

CANONIZATION OF SAINTS

But the saints of the Most High shall receive the Kingdom, and possess the Kingdom forever and ever. ~ Daniel 7:18

THROUGHOUT ITS HISTORY, the Catholic Church has canonized some of its faithful who have died. It has publicly declared that they faithfully cooperated with God's grace and practiced to an heroic degree the virtues of faith, hope, charity, prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance, and humility. And, in practicing these virtues, they must have manifested joy: *"let thy saints rejoice in thy goodness"* (2 Chr 6:41). These holy individuals, who are considered to be in Heaven, are called **saints**. The term must be distinguished from its use in the New Testament, where it more broadly refers to those who were members of the earliest Christian communities.

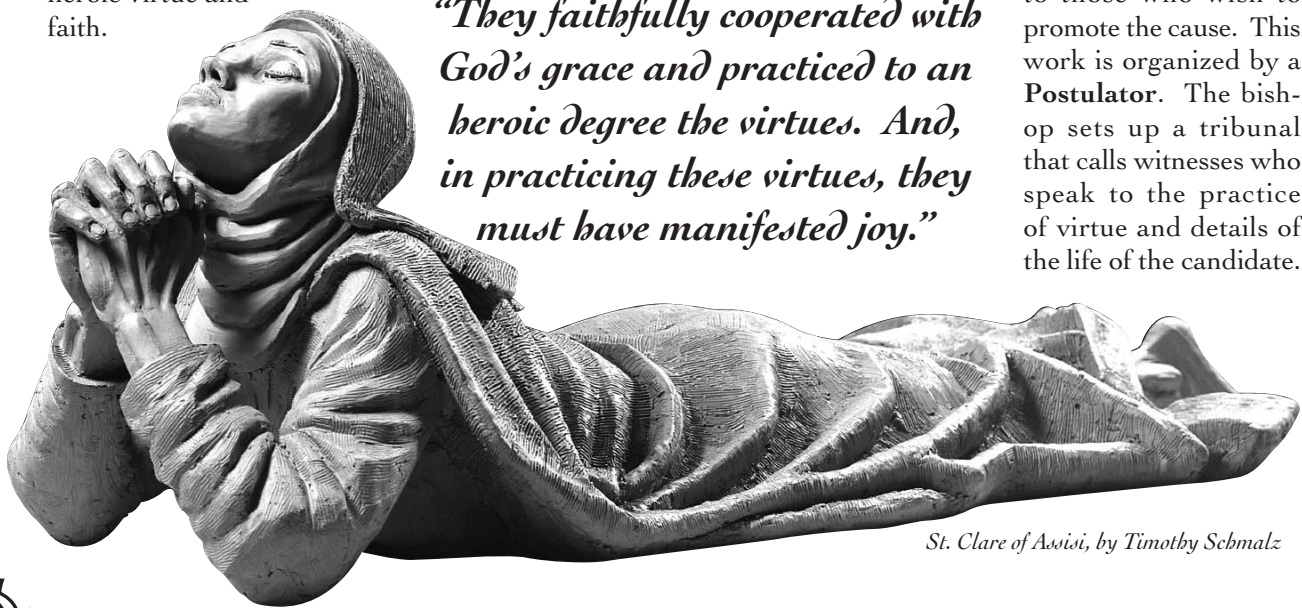
The term canonization comes from the Greek word *kanon*, meaning a standard or measuring rod. The Church applies the standard of holiness laid down in the Gospels to those who have lived exemplary lives and, if they measure up, are declared saints, meaning that the Church believes they are in Heaven and, therefore, are worthy of veneration and imitation. **Canonization** is the process by which the Church makes the determination that they faithfully cooperated with God's grace and lived lives of heroic virtue. For some individuals, this might have meant leaving behind a life of sin through an experience of deep conversion that then showed itself in exceptional holiness. For others, accepting death rather than deny Christ might be the most significant indicator of heroic virtue and faith.

