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Saints in the Christian Tradition: Unraveling the Canonization Process

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It would not be atypical in contemporary parlance to describe a significant friend or other person we know as a “living saint.” What do we mean by calling one a “saint?” Various responses could be given, but most agree that the term speaks in a very positive sense, and often refers to how one manifests holiness, close proximity to God, or other general qualities that society sees as attractive or desirable. People are honored when others, especially those beyond their family associations, refer to them in such a laudatory way.

Historically, many religious traditions, but most especially Roman Catholicism, have honored people who in some way have manifested (a sense of) holiness in their lives. Buddhists venerate *arahants*, their *bodhisttvas* and for Tibetans, their *lamas*. Hindus revere a range of divinely human and humanly divine figures, including their personal gurus and spiritual leaders. Muslims have their *awliya Allah* (close friends of Allah), and their revered Sufi masters. Even in Judaism, one finds popular devotion to Abraham and Moses, beloved rabbis and other *tsaddikim* (just men). The Roman Catholic Christian tradition, however, is most associated with the concept of saints. The Church’s 2000-year history has seen the process for the proclamation of saints, a procedure not well understood even by faithful Catholics, develop significantly with time. Indeed, for the majority of peoples of all faiths, this process, known as canonization, has been shrouded for many generations in mystery and ignorance. The religious historian and journalist, Kenneth Woodward, quoting a popular history of the Vatican, commented on the mysterious nature of the canonization process: “The mystery of Sainthood and the canonic process, with all its spiritual dimensions of divine intercession, relics and miracles, probably is the Church’s greatest enigma outside the Mass itself.”¹

¹ Kenneth Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't and Why* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 77.

Unraveling the puzzle of the canonization process through an analysis of the administrative process followed historically by the Church to officially declare one a saint is the subject of this article. After an initial discussion of the concept of sainthood, an historical overview of the development of the canonization process will be given. This process was most recently transformed by Blessed Pope John Paul II,² whose long pontificate (1978-2005) produced not only the most beatified and canonized Servants of God of any pope in history, but also, appropriately was the source of the most recent transformation (streamlining) of the canonization process.

The Concept of Sainthood

What do we mean when we call a person a saint? Etymologically, the word saint is derived from the Greek *hagios* and Latin *sanctus*, which generally refer to a “holy person.” Various classes of people, emperors, gods, deceased relatives, and other significant people could generally be classified as “saints.” With the dawn of the Christian era a more technical meaning for the word became normative. On a basic level, a saint was seen as one whose holiness was recognized as exceptional by other Christians. Referring to Galatians 2:20, the Jesuit theologian Paul Molinari describes the saint in this way:

Every age, every environment, has seen and still sees countless Christians who have like him [Paul] “clothed themselves in Christ” (Gal 3:27, Eph 4:24), surrendering themselves unconditionally to the graces of his Spirit in responding spontaneously to the divine proffer. It is these people who are justly called “saints.”³

² John Paul II was beatified on May 1, 2011.

³ Paul Molinari, SJ, “The Theology of Canonization,” *Way Supplement* 39, (Winter 1980), 9.

Vatican II's "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" (*Lumen Gentium*) presents a different perspective of being transformed by the power of Jesus Christ:

In the lives of those who, sharing in our humanity, are however more perfectly transformed into the image of Christ, God vividly manifests His presence and His face to men. He speaks to us in them, and gives us a sign of His Kingdom, to which we are strongly drawn, having so great a cloud of witnesses over us and such a witness to the truth of the Gospel.⁴

For centuries, Christians have delighted in and given veneration to those exceptional individuals whom they claim to be "saints." Thus, it is important to note that saints exist for others; they are proclaimed for the way they have modeled the life of Christ, by their willingness to undergo a powerful conversion, willingly giving away (in the case of martyrs) or living their lives as disciples of Jesus.

What qualities do these men and women who over the Christian era have been recognized as saints possess? First, it is important to realize that saints are not perfect; like all human beings they were incomplete and broken people who had their failures and at times did not lead lives consistent with their saintly recognition. Indeed, Molinari has written of the limitations of those declared to be saints.

Furthermore, these people are as human as ourselves in their limitations, their characters, their genius, their capabilities and gifts, their learning and culture. They inhabit the same world as we do, are children of the same times, and have the same human predicament. The difference is that they live in

such close contact with him [God] as to be wholly taken up with him, moved and directed by his Spirit. When we come into contact with such people, we experience a lively sense of presence—of the God who has turned their lives upside down by the force of his love.⁵

Augustine, the fourth and fifth century bishop and theologian, and one of the most well-known saints, serves as a good illustration. He wandered rather aimlessly during his youth and early adult life, even fathering a child out of wedlock, until his conversion to Christianity. Yet, Augustine and the many others who have been proclaimed as saints, did, in the end, demonstrate important qualities that have led others to view them as saintly figures.

Historically, the basic qualities of the saints are collected into two major categories: martyrdom, shedding one's blood for the faith, and heroic virtue. Referencing *Lumen Gentium*, Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Constitution, *Divinus perfectionis Magister*, stated:

"At times God chooses from among those many who, having followed more closely the example of Christ, give outstanding testimony to the Kingdom of heaven by shedding their blood or by an heroically virtuous life."⁶

The theologian Richard Kieckhefer has identified five essential elements found in Christian saints. Under the category of moral elements, he describes asceticism, contemplation, and action. Associated with extraordinary manifestations of power, he lists miracles and visions. He does not suggest that these abilities and qualities are absolutely necessary, but rather that they are

⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, #50.

⁵ Molinari, "Theology of Canonization," 10.

