

## Chapter 1

# Understanding Sainthood

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Defining what it means to be a saint
- ▶ Looking at the canonization process and how it has changed
- ▶ Honoring and celebrating the saints
- ▶ Following the examples set forth by the saints

**I**n this chapter, we discuss the idea of sainthood in general, especially how the Catholic Church understands the notion of holiness in its members. We take you through the canonization process and explain how it has evolved over the centuries. We explain how saints are venerated, and we discuss the unique role patron saints can play in your spiritual life. Finally, we examine the reasons for pursuing a saintly life and the means to achieve it.

## *Ordinary Saints versus Official Saints*

In the Catholic Church, anyone who goes to heaven is considered a *saint*. Those who make it to heaven but are never canonized are still as saintly as those named so by the pope; in fact, the unnamed and unnumbered saints in heaven are in the majority, and God alone knows who they are and how numerous. These ordinary saints lived normal lives but did so with faith in and love for the Lord. Official *saints*, on the other hand, are men and women who lived lives worthy of recognition, honor, and imitation.



The Catholic Church has never taught that a person has to be perfect or sinless to get to heaven. In fact, it teaches that every man and woman who has been born since Adam and Eve (except for the Virgin Mary, by a special divine grace from God) suffers from the effects of original sin. This means that all of us are sinners and need forgiveness. The saints were all human, with their own vulnerabilities, but by the grace of God they were able to overcome their shortcomings. They lived holy lives, even with their quirks

and weaknesses, proving that others can do it, too. To be named a saint (a decision reserved for the pope), candidates are *canonized*, or formally authenticated through an intense study of the person's life. Everything that's known about a candidate — his words, deeds, and writings — comes under close scrutiny. If the details of the candidate's life are determined worthy of formal sainthood, the facts and evidence are presented to the pope for approval. No one becomes a saint until the pope says it's so.



Official sainthood isn't merely an honor for the saints themselves. The saints serve as examples for the faithful who struggle to reconcile their human natures with their spiritual aspirations.

The following sections explore the making of a saint, from the initial nomination process and early examinations, to everything the Church must consider and the events that must take place after the candidate's death.

## *The Canonization Process Then and Now*

As we mention in the previous section, any declaration of sainthood must come from the pope. That's true now, but it wasn't always so. Before the 12th century, the local bishop was the one who canonized saints — either on his own or in a council or synod of bishops. In very early and ancient times, saints were declared by *acclamation*, or unanimous consent of the people. If a popular holy person died, usually a martyr, the diocese where he or she lived and died eagerly pushed for sainthood.



But dying for the faith wasn't the only way of sanctity and holiness. Living a good and holy life — even if it didn't end in martyrdom — meant something, too.

The question arose, then: Who gets to be declared a saint? In this section, we look at the development of the formal process by which someone is declared (canonized) a saint.

### *Centralizing the process with Pope Alexander III*

Pope Alexander III was the first to rein in the canonization process. In the late 12th century, he made canonization the exclusive province of the papacy, and he and his successors established elaborate processes and regulations to make sure that every candidate met uniform eligibility guidelines. The

result was something very much like a trial. Each investigation involved a promoter for the saint-to-be (sort of a defense attorney) and an opposing side (the equivalent of a prosecuting attorney), called the *devil's advocate*, whose job was to expose any heresies in the candidate's writings or sermons, and/or any immoral behavior in the candidate's life.

For the next 800 years, those who wanted to advocate a particular person for sainthood had to follow a time-consuming path. First was *beatification*, a formal decision that a person can be called "Blessed." Beatification involved a canonical trial with advocates and judges. Those who knew the candidate or witnessed postmortem miracles testified, and the candidate's writings and teachings were examined and entered into evidence. All this took place in Rome, because one of the regulations that came from Alexander's centralization policies was that all such trials be held at the Vatican.

Oh, yes, there was also a 50-year waiting period between a person's death and the earliest date he or she could be considered for sainthood. The purpose of the waiting period was to allow time for emotions to settle, thus reducing the number of grief-induced petitions for sainthood. Fifty years was considered the length of time for one generation to disappear.

## *Revamping the process with Pope John Paul II*

In 1983, Pope John Paul II made major changes to the canonization process. For one thing, he reduced the waiting period from 50 years to 5 years, in large part because, after 50 years, finding witnesses who knew the candidate personally can be difficult.



The pope has the authority to reduce or waive this waiting period; in fact, John Paul waived it himself in the case of Mother Teresa (see Chapter 18).

John Paul II also replaced the trial process with a more scholarly, document-oriented approach. Officials still gather the candidate's writings and facts about the candidate's life, but the contentious roles of the devil's advocate and the trial setting are gone (see the upcoming section "Examining lives and allowing for human nature"). And he returned much of the process to the authority of the local diocese; local bishops and dioceses now do much of the preparatory work and the first phase of research, as they're the ones on location where the proposed saint lived and worked.