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From the earliest times, the Church has venerated certain individuals as exceptionally holy, although the way the determination has been made has varied considerably over the centuries. The patriarchs, such as Abraham; the prophets, such as Isaiah; and certain other figures of the Old Testament have always been honored as saints. Others who have been venerated right from the beginning have been Mary, the Mother of God, her husband Joseph, and the apostles, early Church leaders such as Paul and his disciples Timothy and Titus. Martyrs, those who gave their lives rather than denying their faith in Christ, constitute nearly all those who were deemed saints in the first few centuries of the Church's history.

Since the 10th century, canonization is a formal process used by the Church to evaluate the lives and virtues of certain individuals, and since the 17th century, all beatifications and canonizations must be done by the Pope. Most of the procedure we now recognize was also established in the 17th century. The most recent change in procedure was promulgated by Pope John Paul II in January 1983. The most important norms used in pursuing a "cause," or investigation process, are found in an Apostolic Constitution entitled *Divinus Perfectionis Magister* ("The Divine Perfection of the Master").

A cause for any person cannot begin before five years after his or her death. The local bishop is responsible for initiating the investigation, in response to those who wish to promote the cause. This work is organized by a **Postulator**. The bishop sets up a tribunal that calls witnesses who speak to the practice of virtue and details of the life of the candidate.



St. Clare of Assisi, by Timothy Schmalz

All documents related to the candidate, for example writings or other pronouncements, are gathered for examination. At this stage, the candidate is called **Servant of God**.

When the diocesan work has been completed, the findings and documentation are forwarded to the **Congregation for the Causes of Saints** in Rome. The process in Rome takes on the character of a long, detailed, and scholarly investigation. A postulator who is resident in Rome acts in the same capacity as the first postulator to promote the cause of the candidate. A **Relator** from the Congregation oversees the progress of the cause. Within the Congregation a **Positio** (a position paper) is prepared that summarizes the documentation and proofs for the heroic practice of virtue. Nine theologians examine the Positio and, if it receives a majority vote from them, it is sent to the cardinals and bishops of the Congregation for their approval or rejection. If approved by the Congregation, the results are forwarded to the Pope, who must give his approval. Following papal approval, a decree is prepared concerning the heroic practice of virtue, and faithful conformity to the teachings of the Gospel, of the candidate. At this point, the candidate may be called **Venerable**.

An interesting special feature of this whole process is the Church's appointment of a competent person called the **Promoter of the Faith** (in earlier times, this person was called the "Devil's Advocate"), whose only duty is to present obstacles to the cause by questioning aspects of the candidate's life that might disprove his or her practice of saintly virtue, and the orthodoxy of his or her writings and other available pronouncements. The Promoter of



Statue of Christ and St. John on the exterior of the Cathedral of Chartres, France, dating from the 15th century

“Veneration of the bodies and other relics of saints is an essential feature of the Church’s devotional practice.”

intercession of the candidate, most often but not always healings. Here, again, the work is intense, involving experts — physicians, surgeons, specialists of all kinds — who must confirm a complete cure of an illness that cannot be explained by natural laws. At least one authenticated miracle is needed. (The requirement for approved miracles is not applied in the case of martyrs.) In the examination of the miracles attributed to St. Thérèse of Lisieux, another 2,500 pages of documentation, produced during 91 investigative sessions, had to be reviewed before the miracles were authenticated.

If the miracles are accepted as valid by the examining experts, the Promoter of the Faith, and the Congregation, the Pope reviews the case and, upon his approval, a decree is prepared and the Venerable is raised to the status of **Blessed**. An official feast day is designated; when possible, this is the date of death of the candidate, for “*precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints*” (Ps 116:15). This is usually done during a Mass celebrated by the Pope,

the Faith at a later stage in the proceedings is also charged with questioning the authenticity of any miracles attributed to the intercession of the candidate.

This stage of the process involves tremendous work on the part of all concerned to ensure the validity and accuracy of the process and its findings. For example, in the consideration of the sanctity of now-St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the “Little Flower,” some 3,000 pages of documentation had to be assembled and reviewed during 109 judicial sessions, most of which ran more than five hours.

The process of **beatification** involves further investigation, this time of miracles attributed to the

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which may be attended by thousands or hundreds of thousands of the faithful.