⁶ Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution, *Divinus perfectionis Magister*, January 25, 1983.

commonly manifested in the lives of saints.⁷ In general, the saints make Jesus known to others in an experiential way; the face, actions, and message of Christ are manifested to the world in the person of another.⁸

While it can be said that people generally appreciate the qualities of saintliness and respect for the people who manifest them, it still must be asked: Why is there a need for saints? First, people are always looking for mentors and role models who can provide solid advice and example that can be directly applied to one's own life. Many, so moved by what they experience in another, have chosen to pattern their lives after an individual. In a similar way, over the Christian centuries, saints, inspired by Christ, have become superior role models for countless numbers of people. Another critical dimension of the presence of saints is their role of continuing the mission of Christ in the world today. Molinari has commented:

Christ lives and works in them [the saints] not simply in order to establish that intimacy of relationship which delights him so much, but also to prolong in them his mission, his labours and the abundance of his gifts.⁹

Lawrence Cunningham, the noted theologian and professor at the University of Notre Dame, suggests that the life and witness of saints signifies one of three things: (1) the perennial value of the religious tradition by showing that tradition in a vigorously lived fashion, (2) a model for new ways of living out the religious vision of a given tradition, and (3) a prophetic judgment on those who share the religious tradition but failed to

reach up to its claims and/or ideals.¹⁰ There will always be a need for saints. Indeed, the famous French philosopher and Christian mystic, Simone Weil, in her book *Waiting for God* concluded, "The world today needs saints, new saints, saints of genius."¹¹

Society's need for models and mentors requires that some system or guidelines for recognizing saintly qualities be developed. It first must be understood that saints are the work of God, not the Church. Archbishop Edward Nowak has articulated this distinction: "It is evident that sanctity is a gift from God. The Lord makes saints. The Church has the task of finding these gifts and presenting them to the faithful."¹² As mentioned earlier, the concept of a saintly figure is found in many world religions, but only Roman Catholicism possesses a formal process for a declaration of sainthood. Considering Catholicism's 2000 years of history and tradition, it is understandable, even expected, that the process to formally declare a saint would develop over time. The Belgian sociologist Pierre DeLooz points out that saints are understood within their historical context; thus changing conditions will dictate what process might be utilized. He writes, "Since saints were the witnesses to the group [people of the time period] considered by the group to be ideal models, they will doubtless reveal its successive changes and structures."¹³ The fact that

⁷ Richard Kieckhefer, "Imitators of Christ: Sainthood in the Christian Tradition) in *Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions* Richard Kieckhefer and George D. Bond, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 7.

⁸ Molinari, "Theology of Canonization," 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Lawrence S. Cunningham. *The Meaning of Saints* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 73.

¹¹ Quoted in Roland Cluny, *Holiness in Action* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 18.

¹² Edward Nowak, "The New Evangelization with the Saints," Address, November 6, 2001 in Woestman, *Canonization*, 55.

¹³ Pierre DeLooz, "Towards a Sociological Study of Canonized Sainthood in the Catholic Church," in Stephen Wilson, ed. *Saints and Their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 189.

procedures for declaring saints have changed with time provides evidence that an accurate list of men and women over history so designated as saints would be virtually impossible to generate. Again, DeLooz has commented:

Even if a definition of a Catholic saint can be...agreed upon—a person whose cult is officially sanctioned by the church—it is impossible to draw an exact list of those to whom their definition may be applied.¹⁴

Saints of the Patristic Era: First to Sixth Centuries

The concept of honoring Christian men and women, and developing cults to their memory, started as a direct result of the Roman persecutions perpetrated on the early followers of Jesus. The dominant Roman influence of polytheism clashed directly with the monotheism of Judaism and Christianity. In particular, it was the nascent Christian community which was rapidly growing that was viewed as problematic and, therefore, was proscribed throughout the Empire. At times severe persecutions, both local and general, arose against Christians, generating numerous martyrs. For example, local Roman persecutions were inaugurated by the emperors Nero (64-66), Domitian (95), Trajan (111), Marcus Aurelius (161-180), and Septimus Severus (202-203). General persecutions of Christians occurred under Decius (249-251), Valerian (258-260), and Diocletian (303-305).¹⁵ This era ended with Constantine's Edict of Toleration in 313.

The freedom brought to Christianity through Constantine was clearly the catalyst that drove the machine for

recognizing martyrs as saints. Indeed, the Church historian Yves Beaudoin, describing the Church after 313, has written:

"The cult of martyrs developed with great enthusiasm and without any opposition. Freedom gave greater solemnity to celebrations. Many people gathered for the celebrations. Often Christians built churches—basilicas at times—over the sites of these burials."¹⁶

The basilicas of St. Peter and St. Paul Outside the Walls in Rome are primary examples of this reality.

Public veneration of many of these martyrs, generally celebrated on the date of their death, was in evidence as early as the second century. The Patristic scholar, Peter Brown, has written, "The cult of the saints as it emerged in late antiquity, became part and parcel of the succeeding millennium of Christian history to such an extent that we tend to take its elaboration for granted."¹⁷ While Christians regarded all the baptized as saints, dying for the faith was particularly noteworthy and was awarded with special veneration. Sanctity and martyrdom were virtually indistinguishable in the Christian consciousness. As Jesus died obedient to the Father, so the saints died for and in obedience to Christ. Cults to individual saints, almost exclusively local in nature, arose. Indeed, one of the early definable objective criteria for one to be called a "saint" was the existence of a public cult.¹⁸ Pierre DeLooz has commented on this concept: "Saints are saints *for other people* [emphasis DeLooz] but they are also saints made *by other people* [emphasis DeLooz]. The opinion of others is not

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 189-90.

¹⁵ See Jean Daniélou and Henri Marrou, *The First Six Hundred Years* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 81-114, 223-38.

¹⁶ Yves Beaudoin, O.M.I. "Brief History of Canonization," in Woestman, *Canonization*, 22.

¹⁷ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 1.

¹⁸ Cunningham, *Meaning of Saints*, 8-12; Woodward, *Making Saints*, 52-53; DeLooz, "Sociological Study," 193.

sufficient in itself to create a saint. Opinion must be strong enough to provide a public cult."¹⁹ In this era there were generally no inquiries, tribunals, or judgments concerning saints; rather the martyrs were claimed as saints by public acclamation. This was a period of popular canonization when spontaneous reputation for sanctity could lead to sainthood.²⁰

The early Patristic era was a time when sainthood was basically defined by martyrdom, yet the universal call to sanctity was never lost. This reality was acknowledged by Pope John Paul II:

The Church...from the earliest beginnings of Christianity has always believed that the Apostles and Martyrs are more closely joined to us in Christ and has venerated them, together with the Blessed Virgin Mary and the holy Angels, with special devotion, devoutly imploring the aid of their intercession.²¹

The British Patristic historian W.H.C. Frend, describing the state of the Church in North Africa in the third century, concurs with the Pope's ideas, while adding specifics on common practices of the cult:

In this environment confessors and martyrs were held in the highest honour. Vigils outside their prisons, services in the *creae* in which they were buried, the cult of their anniversaries (*natalica*) and powers of forgiveness universally subscribed to them, raised their status beyond that of the clergy.²²

¹⁹ DeLooz, "Sociological Study," 199.