When a bishop accepts a case for review, the candidate is called a "Servant of God," until a decision is made to send the case on. When that occurs, the proposed saint is considered Venerable, and research focuses on proof of a

miracle connected with the candidate (see the “Confirming miracles” section later in this chapter). After a bona fide miracle is established, Rome decides whether the person can be called “Blessed” and formally beatified.

The next phase is one of waiting for another miracle and the documentation on it. Not all beatifications continue to canonization, but as long as a verifiable second miracle exists, there is hope.



Pope John Paul II reserved all beatification ceremonies to himself, but Pope Benedict XVI has restored the ancient practice of allowing other bishops to beatify their local candidates for sainthood. Benedict still has final say on elevating a “Blessed” to “Saint.”



If sufficient evidence exists, and if the pope decides to canonize someone, the feast day is typically the day he or she died. This is considered the saint’s “heavenly birthday.” Some saints die on a day already taken in the universal calendar, so their feast day is designated on the closest open day to their actual date of death.

### ***Examining lives and allowing for human nature***

When people are proposed as possible saints, their lives — their actions and words — are closely examined. No one looks for perfection — just for reassurance that the person in question didn’t lead a notorious or scandalous life. Catholic authorities scrutinize the candidate’s speeches, sermons, books, and other writings to make sure that they contain nothing contradicting defined doctrines or dogmas.

## **Still saints, just no feast days**

Some saints, like St. Christopher and St. Valentine, have been removed from the Roman calendar, but that doesn’t mean that they were defrocked of their sainthood. Saints for whom there isn’t enough evidence to establish the date and place of death are considered saints, but their traditional feast days may be given officially to someone whose departure from this world can be verified.

So, for example, February 14 was traditionally St. Valentine’s Day and still is. However, there are no records unequivocally establishing the

actual day of his death, and even the precise year is unknown. (We don’t even know what century some saints lived in.) On the other hand, we have proof that SS. Cyril and Methodius died on February 14. So Valentine’s Day is the official feast day for St. Cyril and St. Methodius.

What happened to St. Valentine and St. Christopher? They’re still in heaven; they’re just not on the liturgical calendar, that’s all. Other saints went from the universal calendar to the local or regional feast calendar.

If the candidate's words and deeds pass muster, examiners then search for *heroic virtue* — the desire and effort to seriously pursue a life of holiness.



Saints are human, and as such, they make mistakes. They're not angels, they don't have wings or halos, and they don't glow in the dark. Saints are simply sinners who never gave up trying to do and to be better.

### ***Confirming miracles***

The definition of an *accepted miracle* varies almost as widely as those proposed for sainthood. Traditional miracles involve unexpected healing that's immediate and complete, as well as inexplicable to modern science.



Other miracles can be used as corroborative evidence, such as

- ✓ **Incorruptibility:** A phenomenon in which the dead person's body doesn't decay, no matter how many years have elapsed since death. Only non-embalmed bodies are considered for evidence of incorruptibility.
- ✓ **The odor of sanctity:** A sweet smell of roses exuding from the dead body, despite rigor mortis and the number of years since death. Again, only non-embalmed bodies are considered for this miracle.
- ✓ **Signs of stigmata:** Marks resembling one or more of the five wounds Christ suffered upon crucifixion, present only while the person was alive.
- ✓ **Bilocation:** Being in two places at the same time. Because this only happens before death, while the saint candidate is still alive, only the most reliable testimony from unimpeachable witnesses can be used. *Levitation* also can be used as evidence.

## ***Intercession (Patron Saints)***

You have mediators and intercessors in your lives every day; you just don't call them "mediator" and "intercessor." Sometimes you call them "doctor" and "nurse," or "store manager" and "clerk." The intercessor is the person you turn to in order to seek help from someone higher up: The nurse relays your information to the doctor; the clerk relays requests or concerns to the store manager.

That's how it is with God and saints. Jesus is the mediator in our lives, the one who can speak on behalf of an entire group and who has the authority to negotiate, make agreements or treaties, and represent both parties. The

saints are those who make requests to the one and only mediator on behalf of someone else. Their role is optional — not everyone turns to an intercessor, or saint, to address God.

Patron saints serve as intercessors for particular areas. For example, St. Lucy was a martyr in the ancient Church who died a horrible death when her Roman persecutors gouged out her eyeballs (see Chapter 6). She is invoked as the patron saint for ailments of the eye.