The final stage in the process, **canonization**, requires yet another approved miracle, which must take place after the candidate has been beatified. The process of approval is the same as for beatification. Since the canonization of the martyr St. Stanislaus in 1253, the ceremony of canonization always takes place during a special Mass and, since the mid-1700s, virtually all canonizations have taken place in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The tremendous public interest in many canonizations has resulted in the Mass taking place in St. Peter's Square in front of the basilica, which allows a much greater number of people to attend. The canonization Mass is a glorious occasion for the Church and its faithful throughout the world.

Once canonized, the name of the new **saint** is inserted into the official catalogue of saints and may be included in the canon (standard part) of the Mass. The memory of the saints is annually venerated on each one's feast day (most of which are optional memorials, but some are added to the Roman Calendar for the universal Church, or to national calendars or calendars of specific religious orders) and petitioned for God's graces as a member of the Church Triumphant in Heaven. These holy ones are those who, to the highest degree, accepted Jesus' invitation: *"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me"* (Lk 9:23), and chose to *"suffer with him in order that [they] may also be glorified with him"* (Rom 8:17).

The veneration of the bodies and other relics of saints is an essential feature of the Church's devotional practice today. We find in the Acts of the Apostles that the faithful *"carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and pallets, that as Pe-*

ter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them" (Acts 5:15) and that *"God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were carried away from his body to the sick, and diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them"* (Acts 19:11-12). In the veneration of the martyrs, their bodies were preserved with such intense devotion that those persecuting them actively tried to prevent the bodies from recovery. Altars were built upon the tombs of the

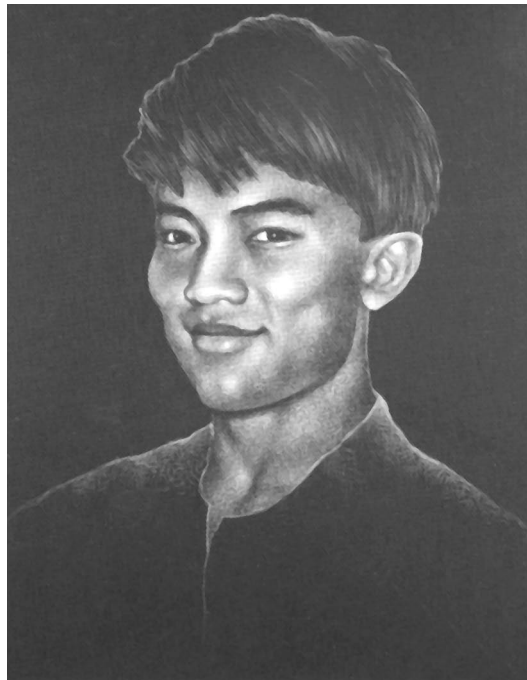
martyrs for the celebration of Mass, a practice recorded in the book of Revelation where St. John writes: *"I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne"* (Rv 6:9) and preserved by including the relics of one or more saints in the altars of churches today.

The Church canonizes saints so that we might have both intercessors and models of holiness. St. Paul invited the Corinthians to be imitators of him, as he imitated Christ (see 1 Cor 11:1). This is the invitation the Church offers to us, to imitate these glorious ones who, with St. Paul, can say: *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith"* (2 Tm 4:7) to whom *"the crown of righteousness"* (2 Tm 4:8) has

been awarded. As faithful Catholics, we are obliged to believe that canonized saints are in Heaven, as this is an irreformable judgment of the Church.

In every age, God has raised up saints and, in especially difficult times, the saints "have always been the source and origin of renewal"¹ (CCC 828). Those who look at the Church solely as an earthly organization think that power in the Church resides in the hierarchy of pope, bishops, and priests. Those who know that the Church is, first and foremost, a divine institution, the Body of Christ with him as its Head, know also that the *true* source of its power comes from him, and is manifested in the holiness of its saints.

(CCC 61, 828, 1173)



Blessed Pedro Calungsod, by Lisa E. Brown; a young Filipino student, Pedro was also a catechist, missionary, and faithful friend; in defense of a missionary priest, he was martyred by natives when he was 18 years old

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¹ John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* 16, 3