²⁰ Beaudoin, "Brief History of Canonization," 27.

²¹ Pope John Paul II, *Divinus perfectionis Magister*, Apostolic Constitution, January 25, 1983.

²² Quoted in Cunningham, *Meaning of Saints*, 12.

Still, the Roman Martyrology *Praenotanda* of Pope Gregory XIII (1583) speaks of the universal call to sanctity:

1. God the Father wants the salvation of all men and women made according to the divine image and that they come to a knowledge of the truth, which is Christ, the way for all to the Father. All, and first of all Christ's faithful, of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity; by this sanctity a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society.

2. Rather God the Father manifested his will, namely the sanctification of all, which through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ, increases each day for the greater glory of the one and undivided Trinity and greater holiness in the life of Christ's faithful.²³

The cult of the saints, as suggested by Peter Brown, was the way Christians broke down the imaginative barrier between Heaven and Earth. He writes, "It [the cult of saints] designated human beings as the recipients on unalloyed reverence, and it linked these dead and invisible figures in no uncertain manner to precise visible places and, in many areas, to precise living representatives."²⁴ Indeed the graves of the saints, fragments of their bodies, or even objects they had made almost became centers of ecclesiastical life for a region, where the contrast between Heaven and Earth met. Brown describes a sixth century layman who wrote to his spiritual father: "When I find that I am in a place where there are relics of the holy martyrs, I am obsessed by the need to go in and venerate

²³ Roman Martyrology *Praenotanda*, paragraph 1 in Woestman, *Canonization*, 3.

²⁴ Brown, *Cult of Saints*, 11.

them. Every time I pass in front of them, I feel I should bow my head."²⁵

The concept of public veneration and acclamation of saints, conducted with virtually no controls, began to disappear between the fifth and tenth centuries when local bishops began to exert significant influence on the process of declaring saints. During this era it became normative that before a new name was added to the calendar of saints, bishops insisted that petitioners provide a written account of the candidate's life, virtues, death, accounts of miracles, and where applicable martyrdom. This *vita* was typically a stereotypical account filled with legends and hagiography. Often witness testimony was second or third hand. Saints were identified by: (1) their reputation, especially among the people, (2) the stories and legends into which their lives were transmitted as exemplars of heroic virtue, and (3) their reputation for producing miracles, especially those worked at their shrines or through relics. At this time saints still remained objects of cult, not investigation or inquiry. However, some bishops began to see the need for a more serious examination of the candidate's life.²⁶ Control on cults was a means to wrest control from local pious people to a more central authority. This is in evidence in the Roman Martyrology *Praenotanda*:

It is permitted to venerate by public cult only those servants of God who are listed among the saints and blessed by the authority of the Church. Their authentic relics and their images are held in veneration, for the cult of saints in the Church proclaims the wonderful deeds of Christ in his servants and provides the faithful with examples suitable for imitation.²⁷

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Woodward, *Making Saints*, 62, 65.

²⁷ Roman Martyrology *Praenotanda* #1 paragraph 15, in Woestman, *Canonization*, 6.

By the end of the 10th century there was a call for the Pope, in virtue of his supreme authority, to grant sainthood, the process which eventually became canonization.²⁸

Sacred relics,²⁹ especially those associated with the martyrs, was another concept associated with the veneration of saints that, due to abuses, led to greater controls. Relics circulated widely and in many ways became portable shrines for public and private veneration of the saints. This idea became so integral to general public worship that by decree of the Second Council of Nicaea (767) church altars were required to have embedded in them a relic from a saint.³⁰ Tracts, known as the *passio*, contained accounts of miracles, especially healings that became part of the cult. Even speeches given by great orators at various sites of relics were preserved.³¹ The importance of relics for public and private worship generated the practice of transferring them to different locations. In the Eastern Church, which laid little claim to martyrs compared with Rome, local churches began to "import" relics by moving the bodies of saints. This practice of "translation" of relics led to many abuses. People, even monks and other religious, stole relics for their personal use. This abuse reached its apex in the 12th century when Crusaders stripped Constantinople of its relics and carried them back to churches in the West.³² This abuse eventually created a need to end the practice of public cults associated with reputed saints until after an individual had been publicly proclaimed by the official Church to be a saint.

²⁸ Woodward, *Making Saints*, 65.

²⁹ Catholicism speaks of two different levels of sacred relics. First class relics would be some portion of the saint's body, such as a bone chip or hair sample. Second class relics are something that came in contact with the saint's body, such as clothing.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 59. The practice of embedding the relic of a saint in an altar continues today.

³¹ Beaudoin, "Brief History of Canonization," 24.

³² *Ibid.*, 59, 63.

Stopping the practice of public cults was a boon to the Church's desire to secure an impartial judgment concerning candidates for sainthood, one that was not influenced by public opinion.³³

Veneration of the saints and their relics, while a practice that honored all those considered to have lived extraordinarily close to Christ, was, as indicated earlier, centered in the cult of martyrs. Such was the case during the Patristic era and beyond. While the Romans venerated their dead, their general practice was cremation. Christians, on the other hand, possibly following the idea of Jesus' burial and Jewish custom (which was totally opposed to cremation), buried their dead outside city walls as was required by law. These cemeteries (which became the origins of the catacombs in Rome) were sites where the faithful came to celebrate the anniversary of death of the individual. This custom was first described in the *Martyrium Polycarpi* (155-156), which speaks of how the community of Smyrna celebrated the martyrdom of their bishop Polycarp. The *Depositio martyrum* of the Church of Rome (early fourth century) contains the oldest list of Roman feasts of martyrs, giving their anniversaries of death and the cemetery where the martyr was buried.³⁴

How has the Church defined martyrdom over the centuries? While a general idea of one who died for the faith was in vogue for centuries, Pope Benedict XIV (1740-1758) in *De Servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione* (only published in 1840) defined the practice: "Martyrdom is the voluntary suffering or acceptance of death because of faith in Christ or another active virtue related to God." Additionally, it is necessary that the individual persevered, undefeated and patiently, until death.³⁵ For one to be officially proclaimed a

³³ Woestman, *Canonization*, 36-37.