Just as the living on earth can and do pray for others (intercession), the saints in heaven can and do pray for the living here on earth. In both cases, the intercessor prays to the one mediator on behalf of someone else. The Catholic Church sees the intercession of the saints as one big prayer chain in the sky.

## *Venerating the Saints*

Just because saints have their own days on the Church calendar doesn't mean they're to be worshipped — that's held for God alone. Rather, saints are worthy of public honor or veneration, called *dulia* in Latin. Holy men and women in heaven deserve honor just as our nation honors those who died defending our country.



Statues, icons, and images of the saints are not to be considered idols (a claim some have used to criticize Catholicism, citing one of the Ten Commandments warning against worshipping false idols). Again, the proper analogy is not worship but honor. Memorials such as statues of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln are public and government-supported ways to honor brave heroes who either died in service of their nation or who spent a good portion of their lives in service to it. The same type of honor exists within the Church. Statues, icons, and images of the saints are memorials meant to remind us of the courage and piety of these holy men and women.

Do you have a picture of a deceased loved one in your wallet or hanging on the wall at home? Those images aren't idols. The pictures of saints displayed in church or in homes are the same thing: a visible reminder of someone you honor and appreciate.



Canonized saints not only have a feast day but also can have churches named after them, such as St. Bernadette's Church or the Church of St. Ann. The building is still a house of God and place of divine worship, yet the place is dedicated to the intercession (see the next section) of this particular saint. Schools (elementary, high school, college, and university), too, can be named after canonized saints to honor their legacy of faith.

## *Following the Saints' Examples*

By canonizing many new saints, Pope John Paul showed the world that sanctity and holiness don't belong to a clerical minority. Heaven is open to anyone who wants it and is willing to live a good and holy life.



Sainthood is a multi-step process, both in life and after death. In life, achieving holiness may involve a one-time decision to accept God, but that decision must be followed by a lifetime of living according to that decision. Martyrdom — dying in the name of faith — is a one-time act, but making such a strong commitment requires a lifetime of working toward being a true and faithful servant of God.

Sainthood is a reminder that perseverance and dedication to one's faith can bring us to our goals. As Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta often said, "God does not call us to be successful; he calls us to be faithful." We know we aren't perfect and, save for the grace of God, won't be; as such, we should stop trying to reach for that which is out of our grasp. Instead of trying to be perfect, we are called to be faithful in our efforts to do and be better.

Sainthood is also a reminder that even the most hardened sinner isn't without help or hope. Through God's grace, anyone can turn his life around and return to the faithful.

In this section, we look at the moral, everyday life of the hopeful saint-to-be. Because the saints are normal human beings, they have the same wounded human nature all men and women are born with, thanks to original sin. And because they have the same moral weaknesses we all do, their ability to overcome them by God's grace is also available to everyone else.

### *Setting a moral and ethical foundation with the four cardinal virtues*

St. Thomas Aquinas, a brilliant theologian of the 13th century, taught that "grace builds upon nature." This means that before anyone can hope to live a holy life worthy of sainthood (being in heaven), he or she must have a solid moral and ethical foundation upon which the life of grace is built. Being a holy or saintly person is no accident. You must intend and want to be holy. One must first pursue goodness before holiness. The former lays the groundwork for the latter.

The moral or cardinal virtues have been known and discussed since antiquity. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and the Stoics, just to name a few, were philosophers who lived centuries before Christ and who were Greek or

Roman pagans. They had no revealed religion like the Jews and Christians. But they had the use of human reason and saw that there were four cardinal (from the Latin word *cardo*, meaning “hinge” — that is, the hinges to a good moral life) virtues. The ancient philosophers realized that prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance were the underpinnings of an ethical life and would bring peace and happiness to the individual person and to the community and society at large. Faith complements reason, so religion continues the process by adding to the cardinal or moral virtues the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love.

The moral (cardinal) virtues can and ought to be practiced by anyone and everyone. They’re good for you and help you to be and to do good, as each one is considered a habit you must acquire through effort and practice. The theological virtues come via divine grace through the sacraments, especially Baptism, which is the gateway to the other sacraments (Penance, Eucharist, Confirmation, Matrimony, Holy Orders, and Anointing of the Sick).



To be considered holy, one must first seek a life of virtue — a life guided by the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. As with any life change, each of these virtues must be practiced often before it becomes an ingrained habit.

The following sections give a closer look at each of the cardinal virtues.

### ***Prudence***

The premiere of all virtues, prudence is the ability to make good decisions and to have the ability to practice tact — knowing when, where, and how something is appropriate. You wouldn’t ask a friend to repay a debt at the friend’s mother’s funeral. In the same vein, prudence is knowing how to approach a delicate situation with sensitivity and charity.

