



backgrounder

prepared by
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Making Saints

Introduction

All Christians aspire to become saints, that is, persons in heaven (officially canonized or not), who lived lives of great charity and heroic virtues and who are worthy of imitation.

In official Church procedures there are three steps to sainthood: a candidate becomes “*Venerable*,” then “*Blessed*” and then “*Saint*.” Venerable is the title given to a deceased person recognized formally by the pope as having lived heroic virtues. To be beatified and recognized as a Blessed, one miracle acquired through the candidate’s intercession is required in addition to recognition of heroic virtue or martyrdom. Canonization requires a second miracle after beatification, though a pope may waive these requirements. (A miracle is not required prior to a martyr’s beatification, but one is required before canonization.)

Key Terms

Beatification -- the second stage in the process of proclaiming a person a saint; occurs after a diocese and the Congregation for the Causes of Saints has conducted a rigorous investigation into the person’s life and writings to determine whether he or she demonstrates a heroic level of virtue or suffered martyrdom. A miracle attributed to the person’s intercession must be proved.

Blessed -- titled bestowed on a person who has been beatified and accorded limited veneration.

Canonization – the formal process by which the Church declares a person to be a saint and worthy of veneration universally.

Congregation for the Causes of Saints – a department of the Roman Curia, established originally as the Congregation of Rites by Pope Sixtus V in 1588. Reorganized and renamed in 1969 by Pope Paul VI, and again in 1983 by Pope John Paul II. In addition to making recommendations to the pope on beatifications and canonizations, it is also responsible for the authentication and preservation of sacred relics.

Miracle – an event that can be witnessed by the senses but is in apparent contradiction to the laws of nature. The Church recognizes authentic miracles as a divine intervention in the sensible world.

Petitioner – party initiating action in canon law. In the case of a sainthood cause, the petitioner is one who asks the bishop to begin the investigation which could ultimately lead to canonization. (A bishop may also begin a cause on his own initiation.)

Positio – a comprehensive summary of all documentation; in this context, there are two: the one summarizing the investigation of a candidate’s life and heroic virtues or martyrdom and a second for any alleged miracles. The *positio* is prepared by the postulator with the assistance of someone from outside the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

Postulator -- person appointed to guide and oversee the cause. One oversees the cause at the diocesan level (Phase I); the second, resident in Rome and appointed by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, oversees all aspects of Phases II and III.

Prefect -- the head of any of the pontifical congregations, usually a cardinal.

Relator – person appointed by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints to assemble the historic documentation of the particular location and era of the candidate.

Saint – the title given to someone who has been formally canonized by the Church, and therefore offered for public veneration; less formally, anyone, canonized or not, believed to be sharing eternal life with God.

Servant of God -- the title given to a candidate for sainthood whose cause is still under investigation, prior to beatification.

Venerable – another honorific given to a candidate for sainthood whose cause has not yet reached the beatification stage but whose heroic virtue has been declared by the pope.

History

Before beatification and canonization procedures were assigned to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints (instituted in 1588 by Pope Sixtus V) and to the Holy Father himself, it was the “vox populi” or “spontaneous local attribution” which led to the proclaiming of saints. This was the case, for example, of St. Anthony of Padua. The first formal canonization which resulted from a papally mandated investigation was in 993 when Pope John XV declared Ulrich of Augsburg a saint. Pope Urban VIII required Vatican involvement in all sainthood causes in 1634.

No precise count exists of those who have been proclaimed saints since the first centuries. However, in 1988, to mark its 4th centenary, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints published the first “Index ac status Causarum.” This book and its subsequent supplements, written entirely in Latin, are considered the definitive index of all causes which have been presented to the congregation since its institution.

Excluding beatifications and canonizations celebrated by Pope John Paul, these volumes show that 3,464 causes are pending 1,385 cults have been confirmed and 565 blessed and 285 saints have been proclaimed. These actual totals are probably slightly higher, because in several cases the name of the person was accompanied by the words “and companions,” without specifying a number.

As of October 3, 2004, Pope John Paul II has proclaimed 1,337 Blessed, and canonized 483 saints.

Stage I

Examining the Life of a Candidate for Sainthood

Phase I: Diocesan Level

Five years must pass from the time of a candidate's death before a cause may begin. This is to allow greater balance and objectivity in evaluating the case and to let the emotions of the moment dissipate. The pope can dispense from this waiting period.

The bishop of the diocese in which the person died is responsible for beginning the investigation. The diocese, parish, religious congregation, or association asking for a cause to be opened, known as the *petitioner*, asks the bishop through a person known as the *postulator* to open the investigation. (A bishop also may begin a cause on his own initiative.) The bishop, once the '*nihil obstat*' of the Holy See is obtained, forms a diocesan tribunal for this purpose. Witnesses are called before the tribunal to recount concrete facts on the exercise of Christian virtues considered heroic, that is, the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, and the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude, and others specific to his or her state in life. In addition, all documents written by and about the candidate must be gathered and examined.

The bishop also will consult with the national bishops' conference, or at least the bishops of his region to solicit their opinions on the merit and timeliness of introducing the cause. Likewise, he will consult the general public, asking for anyone with any knowledge of the candidate to come forward.

Phase II: Congregation for the Causes of Saints

Once the diocesan investigation is finished, the documentation is passed on to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. The public copy used for further work is put together here. The postulator for this phase, resident in Rome, follows the preparation of the '*Positio*,' or summary of the documentation that proves the heroic exercise of virtue or the martyrdom, under the direction of a member of Congregation's staff called a *relator*.

The '*Positio*' undergoes an examination by nine theologians who give their vote. If the majority of the theologians are in favor, the cause is passed on for examination by cardinals and bishops who are members of the Congregation. They hold meetings twice a month. If their judgment is favorable, the *prefect* of the Congregation presents the results of the entire course of the cause to the pope, who gives his approval and authorizes the congregation to draft the relative decree. The public reading and promulgation of the decree follows.

Stage III

Beatification

For the *beatification* of a Servant of God, a miracle attributed to his intercession, verified after his death, is necessary. The required miracle must be proven through the appropriate canonical investigation, following a procedure analogous to that for heroic virtues. This investigation too is concluded with the appropriate decree. Once the two decrees are promulgated (regarding the heroic virtues or martyrdom and the miracle) the Holy Father decides on beatification, which is the concession of limited public veneration – usually only in the diocese, region, or religious

community in which the Servant of God lived. With beatification the candidate receives the titled of *Blessed*.

Stage IV Canonization

For canonization another miracle is needed, attributed to the intercession of the Blessed and having occurred after his beatification. The methods for affirming the miracle are the same as those followed for beatification. Canonization is understood as the concession and requirement of public veneration in the Universal Church. With canonization, the Blessed acquires the title of Saint.

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Adapted from "Canonical procedure for causes of saints," Vatican Information Service, Sept. 12, 1997; and from "Saints in the Catholic Church," Vatican Information Service, July 29, 1997.

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