³⁴ Beaudoin, "Brief History of Canonization," 20-22.

³⁵ Quoted in Robert Sarno, "Theological Reflection on Canonization," in Woestman, *Canonization*, 11. See also, Woestman, *Canonization*, 43.

martyr, two elements had to be proved: (1) the death of the individual really took place and (2) the person was killed (a) out of hatred for faith in Christ or (b) for an active virtue connected with God.³⁶ This idea has been synthesized in a recent document published by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints (one of the many Roman curial offices): "The reputation of martyrdom is the opinion that has spread among the faithful about the death endured by the Servant of God for the Faith or for a virtue connected to the Faith."³⁷

Martyrs are witnesses of Christ, not only through their profession of faith, but also through the individual's life and death. They are seen as paradigms of Christian living and a locus of spiritual power. Referencing Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), theologian Robert Sarno comments,

Christian heroism is found par excellence in the most sublime practice of charity that is martyrdom by which a disciple is transformed into an image of his Master by freely accepting death for the salvation of the world as well as in conformity to Christ in the shedding of his blood.³⁸

Martyrdom was clearly the initial and most obvious path for one to find official Church recognition as a saint, but with the end of the Roman persecutions after 313 and the consequent reduction in martyrs, another avenue to sainthood had to be formulated. Christians began to view the heroic exercise of virtue, of penance and prayer, as equivalent to martyrdom.

³⁶ Robert J. Sarno, "Theological Reflection on Canonization," in William Woestman, OMI, ed. *Canonization: Theology, History, Process* (Ottawa, Canada: Faculty of Canon Law of St. Paul University, 2002), 11.

³⁷ "Instruction for Conducting Diocesan or Eparchal Inquiries in the Causes of Saints," May 2007, Article 5, #2.

³⁸ Cunningham, *Meaning of Saints*, 13; Sarno, "Theological Reflection," 15.

Hagiographical accounts of the fourth century began to point out that the confessor (one blessed with heroic virtue) was not inferior to a martyr. This thinking led to the creation of the cult of great heroes who, by their virtue, penance, and prayer life, had drawn exceptionally close to God. Saints so recognized under this new category were: in the East, St. Antony of the Desert (died 356), St. Hilary (died 372), St. Athanasius (died 373); in the West, St. Sylvester (died 335), St. Martin of Tours (died 397) and St. Augustine (died 430).³⁹

Heroic virtue was manifested in general and specific ways. In a generic sense, it was the exemplary example of the individual which was touted as heroic virtue. Sarno comments:

The heroic exercise of virtue signifies instead that a person in his or her whole way of acting was faithful to the faith, animated by charity, sustained by hope, and that as a consequence, practiced the cardinal virtues.... The person's whole mode of life is to be considered exemplary.⁴⁰

More specifically, at the dawn of the sixth century, the miraculous became the criterion for establishing the cult of a confessor. Professor Agostino Amore, speaking of the early Church concept of saints, comments, "A confessor is a saint because he performs miracles (both in his lifetime and after his death, and the more numerous, the more extraordinary, and the more stupefying the miracle the greater sanctity reputed to the person."⁴¹ Indeed, the miraculous often totally overshadowed any good works or noteworthy accomplishments the person achieved in life.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 205-06; Beaudoin, "Brief History of Canonization," 24-25.

⁴⁰ Sarno, "Theological Reflection," 14.

⁴¹ Quoted in Cunningham, *Meaning of Saints*, 18.

A person of heroic virtue must hold as central the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, and the four moral or cardinal virtues of fortitude, justice, prudence, and temperance. For a religious, observance of the evangelical counsels, the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and the rule of the community were also essential. The Christian hero was seen as one who lived these virtues in an extraordinary life of faith and constancy by being Christ-like in every manner. Robert Sarno has captured the essence of Christian heroic virtue:

The constant, faithful, and joyful fulfillment of all the duties of one's state in the midst of the difficult daily trials is called *heroic* [emphasis Sarno]. In a word it is the practice of the virtues in a way that is essentially superior to that of good Christians who live in the same state and circumstances of life.⁴²

This same sentiment has been expressed in the most recent Vatican document on the subject: "The reputation of holiness is the opinion that has spread among the faithful about the purity and integrity of life of the Servant of God [candidate for sainthood] and about the virtues practiced by him to an heroic degree."⁴³ Clearly the achievement of heroic virtue as described herein is rather utopian. Thus, it must be understood that while these virtues (and others could be added) are the goals, many saints have struggled with fulfilling them. The humanity of the saints must never be forgotten.

The Era of Papal Control: Canonization

The Medieval period of Church history was a time of significant centralization of the procedures for declaring martyrs and men and women of heroic virtues as saints. Greater control

⁴² Sarno, "Theological Reflection," 15.

⁴³ "Instruction for Conducting Diocesan or Eparchal Inquiries in the Causes of Saints," May 2007, Article 5, #1.

was deemed necessary due to many abuses, such as those previously mentioned associated with relics as well as the mixing of cults with pagan ritual. Additionally, it became clear that many had been declared saints without sufficient investigation. Although rather dismissive in his analysis, Pierre DeLooz captures the essence of the problem:

Several people...have been considered to be saints... without anything being known about them beyond a few scraps of legend: in the last resort saints do not need to have existed at all, and this is true of more than one.⁴⁴

Lawrence Cunningham raises a similar concern:

The historical corruption of the biographies of the saints takes many forms and undergoes any number of permutations in the medieval period. In its most basic form, there was the inclusion of people who never existed but it took on a fictionalized *persona* because of the accretion of various stories, legends, and romances attached to real historical events.⁴⁵

Initially in an attempt to correct possible abuses, local episcopal control was implemented. As one example, the Council of Mainz in 813 decreed that it was forbidden to canonize anyone without the agreement of the Prince (Emperor or Pope) and permission of the bishops. People of that era did not see the bishop's intervention as any sort of human control on what God had done in the saint's life, but rather a solemn

⁴⁴ DeLooz, "Sociology Study," 195. Although DeLooz's attitude is rather dismissive, his concern about proclaiming as saints individuals who possibly did not exist has been raised recently with the canonization in 2002 of Juan Diego, an Aztec peasant who was the seer to a series of apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Mexico in 1531.