St. Thomas More (16th century) was a most prudent man. As Lord Chancellor of England and a wealthy nobleman, Thomas always weighed his words and deeds before he said or did them. Some may have called him cautious, but prudent best summarizes his life as a Catholic layman. During his conflict with King Henry VIII, Thomas prudently kept quiet when needed and spoke eloquently and boldly when needed as well. Never rash or impetuous, Thomas prayed and gave deliberation to every aspect of his political, social, and private life. Being wise in knowing the right time and place and the right word and action is what prudence is about.

### ***Justice***

Justice is doing the right thing for the right reason; *quid pro quo* (this for that), the Romans used to say. There are three kinds of justice: commutative, distributive, and social, each defined by the people involved.



- ✓ Commutative justice involves just two parties: the buyer and seller, teacher and student, neighbor and neighbor. It involves equity and fairness between the two parties.
- ✓ Distributive justice is the balance between the individual and the group, such as between a resident and a government, or a union member and the union. A resident pays taxes and votes in elections; in return, the government provides for safety and well-being.
- ✓ Social justice is the responsibility everyone has to preserve natural resources for future generations and look out for one another. When one government oppresses its people, for example, social justice drives other governments and citizens to stand up in defense of the oppressed.

St. Joseph (first century) is literally called a “just” man in the Gospel, and he epitomizes the virtue of justice. He knew what was the right thing to do, and he sought to be fair at all times. His protection of his wife Mary and her son Jesus was motivated out of love, to be sure, but it was his practice of justice that enabled him to be the husband and foster father he needed to be for his family. Being fair to everyone and doing the right thing — and not for reward or recognition — is what justice is all about.

### ***Fortitude***

Everyone has been in the position of wanting or needing to do or say something that’s necessary, although not easy. Fortitude is having the courage to do or say it anyway.

Blessed Teresa of Calcutta (20th century) is certainly the poster child for fortitude and courage. She was unflinching in her determination to do what had to be done and to say what had to be said, no matter how powerful her opponents. Whether it was helping the poorest of the poor or defending the lives of the unborn in the womb, this little Albanian nun became very familiar with the virtue of fortitude, and hence, she never gave up and never quit. She spoke with charity and kindness but also with firmness of conviction — to leaders of the First, Second, and Third Worlds; the UN; Congress and the White House. Having the guts to do the job (God’s will, that is) and not be influenced by ambition or fear is what fortitude is about.

### ***Temperance***

Temperance is knowing when enough is enough. Temperate people set limits on their own legitimate pleasures and activities. You may allow yourself a glass of wine, for example, but temperance keeps you from overindulging.

St. Josemaria Escriva (20th century) was a very temperate man. He practiced moderation in his work and in his play (leisure and recreation). No party pooper, Josemaria would enjoy parties and responsibly partake of alcoholic beverages, such as wine. But he knew there had to be limits, and he didn’t

overindulge. He balanced work with rest. Temperance taught him the value of moderation in pleasures so as not to abuse himself or others. Josemaria also practiced some self-denial called mortification, but again in moderate ways so as not to incur injury or harm. A healthy balance is what temperance is about.

## *Building on moral virtues with the theological virtues*

The road to sainthood involves not only the moral virtues but also the *theological* virtues. These virtues are bestowed at Baptism but can be enhanced throughout one's lifetime. Baptism remits original sin and makes a person an adopted "child of God." Sanctifying grace is given at Baptism, which makes a person holy and thus able to enter the holiness of heaven. Along with sanctifying grace, Baptism also makes the soul pliable and ready for actual grace, which is the supernatural gift from God that enables you to do holy things (like pray, forgive your enemies, endure hardships, make sacrifices for others, have courage in the midst of difficulties, and so on).



Following are the theological virtues:

- ✓ **Faith** is believing what God says simply because it comes from God.
- ✓ **Hope** is trusting in promises that God has yet to fulfill, knowing that those promises one day will come to fruition, at a time and place that is right for God.
- ✓ **Love**, theologically, is a spiritual love, wanting what is best for someone else, putting others above one's self. It's not a sexual love or a biological love; it's seeking to love God and to love your neighbor.

The theological virtues build on what the moral, cardinal virtues hopefully establish as a foundation. Faith, hope, and love empower you to believe what God has revealed, to trust in his mercy and providence, to love God with your whole heart and soul, and to love your neighbor as yourself. The daily struggle to live a holy life is made possible by the theological virtues. Hence, people want and need more faith, more hope, and more love every day of their lives until they finally get to heaven, where there is the fullness of grace and the total joy without end.



Sainthood begins with virtue and ends in holiness. It's a lifelong process — there's never a time when a person can stop being prudent, just, temperate, or courageous. In the same way, faith, hope, and love are never fully realized until we get to heaven, but God gives us little morsels to savor along the way.