Saint Teresa of Avila, Saint Thomas Aquinas and Saint Augustine.

Our Catholic list of saints is found in what is called the *Roman Martyrology*, so named because it originally contained only the names of martyrs. In time nonmartyrs were added, since, in a broad sense, all the saints lived and died for the Lord.

The *Roman Martyrology* reads like a daily journal that very briefly identifies the saint or saints to be remembered and celebrated on that particular day. It usually tells where a saint lived or died, sometimes how he or she died and who canonized him or her. Since the Church continues to canonize saints from year to year, the Congregation for the Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments integrates an appendix into the *Roman Martyrology*; the last edition was in 2004. The *Roman Martyrology* currently contains the names of approximately sixty-five hundred men and women—rich and poor, clerical and lay, secular and religious, married and single—from all parts of the world and periods of time.

58. By what process does the Church determine whether or not a person should be declared a saint? How long does this process take?

The process for canonization is not found in the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*. In the past century the Church has updated the process to allow for the increased intervention of experts, in order to increase objectiv-

ity and efficiency in considering causes. Pope John Paul II most recently outlined the process in a 1983 document entitled *Divinus Perfectionis Magister*.¹

The steps in the process of canonization can be summed up in the following way: the death of the individual, presentation of the cause (the person is called a servant of God), declaration of venerability (the person is called venerable), declaration of beatification (the person is declared blessed) and canonization (the person is declared a saint).

Canonization is an infallible proclamation that the individual in question is in heaven with the Lord. Thus the person would have to be dead before the process could start. In fact, five years must pass from the time of death before the canonization process can begin. This time period, formerly much longer, is meant to bring about a sobriety of emotion that promotes objectivity.

The Church recently witnessed a relaxation of this five-year period in the case of Pope John Paul II. In the past it has happened that, due to the acclaim of the people, a person was declared a saint shortly after his or her death. One such individual was Saint Gregory the Great (540–604), a pope and doctor of the Church.

The diocesan bishop, or those who are lawfully equivalent to him (see canon 368), can present a case for canonization. The bishop should seek the assistance of a postulator to coordinate and promote the case. The writings of the person under consideration, who at this point is called "servant of God," must be scrutinized in a report. Witnesses must be interviewed to inquire into the sanctity of the servant of God's life. Reported miracles must be investigated.

Upon completion of the diocesan investigation, the bishop sends a report to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints for further study and possible recommendation to the pope. Theologians and other experts in their respective fields carefully scrutinize the materials. If it is found that the individual's life is characterized by virtue, martyrdom, alleged miracles or agelong public devotion, the Congregation will recommend to the pope that the Church declare the servant of God worthy of the veneration of the faithful. The cause is then officially opened.

A miracle is needed for beatification, and, following beatification, another subsequent miracle is needed for canonization. The diocesan bishop or his delegate carries out an investigation of each alleged miracle, while the postulator continues promoting the cause. With these miracles the Church grows in certainty that the person in question is with the Lord and is a model of holiness and a means through which we can seek intercession.

At any given time the Congregation for the Causes of Saints has numerous cases that are "waiting for a miracle." That is why there is no way to tell how long a process of canonization will take.

59. Who takes charge of a cause for canonization?

There are many people involved in a person's cause for canonization:

Diocesan bishop. As mentioned above, the canonization process usually begins in the home diocese of the person under consideration. The diocesan bishop conducts an initial investigation into the life of the person. He is responsible for investigating alleged miracles that have occurred within the territory of his diocese. It is fitting for him to preside over the investigation, but he may appoint an episcopal delegate to act in his absence.

Episcopal delegate. The episcopal delegate oversees all aspects of the diocesan investigation. He must be present for all sessions investigating the cause, and he presides over a session when the diocesan bishop cannot attend. The episcopal delegate must be a priest.

Postulator. The postulator has an essential role in the canonization process, as he or she represents the cause of the saint. The postulator makes the preliminary judgment of whether or not a situation warrants advancing a case for canonization. In all steps of the canonization process, the postulator will attempt to present evidence that warrants consideration by diocesan bishops and the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. The Congregation must approve the postulator to work in this capacity. At this time there are approximately two hundred individuals in Rome approved for this task.

Sponsor of the cause. The sponsor directly hires the postulator and financially supports the introduction of the servant of God and the

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various investigations as the case progresses. The sponsor can be an individual, a diocese or a religious order.

Promotor of justice (or of the faith). The promotor of justice must be present for all sessions of the diocesan investigation. He ensures that the interests of the Church are maintained. In consultation with the medical expert, he prepares questions for the witnesses. Through the episcopal delegate he can pose additional questions during witnesses' depositions. He can admit and scrutinize pertinent documents. The promotor of justice must be a priest.

Medical expert for the tribunal. This medical expert must be present for all the sessions. He acts as an advisor to clarify any and all matters that pertain to the medical aspects of the miracles. He can recommend admission of documents to the case, as well as scrutinize those already submitted. He must be a medical doctor.