⁴⁵ Cunningham, *Meaning of Saints*, 39.

thanksgiving to God for his benevolent action through the saint. The basic procedure started when a cult arose from the people, based not only on miracles, but holiness of life. A *passio* (biography) of the individual was then generated with emphasis on miracles. After the aforementioned Council at Mainz, the local bishop conducted a study that led to a decree permitting the *elevatio* (elevation) *et translatio* (translation), a process whereby the individual was officially recognized. This drew attention to the saint, local community, and the place privileged to be the guardian of the saint's relics. Nevertheless, the era of local episcopal control was fraught with its own problems. Indeed, Beaudoin comments:

From a study of the sources, it can be said that often episcopal canonizations were done with great ease, little discernment, and no critical sense concerning the means used or the proofs accepted to determine the decision.⁴⁶

Centralization of the canonization process led to greater hierarchical control and consequently, a more formalized process. The basic procedure began when a cult arose from the people. This was based not only on miracles, but holiness of life. The greater the authority of the Church official who performed the rights of *elevatio* and *translatio*, the more God was glorified and the more the saint was recognized. This was the initial reason why bishops often requested intervention of the Pope to formally proclaim one a saint. In turn, papal confirmation accentuated the Pope's authority.⁴⁷ Pope Innocent I (401-417) was the first pontiff to intervene by authorizing a cult and conducting the canonization outside Rome. Over the ensuing centuries, several popes issued decrees permitting

⁴⁶ Beaudoin, "History of Canonization," 28, 32.

⁴⁷ Cunningham, *Meaning of Saints*, 48-49; Beaudoin, "History of Canonization," 30. From the period of the Patristic Church (100-600) the ritual of raising up and exposure of the body of a saint was known as *elevatio* and *translatio*.

canonizations, but in other cases the Pope traveled to the site to perform the canonization. For example, in 1052, Pope Leo IX (1049-1054) traveled through Germany and conducted several canonizations.⁴⁸

The Medieval papacy, beginning with Pope Alexander III (1159-1181), with some interruptions, saw a long series of Medieval lawyer popes who fashioned Roman Catholicism into Europe's first state governed by laws. Included in this development was the process of canonization. In 1179 Alexander reprimanded the Swedes for venerating a man who had died drunk. In his letter *Audivimus* he wrote, "Even if there are miracles, it is not permitted to consider any one a saint and to venerate them without the authorization of the Church of Rome."⁴⁹ This important statement was included in the *Decretals* (1234) of Pope Gregory IX which brought greater clarity, as well as complexity and centralization, to the canonization process. Through Gregory's efforts, canonization became a legal trial between petitioners, represented by an official procurator, and the Pope, represented by a new curial official, the "Promoter of the Faith," popularly known as the "Devil's Advocate." It was at this time as well that the papacy introduced the distinction between *sancti* (saints) and *beati* (blessed). The former were so declared by the Pope, the latter by local bishops. After 1234 canonization was reserved to the pope, even though other bishops until 1634 continued to approve, at least indirectly, the popular cult of saints.⁵⁰

The shift to a more centralized canonization process brought consequent change in the types of individuals who were canonized. Members of religious orders and royal houses in favor with a particular Pope were given priority. Most notably

was the obvious diminution of martyrdom as the litmus test for sainthood. The French Medieval historian André Vauchez has written, "The identification of sanctity with martyrdom was no more than a mere memory."⁵¹ Servants of God who combined radical poverty, chastity, and obedience, such as Francis of Assisi (canonized only two years after his death) were favored. The learned cleric, such as St. Dominic, canonized in 1234, and Thomas Aquinas, canonized in 1323, was another favored category. Kenneth Woodward has commented, "In sum, the development of canonization as a papal process meant a shift in focus from popular concern with miracles to elite concern with virtues."⁵²

While centralization of the canonization procedure propelled sainthood beyond martyrs, it did little to encourage the Church to declare lay men and women as saints. Indeed, the most underrepresented group in the ranks of the canonized is the laity. Between 993 and 1978 only 19% of canonized saints were of the laity. From the 17th century to the elevation of John Paul II in 1978, only 35% of those beatified were members of the laity. The statistics are more striking one observes when the majority of lay saints are not individuals, but rather anonymous members of persecuted groups who were martyred, such as the Ugandan, Japanese, and Korean martyrs. Between 1978 and 1987, when the Church celebrated the "Year of the Laity," not one layperson was canonized for heroic virtue.⁵³ While many reasons can be postulated for these numbers, one significant reason most assuredly was the general perception prior to Vatican II that priesthood and religious life was a higher order than choice of the single or married life. Surely, the fact that the process of canonization was completely controlled by clerics

⁴⁸ Beaudoin, "History of Canonization," 31.

⁴⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 30; Woodward, *Meaning of Saints*, 68-70.

⁵¹ Quoted in Woodward, *Meaning of Saints*, 69.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 69-71.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 118-20, 340-46.

brought a blinding effect to the contributions of laity and an overemphasis on the contribution of clergy and religious.

Despite the centralization of the canonization process between 1234 and 1634, the broadening of saints beyond martyrs, and Pope Gregory IX's edict that forbade bishops from authorizing a cult for a prospective saint, local ordinaries often continued to tolerate the popular cult of new saints, generating new abuses. Indeed, the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, referring to the Church on the eve of the Reformation, describes a society drenched in saints in which "excesses and abuses result[ed] from an extreme familiarity with the holy.... Too large a part of the living faith had crystallized in the veneration of saints, and thus arose a craving for something more spiritual."⁵⁴ During the Reformation era, Martin Luther rejected the concept of saints as mediators.⁵⁵ Rome responded at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) by reaffirming the cult of saints and their relics. Still, the Church did reform its procedures. In 1588, Pope Sixtus V created the Congregation of Rites and gave its officials responsibility for preparing papal canonizations and for the authentication of relics. The Counter Reformation era was also the catalyst for the work of the Bollandists, a group of Jesuit priests who, beginning in the 17th century, defended the cult of saints against Protestants and the general skepticism against saints promoted during the Enlightenment. Their commitment to scrupulous scholarship and exacting standards anticipated the great flowering of historiography in the latter half of the 19th century. Their work, the *Acta Sanctorum Bollandistarum* (62 volumes by 1988), became the standard against which all hagiographic works were measured. The Bollandists showed the

⁵⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 74-75.

