

# The Process of Canonization of Saints

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## Introduction and Pretest

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The recent beatification of Pope John Paul II and the opening of the cause for sainthood, on a diocesan level, of Cora Louisa Yorgason Evans, a native of Utah, are giving us the opportunity to present a summary of the process of canonization according to the current Code of Canon Law and the particular pontifical laws regulating this type of procedures. This article would be divided in five parts. After a brief introduction and a pretest, we will be presenting in Part I, the significance of canonization; parts II and III will be dedicated to describe the steps of the process of canonization; part IV will deal with the importance of miracles in the process of canonization and part V will briefly describe the ceremony of canonization and some other conclusions.

Let us begin with some questions: What should Catholics know about the Church's process of canonization of saints? Has the Church always regulated the canonization process? Are there a number of steps before the official determination of sainthood? Take this "pretest" and discover more about this process as you read the series of articles on **The Canonization of Saints** during the following weeks.

(True or False)

1. Beginning in the time of the Apostles, the Church has maintained a carefully regulated process for the canonization of saints.

2. Catholics worship saints and that is the reason for the Church's careful attention to the process of canonization.
3. Diocesan bishops are rarely involved in the investigation that must take place in order to advance a cause for sainthood.
4. There are ten official stages associated with the canonization process.
5. Canon law requires that an investigation into the virtues of a person's life may not be officially opened until five years after the death of the would-be saint.
6. The titles **Servant of God**, **Blessed**, and **Saint** are synonymous.
7. A candidate is automatically declared a saint if the following evidence is presented: healings through contact with a relic; incorruptibility of the body; liquefaction of blood on the anniversary of death; a sweet aroma associated with the saint's remains.
8. If a person has been martyred, the requirement for two miracles after death is considered to be irrelevant to the process for canonization.
9. The Church does not consider scientific evidence or the testimony of medical experts in determining whether a miracle has occurred.
10. The declaration of beatification or canonization must be announced at a Mass that takes place in Rome.

*We are inviting you to find the answers to these questions during the next weeks in the series of articles on "the process of canonization of saints." Full article and pretest will be available online on our diocesan website, [www.dioslc.org](http://www.dioslc.org)*

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Part I

## **Introduction**

The recent beatification of Pope John Paul II and the opening of the cause for sainthood, on a diocesan level, of Cora Louisa Yorgason Evans, a native of Utah, are giving us the opportunity to present a summary of the process of canonization according to the current Code of Canon Law and the particular pontifical laws regulating this type of procedures. This article would be divided in five parts. After a brief introduction, in this part I, we are presenting the significance of canonization; parts II and III are dedicated to describe the steps of the process of canonization; part IV will deal with the importance of miracles in the process of canonization and part V will briefly describe the ceremony of canonization and some other conclusions.

Let us begin by saying that, the veneration of saints has been a common practice since the early church, and the reason is that the Church has been always concerned to present models of conduct and behavior to the faithful to persevere in the values taught in the gospel and the virtues of an authentic Christian life. It was only gradually that the identification of who is a saint came to be regulated by bishops and popes. Beginning in the 10th century, the Roman Church asserted that no one could be venerated as a saint without its approval. The first recorded canonization of a saint is Ulrich of Augsburg by Pope John XV in 993.

Canon 1403 of our current Code of Canon Law regulates the process of canonization of Saints:

§1. Special pontifical laws governs the causes of canonization of the servants of God.

§2. The prescripts of this Code, however apply to these causes whenever the special pontifical laws refers to the universal law, or norms are involved which also affect these causes by the very nature of the matter.

The process of canonization became a part of canon law in the Roman Catholic Church and developed into a long and complex process. This process was simplified by Pope John Paul II through the Apostolic Constitution *Divinus Perfectionis Magister* of January 25, 1983. In addition, the Congregation for the cause of the Saints has its own norms to regularize the processes.

