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How the Church Recognizes Saints

By Jeannine Marino

The process of declaring one a saint in the Catholic Church is called canonization. The canonization process is a canonical (Church law) procedure by which the Church through the Pope solemnly declares a Catholic to be united with God in heaven, an intercessory to God on behalf of the living, and worthy of public and universal veneration.

A cause of canonization examines a person's life and death to determine if they were either martyred or lived a virtuous life. Every cause of canonization has two phases: the diocesan and Roman phase. The diocese responsible for opening a cause is the diocese in which the person died/was martyred. The diocese, religious order, association or lay person(s) requesting (petitioning) for the cause asks the diocesan bishop, through a person known as the postulator to open an investigation into the martyrdom or life of the person.

The diocesan bishop investigates how the person lived a heroic virtuous life, exemplifying the virtues of faith, hope and love through the calling of witnesses and the theological examination of the candidates' writings. If the cause is based on martyrdom, the diocesan bishop investigates the circumstances surrounding the alleged martyrdom, which is also done through the calling of witnesses to the martyrdom and the examination of the candidates' life.

Once the diocesan investigation is complete, the documentation (evidence) that has been collected is sent to the Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints and the Roman phase begins. The first step in the Roman phase is the examination of the diocesan documentation. If the congregation's theologians find the documentation convincing, it is sent for review by the cardinal and bishop members of the congregation. If they also find the documentation favorable, it is sent to the pope. With the pope's approval a decree is issued stating that the person lived a virtuous life thereby conferring the title "Venerable" on the person.

The next step in the process is being named "Blessed." For beatification, a miracle must be attributed to the Venerable. The miracle is verified through an examination by a team of medical experts and theologians. The three traditional standards for judging the authenticity of a miracle are: complete – meaning a total healing of the disease, it is not enough for the person to "just" feel better;

instantaneous – meaning the healing occurred all at once and not over the course of several days or months; and durable – meaning the person remains permanently free from the illness that afflicted them. Once the miracle has been verified, the pope issues a decree declaring the miracle and the person receives the title of “Blessed.” The pope can dispense, though he does not always do so, from the requirement of a miracle for the beatification of a martyr.

A second miracle must be attributed to the Blessed in order for him or her to be canonized a saint. A proven miracle is required, even for martyrs, for canonization. The verification of the second miracle follows the same procedure as the first. Once the person is declared a saint, he or she is worthy of universal veneration by the Church.

There are many steps to be named a saint in the Church and the canonization process is lengthy and detailed. This process ensures that the role models held up as witnesses to Christ and the Gospel as worthy of our emulation.

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