Medical expert(s) to inspect the person cured. The medical expert or experts who will inspect the patient need to take an oath before assuming their role and must be interviewed by the tribunal. If the patient is still alive, two medical experts must inspect him or her and submit their written reports. If the patient has died, only one medical expert is required to review the medical records and make a report. The medical experts must be medical doctors, preferably specialists in the area of medicine pertinent to the investigation.

Notary. The notary must be present for all the sessions. He or she will make a record of all the diocesan sessions and authenticate each page of the record, including copies for the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

Copier. The copier produces exact copies of the original acts to be transmitted to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

The Congregation for the Causes of Saints. A cardinal heads the congregation. A number of individuals assist him, notably a secretary, an undersecretary, theologian-consultors, a promotor of the faith, medical experts and other experts in their respective fields. The congregation's personnel meet in a special session to discuss the validity of the miracles attributed to the person under consideration. The cardinal heading the congregation and other bishops judge the case.

The pope. The pope decrees the various stages toward canonization. In light of the fact that decisions concerning sainthood affect the entire Church, the prerogative to make such determinations rests with him. Despite the fact that the Congregation does most of the work on the pope's behalf, a very direct relationship is encouraged between the Holy Father and the diocesan bishop on these matters. Recently Pope Benedict XVI encouraged diocesan bishops to be involved actively and directly in the initiation of causes as well as the investigation of miracles.

The pope's act of canonization is regarded as an infallible act. This, of course, assumes diligent work on the part of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, on whom he relies to scrutinize the material from the diocesan bishop. The pope decides on what day the feast of the saint is to be celebrated as well as what the saint might be patron of, as evident in the miracles that accompanied the canonization process. By the pope's decree the saint is entered into the *Roman Martyrology*.

60. How does a bishop investigate an alleged miracle?

When the postulator of a person's cause for sainthood becomes aware of an alleged miracle, he usually conducts a preliminary inquiry to see if the claim has merit. If it does, the postulator will ask the bishop in whose diocese the miracle occurred to initiate an investigation. The bishop will then constitute a tribunal, consisting of an episcopal delegate, a promotor of justice, a medical expert and a notary. He will also appoint medical experts to inspect the patient and prepare reports that will become part of the acts, or record.

The investigation then unfolds in a very organized fashion, in sessions. The notary carefully documents each session in writing. Each session focuses on a particular task, and the session lasts as long as is necessary to accomplish that task. For instance, perhaps two witnesses are to be interviewed in the third session.

The sessions unfold as follows:

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Opening session. The diocesan bishop should preside at the opening session, since it is by his mandate that the investigation will unfold. The tribunal members take their respective oaths of office. The notary formally enters the postulator's letter of petition and other documents into "the acts" (the record) of the case.

Subsequent sessions. The tribunal members hear from witnesses, including those presented by the postulator, those presented by the promotor of justice and the medical expert or experts who have inspected the recipient of the healing. The episcopal delegate asks questions that were prepared by the promotor of justice and recorded by the notary. After each interview the written record of the testimony is shown to the witness to confirm that he or she has nothing further to add. Other necessary documents are also entered into the acts of the case.

Second-to-last session. Once all the witnesses have testified and all the necessary documents have been admitted to the case, the copier must prepare two copies for the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. The tribunal gathers for a reading of the acts, and during this reading the copies are compared to the original for accuracy.

Closing session. The diocesan bishop who ordered the investigation should preside at the closing session. This session involves the presentation of the original acts and two copies for the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. The documents are inspected for accuracy.

The postulator and promotor of justice rest their case. A trustworthy individual is commissioned to carry the copies of the acts to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints and must take an oath to that effect. The acts are then sealed in two boxes, the original for the diocesan archives in one box and the two copies for the Congregation in the other. Each box is wrapped in paper and ribbon. The ribbon is then sealed with a wax seal, embossed with the bishop's coat of arms.

When the documents arrive at the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints, the chancellor of the Congregation confirms that the wax seal is intact. A receipt is issued, and the work of the local diocese is formally completed.

The cardinal prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints officially decrees the start of the investigation within the Congregation. The various Congregation officials scrutinize the acts for their strict adherence to procedure. They determine whether the miracle is in fact authentic and clearly attributed to the intercession of the person under consideration for sainthood. If in the estimation of the cardinal prefect the matter warrants the pope's consideration, he will forward the case to the Holy Father for a decision.

61. What ceremonies surround the various stages of a person's beatification and canonization?

The beatification and canonization ceremonies are set within the context of the celebration of the Eucharist. In a change of practice, Pope Benedict XVI recently directed that the prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints or another prelate should preside over beatification ceremonies, while the canonization celebration will continue to be reserved to the Holy Father. These liturgies usually take place in St. Peter's Basilica or in the piazza outside; however, the liturgy could take place at another fitting location, such as the town in which the saint was born, lived or died. At the time of both the beatification and canonization ceremonies, an official image of the blessed or saint is revealed to the public.