

The History of Canonization

How the Saints came to be honored
in the Church

The Early Martyrs

- Reverence was naturally shown to the bodies of the martyrs.
 - “The disciples [of John the Baptist] came and took the body and buried it; and they went and told Jesus” (Mt 14:12).
 - “Devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him” (Acts 8:2).

The Early Martyrs

- The faithful
 - visited the tombs of the martyrs;
 - remembered the anniversaries of their martyrdom;
 - celebrated the liturgy in their honor; and
 - recorded the accounts of their martyrdom.
- The funeral of martyrs and their annual commemorations were celebrated by the local bishop on the anniversary of death (*dies natalis*), during which the acts of their martyrdom were read to the faithful.

The Early Martyrs

- The celebration was filled with a spirit of joy because of the confidence that the martyr was reigning in Heaven.
- “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13)
- Martyrs enjoyed a widespread reputation of holiness because of their well established martyrdom, and became examples of encouragement to those suffering.

The Early Martyrs

- A martyr could be venerated as a saint provided that there is:
 - the certainty of martyrdom; that is, a violent death,
 - inflicted out of hatred for the faith and
 - voluntarily accepted by the martyr for love of Christ,
 - followed by his or her commemoration by the faithful in the liturgical assembly.

The Early Martyrs

- The act of honoring a martyr with cult was largely a spontaneous act by the faithful, but Bishops began to curtail excessive cult when it was unwarranted.
- In the 1st Century, Notaries were appointed to safeguard the authentic cult of the martyrs.
- By the 3rd Century, Bishops began to “vindicate” a martyr by validating that the martyr was deserving of the honor. (e.g. Heretics or schismatics, even if martyrs, were not to be venerated.)

The Early Martyrs

- After the Edict of Milan (313), Christianity was no longer forbidden.
 - The graves of saints became places of pilgrimage.
 - Basilicas were constructed over the grave or in a nearby location.
 - The body of saint was taken in procession to the basilica and buried under an altar.
 - Miracles attributed to the saint began to be recorded.

The Early Martyrs

- The Third Council of Carthage (419) regulated shrines to martyrs:
 - The body or at least relics must be present.
 - The relics must be proven by a trustworthy source (not visions or dreams) and approved by the bishop.
 - If there was no evidence of the martyr's remains, nor testimony to his suffering and death, the shrine was to be suppressed.

The Early Confessors

- With the end of persecutions, there were fewer martyrs.
- Yet there were still holy men and women who came to be honored for confessing the faith. These came to be known as confessors.
- It was not sufficient to examine their manner of death, but rather the whole of their life and the practice of virtue.

The Early Confessors

- A confessor could be venerated as a saint provided that there is:
 - Evidence of holiness of life through the practice of virtue;
 - The existence of a widespread reputation of holiness among the faithful; and
 - Eventually evidence of the confessor's miraculous intercession.
 - The confessor saint was honored when the Bishop carried out the transfer of the mortal remains to a constructed basilica.

Canonization by Council

- By the 5th Century, it became common to gather in Diocesan Synods to advise the bishop before carrying out the transfer of the mortal remains.
- Later, it became common to convene a Provincial or Ecumenical Council.
- Assuming a favorable opinion among the members of the Synod or Council, the local bishop carried out the canonization.

Canonization by Council

- The Council of Frankfurt (794) decided:
 - “No new saints are to be venerated or invoked, nor memorials erected in their honor along the streets, but only those may be venerated in the Church who have been chosen on the basis of the authority of their sufferings or merits in life.”
- This Council required careful examination of the life of the candidate before honored as a saint.

Canonization by Council

- The Council of Mainz (813) decided:
 - “No one is to presume to transfer the bodies of saints from place to place without the counsel of the prince, or the permission of the bishops of the holy synod.”
- This Council made it essentially obligatory to conduct a Synod or Council before transferring the body of one to be honored as a saint.

