

## **THE SAINTS: WHO ARE THEY AND HOW ARE THEY CANONISED?**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

In the Roman Catholic Church, every November 1<sup>st</sup> of each year is the feast of All Saints, a day where we celebrate and honour those who have fought the good fight and won the race. The celebration of this feast is one that reminds us that through our baptism, we all are called to be Saints. Also, the feast helps us to imitate the lives of the Saints and even while we go through their profiles while on earth, we too may be encouraged by their saintly life.

The word 'Saint' comes from the Latin word "Sanctus" meaning **Holy**. In recent times, there has been great controversy on how the Catholic Church confers sainthood on persons and the criteria used in judging that a particular person is in heaven. Even the recent beatification of the late pontiff (John Paul II) has even generated great debate all over the world. Thus, in order to arrest this debate, we shall be taking a cursory look into what canonization means and the role of the saints in our day to day activities. However, it is to be noted that the Catholic Church does not make someone a saint; rather she only confirmed what God has already made so.

### **HOW IT ALL STARTED IN THE EARLY CHURCH**

In the early church, Saints were martyrs like St. Stephen and were acclaimed so by the local Bishop. It was clearly understood in those times the need to reverence the body of those who fought tirelessly for the faith. At this time, martyrs were considered as people who followed Christ devotedly with their lives, and that such persons will definitely go to heaven, since he or she has achieved the perfect imitation of Christ. So during the time of great persecution of the church, many Christians died a martyr's death and this made other Christians to extol their heroic witnesses to Christ, such that they preserved their relics, and so celebrate the anniversary of their death. During this early years of the church, the rites of naming one a Saint was solely reserved to the local Bishops of each local church. Gradually, over time, the Pope restricted the process of Beatification and Canonisation to the Holy See. Various reforms however, took place during this period and up till the time of Benedict XVI as regards the process of canonisation.

### **STAGES OF MAKING A 'SAINT'**

Before the reform of John Paul II to how saints are canonized, there used to be a fifty year waiting before the cause for beatification was opened. However, since the reform, it has been reduced to five years. It therefore means that no cause can be opened within the first five years of a person's death. And also no cause can be opened after 30 years of the person's death. It should also be noted that no cause can be introduced unless there is a clear fame or reputation for holiness or martyrdom of the person. The process for canonisation is as follows:

#### **➤ The Diocesan Stage**

This has to do with opening a cause for the person within his or her diocese and the person that does this is the Bishop of the diocese. However, before the Bishop can do so, he would have consulted with the other Bishops of the region to see if such a cause should be introduced. And once the Bishop agrees to do so a petition is made to the Pope through the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, by issuing a *Nihil Obstat* signaling the cause is formally opened. The person is then given the title "Servant of God". Once this cause is opened, a postulator is appointed by the bishop. A postulator is one who oversees the process of collecting evidences and interviewing witnesses. His role is to make sure that the external life of the person, as seen by the people, was a true reflection of the internal virtue and life of the person. He is also to get proofs of miracles from people through the intercession of the person. The postulator must be an intelligent person, vast in theology, canon law and historical method. As part of this process the body is exhumed to formally identify the remains.

#### **➤ The Roman Stage**

After the diocesan stage has concluded its report with regards to the person and the proof of miracles, they then submit it to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. The congregation then subjects each cause to rigorous

consideration. Firstly, they will set up a panel consisting of nine theologians who are to make sure that there is nothing contrary to faith and morals in the person's life and works. After the conclusion of their report the nine theologians then vote, if they vote in favour of the causes, then the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, made up of Cardinals and Bishops drawn from all over the world, will then take up the matter. They will then meet to consider and vote for the causes. During this time of meeting, a postulator is once again appointed who will reside in Rome, and also a promoter of Faith. The promoter of faith serves as the defender of the faith, trying to find every possible way to debunk the cause, just to promote the faith. When all the consideration has been examined including the medical report of the miracles, if the cause is passed, then the prefect of the congregation presents the findings to the Pope who alone makes the decision to approve the beatification of the person. The title of venerable thus conferred by the Pope once he has asserted that the person has lived a life of heroic virtue. Such persons' are then called venerable. With this assertion from the Pope that the person has lived a heroic life and coupled with a proof of miracle from the congregation, the congregation thus issues a decree declaring the person 'blessed' and the date of the beatification is then fixed.

#### ➤ **Diocesan Consideration of the Second Miracle**

The second miracle has to do with the miracle that happened after the person has been made 'blessed'. The Bishop in whose diocese the claim is made appoints a tribunal of two sub-committees to test whether the miracle is real and whether it is through the intercession of the 'Blessed'. After the miracle has been approved by the tribunal and the bishop consent to it, he then sends the report to Rome.

#### ➤ **Roman Stage**

After the diocesan proof for the second miracle has been concluded, the miracle is then subjected to scientific and theological introspection, by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. If they vote in support of the miracle, it is then forwarded to the Pope. The consent of the Pope to the decision of the congregation results in a decree confirming that the miracle has occurred and thus the road to canonisation is opened.

#### ➤ **Canonisation**

By raising the Blessed into Sainthood, the Pope exercises infallibility and thus calls for universal veneration. Canonisation is the act of the Pope and can only be conducted by the Pope, while beatification can be done by the Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, by the Pope's permission in the home diocese of the Blessed. Once the person is raised to the Sainthood, such person is then worthy of universal veneration and will be given the following;

- ✓ A feast day in the Roman calendar
- ✓ They may have churches all over the world dedicated to them
- ✓ Their relics may be venerated publicly
- ✓ Other public acts such as novena

#### **CONCLUSION: WHY DO WE PRAY THROUGH THEM OR HONOUR THEM?**

In our various traditions or cultures, there is always that recourse made to the spirits of our ancestor. It is believed that these ancestors see us and they will always be of help to us in our day to day living. So most times, we offer them sacrifices and often pray to them to intercede for us. The Saints are also our ancestors in the Christian realm, though the sainthood is higher in scope, and as such we should pay reverence to them because they have lived a life worthy of emulation. St. Paul also admonishes that "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men... this is good and pleasing to our God, who desires all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim.2:1-4)". In the letter to the Hebrews, it is said that "remember your leaders who preached the word of God to you, and as you reflect on the outcome of their lives, imitate their faith, Jesus Christ is the same today... (Heb 13:7-9)". All these words of admonition from the bible shows that it is necessary to pay honour to the Saints.