⁵⁵ In an interesting quirk of history, Luther's original decision to become a priest was traced to the intercession of St. Anne (the mother of the Blessed Virgin Mary) to whom he prayed asking to be spared from a violent thunderstorm.

Church had nothing to fear from critical historical investigation.⁵⁶

The centralization of the canonization process continued apace throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. During the pontificate of Urban VIII (1623-1644), the papacy gained complete control over the declaration of saints. One of Urban's decrees forbade any form of public veneration, including the publication of books of miracles or revelations attributed to the supposed saint, until the person was beatified or canonized by solemn papal declaration. His one exception was if a cult had existed "from time immemorial" or could be justified on the strength of what the Fathers or saints had written about the individual.⁵⁷ Prospero Lambertini, a brilliant canonist who rose through the ranks of the Congregation of Rites to become Pope Benedict XIV, conducted a thorough review of Church policy on saints. His five volume *De Servorum Dei Beatificatione et Beatorum Canonizatione* (On the Beatification of Servants of God and Canonization of the Blessed), published between 1734 and 1738, is even today a significant reference text for the canonization process.⁵⁸

Canonization and the 1917 Code of Canon Law

Beginning with the publication of the Code of Canon Law in 1917, the canonization process became codified. Specifically, 143 canons were present in the 1917 code that dealt with beatification and canonization. The previously presented survey of the historical development of this process demonstrates how a need for an organized system to root out abuses and provide a common ground for the process for canonization

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 74-75, 96; Kieckhefer, "Imitators of Christ, 4-5.

⁵⁷ Beaudoin, "Brief History of Canonization, 29; Woodward, *Making Saints*, 75-76.

⁵⁸ Woodward, *Making Saints*, 75-76.

was necessary.⁵⁹ Writing in 1980 when the Church was operating under the 1917 code, Lawrence Cunningham describes the efficacy of the process: "The present canonization process has served the church well by providing some kind of 'quality control' over those who enjoy the public recognition of the liturgical calendar."⁶⁰

Codification made the process of canonization even more formal. Canonization became known as an act by the Supreme Pontiff to declare in a definitive and solemn way that a Catholic Christian was actually in the glory of heaven, interceding for humanity before God. The two categories of martyrdom and heroic virtue continued to be the avenues one could traverse to be declared a saint.⁶¹

The 1917 code also clearly delineated a nine step process to determine juridical canonization. (1) Pre-judicial Phase: At least 50 years was required after the candidate's death before any process could be initiated. This was to assure the individual's reputation for holiness was sound, not a passing phase. Financial and spiritual support for the process could be gathered by the initiators of the cause, known as "the petitioners." (2) Informative Phase: The local bishop initiated a tribunal or court of inquiry, summoning witnesses for testimony. He was to assure that no public veneration of the candidate was ongoing. (3) Judgment of Orthodoxy: Officials were asked to collect all the writings of the candidate which were checked for orthodoxy. (4) Roman (Apostolic) Phase: Once the information gathered had arrived in Rome, responsibility for the case was assigned to a Postulator. Both the Postulator and the Defender of the Faith (Devil's Advocate) prepared briefs. This generated

material in total was called the *positio*. This material was studied by officials of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. A positive review/judgment from this Congregation signified sufficient grounds for a trial or *processus*. The Pope then gave his approval to enter the Apostolic Phase. New questions were raised and returned to the local bishop. In effect, the Apostolic Phase was a more exacting version of the local diocesan process. Its purpose was to prove the candidate's reputation for holiness or martyrdom was based on fact. From this, an *informatio* was generated and studied by the Congregation. The process was repeated a third time with the Pope as a participant. If the candidate (Servant of God) was judged to have lived the Christian virtues to an heroic degree, the title "venerable" was given. (5) Historical Section: In 1930, Pope Pius XI established a special historical section if a cause required specialized archival research that a normal juridical process could not adequately provide. (6) Examination of Corpse: Before the beatification of the candidate, the individual's body was exhumed for identification only. (7) Miracle Process: After rigorous human investigation (but fallible) beatification and canonization required a divine sign, confirming the Church's judgment. A divine sign is a miracle performed through the intercession of the candidate. It must be established that (a) God performed a miracle—usually a physical healing and (b) the miracle occurred through the intercession of the Servant of God. This material was judged by a team of medical professionals. (8) Beatification: Before beatification, a general meeting of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints and the Pope was held to decide if the process could go forward. A favorable decision led to beatification. (9) Canonization: After beatification the cause lay dormant until an additional divine sign was given. When this second required miracle was accepted, the Pope issued a bull of canonization.⁶²

⁵⁹ Woestman, *Canonization*, 34.

⁶⁰ Cunningham, *Meaning of Saints*, 48.

⁶¹ Sarno, "Theological Reflection," 10.

⁶² Woodward, *Making Saints*, 79-85. The 1917 Code has many canons that addressed the canonization process. Some relevant numbers are: 2115-

This nine step process can be broken down into two basic parts, the informative process on the diocesan level and its review by the Roman Congregation for the Causes of Saints and the adjudication of miracles. The informative process sought to gather information concerning the general reputation for sanctity of the candidate and information about reputed miracles. The 1917 code required at least ten witnesses, at least two of whom were called by the Promoter of the Faith (Devil's Advocate), the remainder by the Postulator.⁶³ Questions to the witnesses were presented by the diocesan tribunal from those submitted by the Postulator and Promoter of the Faith. A court of inquiry was convened to adjudicate the case. A favorable vote sent the process to the next level in Rome.⁶⁴

The Roman procedure began by a review of the informative process, with objections raised and problems resolved, but then moved onto an in-depth analysis of other areas that required scrutiny. The Congregation of Rites conducted a careful review of the writings of the candidate to make certain that nothing contrary to faith or morals was contained therein.⁶⁵ An investigation of miracles, which always had been seen as an obligatory criterion for sainthood (save for martyrs), was conducted. Pierre DeLooz explains the Church's understanding of the value of miracles: "The Catholic Church thus sees miracles as *revealers* [emphasis DeLooz] of sainthood; this means that an *event* [emphasis DeLooz] can signify *to others* [emphasis DeLooz] that a given person intervened in

it precisely as a saint."⁶⁶ A cure under consideration must be complete and lasting; it must be inexplicable by all scientific measures. The *Consulta Medica*, a team of over 60 physicians, was responsible for validating a physical cure as miraculous.⁶⁷ Under the 1917 code, once an individual was beatified, canonization required two additional miracles wrought through the candidate's intercession.⁶⁸