Papal Canonizations

- In the cause of St. Ulrich, the bishops gathered in Council referred the question to Pope John XV who ordered the canonization by apostolic authority in 993.
- This was the first canonization performed by a Pope. Yet, this act did not end the power of local Councils to canonize.
- Following 993, it became more frequent to ask the Pope to decree canonizations by his authority. By the 12th Century this was standard practice.

Papal Canonizations

- On July 6, 1171, Alexander III wrote the letter *Audivimus* to the King of Sweden.
- In a certain monastery in Sweden, a monk while drunk tried to stab two other monks in the refectory after dinner. These two monks responded by clubbing the first monk to death. Afterwards, this wayward monk was honored by some in the region with the cult of martyrdom, under the false presumption that he had died for the faith. The Pope was concerned and expressed his concerns, saying, “We have heard (*audivimus*)...”
- The Church in Sweden was not to honor this monk as a saint without the authority of the Roman Pontiff.

Papal Canonizations

- The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) decided:
 - There are those who present the relics of saints for sale, displaying in a way that disparages the Christian religion.
 - In the future, we establish by the present decree that ancient relics are not to be displayed outside their case, nor presented for sale.
 - No one is to presume to publicly venerate newly discovered relics, unless they are previously approved by the authority of the Roman Pontiff.
 - Bishops are not to permit the veneration of false relics, especially when they are displayed only for the sake of profit.

Papal Canonizations

- On September 5, 1234, Pope Gregory IX issued *Rex Pacificus*, promulgating his famous Decretals. These included a section «On relics and the veneration of the saints.»
 - Gregory IX quoted the letter *Audivimus*, stating: «Without the permission of the Pope it is not licit to venerate anyone as a saint.»
 - He also quoted Lateran IV, stating: «Relics of saints cannot be sold and should not be disseminated, lest the people be deceived.»
- Beginning in 1234, the power to canonize was reserved to the Pope alone.

Papal Canonizations

- Causes of canonization were investigated through a rigorous system that included two specific inquiries:
 - a general inquiry, and
 - a more detailed apostolic inquiry into the reputation, life, and miracles of the candidate.
- The results of these inquiries were studied in Rome and examined in consistory by the bishops and cardinals.
- The Pope would decide whether or not to proceed to the solemn canonization.

Sacred Congregation of Rites

- In the 16th Century, the Protestant Reformation criticized some aspects of causes of canonization:
 - Martin Luther, though not opposed to honoring the saints for their example, expressed concern that some devotions to the saints bordered on idolatry.
 - He questioned whether the liturgical cult given to them and the emphasis on their intercession was in conflict with the singular intercession of Jesus Christ.
 - John Calvin also criticized the Church for its devotion to relics.

Sacred Congregation of Rites

- In response to the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent issued the «Decree on invocation, veneration of saints and their relics, and sacred images» on December 3, 1563. The Council reaffirmed:
 - the existence of saints who pray for us and whose intercession the faithful should invoke;
 - the veneration of saints;
 - the honoring of relics;
 - the dedication of churches in honor of the saints;
 - the commemoration of the memorials of the saints; and
 - the use of images of the saints in order to encourage the imitation of their example.

Sacred Congregation of Rites

- On January 22, 1588, Pope Sixtus V created several dicasteries of the Roman Curia, including the Sacred Congregation of Rites to help study causes for canonization.
- In the Apostolic Constitution, *Immensa aeterni Dei*, Sixtus V stated:

“The Church, instructed by the Holy Spirit and following apostolic teaching and tradition, uses sacred rites and ceremonies.”

Sacred Congregation of Rites

- Furthermore,
“In the administration of the sacraments, these sacred rites:
 - contain the great teaching of the Christian people and the profession of the true faith;
 - commend the greatness of sacred things;
 - raise the mind of the faithful to the meditation of the highest things; and
 - inflame them by the fire of devotion.”

Sacred Congregation of Rites

- Furthermore,

The members of the Congregation were to “exercise diligent care regarding the canonization of saints and the celebration of feast days, so that all would be done properly and correctly according to the tradition of the Fathers.”

Sacred Congregation of Rites

- On July 5, 1634, Pope Urban VIII issued the Constitution, *Caelestis Hyerusalem Cives*, to correct abuses in causes of saints.
- While canonizations were reserved to the Pope in 1234, local bishops continued to allow some signs of public cult before the canonization.
- Urban VIII was concerned that unapproved public signs of cult could lead people to falsely presume the Church had authorized the veneration of an alleged saint.

Sacred Congregation of Rites

- Urban VIII forbade:
 - celebrating Mass or Divine Office in the candidate's honor;
 - venerating their relics;
 - burying their remains under an altar;
 - displaying in churches the images of the candidate crowned with the halo, rays, nimbus, or aureole;
 - publishing books about miracles or revelations related to the candidate's life or intercession after death; and
 - adorning the tombs of candidates with testimonials, images, or lamps.

Beatification and Canonization

- Canonizations were reserved to the Pope in 1234.
- From the 16th Century, some bishops had asked for permission to allow for some public cult for those worthy candidates who had not yet been canonized. This came to be known as beatification.
- Permission for cult (and therefore the power to beatify) was reserved to the Pope in 1634.
- Beatification by the Pope came to be a normal step in the process on the way to Papal canonization.

Beatification and Canonization

- In beatification, the Blessed is allowed to be the subject of limited public cult. Beatification is considered a permission for cult that is tolerated in the Church.
- In canonization, the Saint is ordered to be the subject of universal cult. Canonization is considered a solemn act by which the Pope decrees that the Saint is in Heaven, serving as a model of Christian life and a worthy intercessor for prayer.

20th Century modifications

- The norms for causes of canonization were incorporated into the 1917 Code of Canon Law.
- A stable group of historical consultors was added in 1930.
- A medical commission was constituted to review miracles in 1948.
- Other parts of the investigation and study of causes were modified in 1967 and 1969.

Congregation for the Causes of Saints

- The Second Vatican Council called for a renewal of the liturgy and the procedures used in Causes of canonization.
- For this reason, Paul VI issued, on May 8, 1969, *Sacra Rituum Congregatio*, dividing the Sacred Congregation for Rites into two Congregations:
 - the Sacred Congregation for Divine Cult, dealing with liturgical matters in the Latin Rite, and
 - the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints, dealing with causes for beatification and canonization.

Congregation for the Causes of Saints

- Paul VI explained the reason for this division:
 - “It is not to be considered of lesser value the work carried out by the Congregation in the preparation and the examination of causes of saints.
 - This is clearly demonstrated by the catalog of saints, who from 1588 to the present have been added to the heavenly ranks, called upon because of their heroic virtues or their proven death by martyrdom.”

Congregation for the Causes of Saints

- Paul VI continued:
 - “Nevertheless, today, both the general renewal of the liturgy decreed by the Second Vatican Council, and the review of the laws regarding causes of saints according to the experience of our time, seem to require and demand renewed zeal, fresh attention and concern in the treatment and the accomplishment of these sorts of affairs.”
- This review was completed in 1983 when the new Code of Canon Law was promulgated, as well as a new Constitution and Norms for Causes of Saints.

Developments since 1983

- Pope St. John Paul II began the tradition of personally performing beatifications as well as canonizations.
- Pope Benedict XVI returned to the earlier custom by which the Pope canonized but only gave authorization for beatifications to be performed by others.
- This change emphasized the difference between beatification and canonization, lest too much importance be attached to beatifications.

Future reflections

- In the next presentation, the current procedures used for causes of canonization will be examined.
- How does the Church determine if someone should be made a saint?
- This will include the form (How is a cause investigated and studied?)
- As well as the substance (What must be proven for a servant of God to be canonized?)

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