The procedures defined by the 1917 Code of Canon Law were utilized until Pope Paul VI modified them in March 1969. In his *motu proprio*, *Sanctitas clarior*,⁶⁹ the Pope simplified the norms for beatification. Instead of repeating the informative process on both episcopal and Roman levels, the Pope called for the diocesan Bishop to initiate the process once it received approval of the Holy See. Similarly there was to be only one process to investigate the Servant of God's writings, life of virtue or martyrdom, and absence of a public cult. The Bishop was also allowed to investigate purported miracles once he had received instructions from the Congregation of Rites on how to proceed. This change greatly simplified the process.⁷⁰

The Canonization Process Today

In 1983, a wholly revised and simplified system for the canonization of saints was inaugurated. That year a new Code of Canon Law was promulgated with only one canon (1403)

2118 and 2134-2138. See *The 1917 or Rio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001).

⁶³ See Canons 1764 and 1767.

⁶⁴ Woestman, *Canonization*, 34-38.

⁶⁵ In order to obtain all the candidate's writings, the local ordinary issues a decree to be read in every parish and religious house seeking such writings. If writings are present outside the diocese, church officials in these other locations are asked to cooperate.

⁶⁶ DeLooz, "Sociology Study," 208.

⁶⁷ Woodward, *Making Saints*, 54-55. Members of the *Consulta Medica* are appointed by the pope to their position. Most are professors or heads of departments at Roman medical schools. Their specialties range from surgery to tropical diseases. While these physicians are provided a stipend for their service, their reports which typically run to 1500 pages, are basically a *pro bono* exercise.

⁶⁸ Woestman, *Canonization*, 41.

⁶⁹ Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Sanctitas Clarior*, March 19, 1969.

⁷⁰ Woestman, *Canonization*, 42.

which dealt directly with the process of beatification and canonization.⁷¹ The major change came on January 25, 1983 when Pope John Paul II issued the Apostolic Constitution *Divinus perfectionis Magister*. This document, while bringing sweeping changes, reaffirmed from the outset the rationale for canonization:

From the earliest beginnings of Christianity, the Church, in turn, which has always believed that the Apostles and Martyrs were quite closely joined to us in Christ, has shown them, together with the Blessed Virgin Mary and the holy Angels, particular veneration and has devotedly implored the aid of their intercession. To these were soon added others also who had imitated more closely the virginity and poverty of Christ and, finally, others whose outstanding practice of the Christian virtues and the divine charisms recommend them to the pious devotion in imitation of the faithful.⁷²

While continuity of purpose was maintained by the Pope, his 1983 Constitution mandated a thorough reform of the whole canonization process, inaugurated by Urban VIII in the 17th century and codified in 1917. The goals of this reform were to make the canonization process simpler, faster, less expensive, more collegial, and ultimately more productive. The changes were manifested in two fundamental ways: (1) The entire responsibility for gathering evidence in support of the cause was placed in the hands of the local bishop. Instead of two canonical processes, episcopal and the Roman, there would be one, directed by the local bishop. (2) *Divinus perfectionis Magister* abolished the entire series of legal dialectics between the Postulator and the Promoter of the Faith. A new group of officials, "the college of relators" supervised the writing

of the historical-critical account of the candidate's life and virtues. The chief sources of information would be historical, especially a well-documented critical biography.⁷³

The Pope provided significant rationale for changing the canonization process. He wrote:

Some recent progress in the field of historical studies has shown the necessity of providing the competent Congregation with an apparatus better suited for its task so as to respond more adequately to the dictates of historical criticism.

Additionally, the Pope said that an updated process was needed as the bishops had asked for a simpler procedure while maintaining "the soundness of the investigation in matters of such great import."⁷⁴

Divinus perfectionis Magister created a paradigm shift in how saints were declared. No longer did the process use a courtroom model for determining a truth concerning the saint's life, but rather it employed the academic model of research and writing. Replacement of the Postulator and Defender of the Faith with the college of relators was arguably the most significant change for it transformed the process from a trial to an investigation. The criteria for initiation of a cause were also modified. First, the 50-year waiting period was reduced to five years, although even this could be waived by the Holy Father for pastoral reasons.⁷⁵ Additionally, the cause was not to be introduced unless there existed a true and widespread acclamation, namely spontaneous, genuine, and broadly held, among the faithful that one was in heaven either through an

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁷² *Divinus perfectionis Magister*, January 25, 1983.

⁷³ Woodward, *Making Saints*, 90-91.

⁷⁴ *Divinus perfectionis Magister*, January 25, 1983.

⁷⁵ This was waved with respect to both the causes of Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Blessed John Paul II.

active martyrdom or because of living life in an heroic manner over and above the actions of upright men and women.⁷⁶

Today, as a result of Pope John Paul II's changes, the process of canonization proceeds in three phases. It begins with the institution of a diocesan inquiry which consists of a series of investigations initiated by a competent diocesan bishop who wishes to raise a cause of canonization. This inquiry has as its goal the collection of information concerning the life, heroic virtue, or martyrdom, reputation of sanctity or martyrdom of the Servant of God, as well as proof of any possible miracles. Second, after the information has been collected, it is sent to the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints, presided over by a Cardinal Prefect, which conducts a study of the case, concluding with the preparation of the *positio*. Lastly, the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints discusses and passes judgment on the merits of the cause leading, with the approval of the Pope, to beatification or canonization.⁷⁷

In May 2007, the present pontiff, Benedict XVI, issued "Instruction for Conducting Diocesan or Eparchal Inquiries in the Causes of Saints." The document was issued to clarify currently existing procedures, to facilitate their application, and to indicate the ways of executing them both in recent and ancient causes. Most importantly the document clarified the rationale for canonization by reiterating, using different language, what had been stated in earlier documents:

The cause of beatification and canonization regards a Catholic who in life, in death and after death has enjoyed a reputation of holiness by living all the Christian virtues in an heroic manner; or engages a reputation of

martyrdom because, having followed Christ more closely, he has sacrificed his life in the act of martyrdom.⁷⁸

The document also provides greater clarity on the role and duties of the Postulator, stating that the one should be an expert in theology, Canon law and history, as well as understanding the work of the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints.⁷⁹

The process of canonization, which has clearly developed over history as described in this article, continues to generate questions for people today. While some will always question the basic concept of sainthood and the procedures used to declare one a saint, the most prominent issue during the recent pontificate of John Paul II was the plethora of beatifications and canonizations conducted during his tenure as the Supreme Pontiff (1978-2005).⁸⁰ In response to the critique that John Paul II created a "saints factory," Archbishop Edward Nowak has written:

Since each individual has his or her own, unique, and ir-repeatable personality, the situation with human beings is diametrically opposed to such a concept. This is even

⁷⁸ "Instruction for Conducting Diocesan or Eparchal Inquiries in the Causes of Saints." May 17, 2007, Article 4, #1.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Articles 9 and 12.

⁸⁰ As a matter of comparison, between the sixth and 10th centuries approximately 750 men and women were canonized; from 1002 to 1234 another 600 were canonized. From 1234 to 1588 another 600 were canonized. Between 1592 and 1978, 302 were canonized. During the pontificate of John Paul II, 1338 were beatified and 482 were canonized. Obviously, the numbers of the beatified and canonized during the reign of John Paul II were significant. See Beaudoin, "History of Canonization," 29 and http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/documentazione/documents/pontificato_gpII/pontificato_dati-statistici_en.html#Beatificazioni%20e%20Canonizzazioni

⁷⁶ Woestman, *Canonization*, 78; Sarno, "Theological Reflection," 10.

⁷⁷ Woestman, *Canonization*, 72.

more so when it is a question of saints. A saint is an exceptional person for many aspects: each one is different, each is great, outright a genius in his or her genus. Each saint is a masterpiece of God and with the cooperation of the individual, profoundly personal and always unique. God does not have a factory with an assembly line for the making of saints; nor does he employ cloning, to use a modern expression.⁸¹

The other significant question, both today and in the past, has concerned the infallibility of canonizations. For at least seven centuries, Roman Catholic theologians have argued over whether the Pope can err in declaring one a saint. Thomas Aquinas, one of the first to raise the issue, was of the opinion that "the honor we show the Saints is a certain profession of faith by which we believe in their glory and is to be piously believed that even in this, the judgment of the Church is not able to err." Kenneth Woodward suggests that the judgment of the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints concerning canonizations is infallible and irrevocable, based on theological necessity and tradition. The Council of Trent declared saints to be venerated by the Church. Thus, the Church has the power to canonize. The second argument is given by the words used by the Pope in declaring one a saint: "We solemnly decide and find that [name] is a saint and inscribe him in the catalog of Saints, stating that his memory shall be kept with pious devotion by the universal Church." The key phrase is "solemnly decide and define," the same words used by popes and councils in defining dogmas of faith. Still, the church has never issued a doctrinal statement on this issue. Many theologians, therefore, question the infallibility of canonizations.⁸² This question has become more prominent recently as a result of the

⁸¹ Edward Novak, "The New Evangelization with the Saints," in Woestman, *Canonization*, 48-49.

⁸² Woodward, *Making Saints*, 121-22.

work of Stafford Poole and others who question the historical reality of St. Juan Diego.⁸³

The Saints and the Liturgical Life of the Church

The process of canonization leads to the proclamation of men and women as saints who are celebrated within the liturgical life of Roman Catholicism. Throughout the liturgical year, a journey that begins with the season of Advent and moves through Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Ordinary (ordinal) time, canonized saints are celebrated. Depending on several factors, including significance of the saint in Church history and tradition, saints have been assigned a certain day that is celebrated as that individual's "feast" day. A hierarchy of celebrations, moving from greatest to least, is assigned to each saint. Thus, the feast days of saints are celebrated as solemnities, feasts, obligatory memorials, or optional memorials. In each case, specified prayers, pertinent to the saint's life and work, are used in the celebration of Mass and the daily recitation of the divine office.⁸⁴ In this way the saints become an almost daily example of the qualities one should seek in being a follower of Jesus Christ.

⁸³ The historian priest Stafford Pole has challenged Juan Diego's existence. Basing his conclusion on the lack of any historical record during the episcopacy of Juan Zumarraga, the first Bishop in Mexico, of Juan Diego or data concerning the apparitions, known as Our Lady of Guadalupe, Poole's work once again raised the specter of historical accuracy with respect to the process of sainthood. See Stafford Poole, C.M. "Did Juan Diego Exist? Questions on the Eve of Canonization," *Commonweal* 129(12) (June 14, 2002): 9-10.

⁸⁴ For more detailed information on the liturgical life of the Church and the role saints play in it, see Mary Ann Simcoe, ed. *The Liturgy Documents: a Parish Resource* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1985). The Divine Office, commonly known as the Breviary, is the daily prayer required of priests and utilized by many religious and lay men and women in their daily prayer life. The Office contains special prayers, depending on the rank of the feast, for all saints on the liturgical calendar.

Conclusion

A popular Christian hymn begins, “For all the saints who from their labors rest, who thee by faith, before the world confess.”⁸⁵ The lyrics of this song aptly describe the basic foundation upon which Roman Catholicism has built its tradition of sainthood. Saints, those men and women who have gone before us, marked by the sign of faith, and have been recognized as martyrs or people of heroic virtue, stand as models for people of faith today. Fidelity to Christian teaching that calls one to be a disciple of Jesus necessitates a countercultural perspective on the world. Saints of the past, present, and future have made, continue to make, and will in the future be forced to make a basic decision for the world or for God. The saints of history have in many ways been ordinary men and women who have struggled to live in the world but not of the world. Still, some have been officially recognized for their exemplary lives. Over the 2000 years of Christian history, the process of canonization has become much more refined, transparent, and historically verifiable. Yet, the basic criterion of recognition by the official church, that one lived an extraordinary life dedicated to the teachings of Christ and his Church, has remained constant throughout the Common Era. The unraveling of this perceived mysterious process, by examination of its historical development, can bring greater appreciation to those who have been so recognized as saints, validity to the whole process, and greater understanding to the Roman Catholic Church, under which the process is conducted. Solving the puzzle of the canonization process and bringing one to greater appreciation of this procedure, benefits peoples of faith, both now and in the future.

⁸⁵ “For All the Saints” was composed as a processional hymn by Anglican Bishop William Walsham and published in 1864.