Curiously, the process of canonization of Saints is slightly more informal in the Orthodox Church. Saints are usually canonized by the synod of bishops within a particular autocephalous church, but sometimes saints come to be popularly venerated without official canonization.

## The Significance of Canonization

The primary purpose of canonization is to officially authorize veneration and intercession of a particular saint. The investigation process prior to canonization seeks primarily to ensure that the person lived an extraordinary life through the ordinary events of life, that the person is in heaven and that God is working through him/her intercession bringing favors and granting petitions to the people of God.

Being canonized as a saint means that:

1. The saint's name is added to the catalogue of saints (meaning that veneration is authorized)
2. The saint is invoked in public prayers
3. Churches may be dedicated in the saint's memory
4. The Mass can be offered in the saint's honor
5. Feast days are celebrated in the saint's memory
6. Images of the saint are made in which his or her head is surrounded by a halo
7. The saint's relics (remains) are enclosed in vessels and publicly honored.

Through the Apostolic Constitution *Divinus Perfectionis Magister* the Church expresses its awareness to this reality with the following words:

“In all times, God chooses from these many who, following more closely the example of Christ, give outstanding testimony to the Kingdom of heaven by shedding their blood or by the heroic practice of virtues.”

Parts II and III will describe the steps and stages of the process of canonization.



–Saint Catherine of Siena–

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## **Steps to Sainthood**

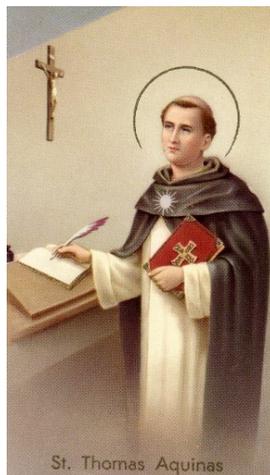
The process, which cannot begin until at least five years after the candidate's death unless the pope waives that waiting period, involves scrutinizing evidence of their holiness, work and signs that people are drawn to prayer through their example. Prior to the presentation of the cause to the Congregation for the causes of the Saints, the Diocesan bishop is under the obligation to conduct an investigation in order to establish the merit of the cause, fulfilling the following requirements:

- a) consultation with the bishops of his ecclesiastical region;
- b) inform the faithful regarding the petition and inviting them to tell what they know about the cause;
- c) submit to study the possible writings of the possible servant of God;
- d) appoint experts to study writings and other documents related to the cause;
- e) request the *nihil obstat* from the Holy See.

Once the Diocesan investigation is completed, and the proper solemnities required by the law have been fulfilled, the *Acta* of the process and the evidence collected are forwarded to the Holy See where the following stages take place:

- First stage: individual is declared a 'servant of God'
- Second stage: individual is called 'venerable'
- Third stage (requires a miracle attributed to candidate's intercession): beatification, when individual is declared blessed
- Fourth stage (requires a further authenticated miracle): candidate is canonized as a saint for veneration by Church.

Part III will detail the stages of the process of canonization.



-Saint Thomas Aquinas-

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## The Process of Canonization

The process of declaring a deceased Christian to be saint was originally quite informal, but became increasingly regulated over the centuries and is now defined by canon law. The steps for becoming a saint are as follows:

1. The process leading towards canonization begins at the diocesan level. A bishop with jurisdiction—usually the bishop of the place where the candidate died or is buried, although another ordinary can be given this authority—gives permission to open an investigation into the virtues of the individual. Usually between 5 and 50 years after a would-be saint's death, a formal request made to consider person as saint. However, the pope has the authority to waive this five year waiting period, as was done for Mother Teresa by Pope John Paul II, for Lúcia Santos by Pope Benedict XVI, and for John Paul II himself by his immediate successor. The group making the request, called the *Actor Causae*, consists of people from the candidate's church and community, either actually or *pro forma*, and the request is directed to the bishop of the diocese where the person died. The request includes testimony of the person's exceptional virtue and dedication to God. Normally, a guild or organization to promote the cause of the candidate's sainthood is created, an exhaustive search of the

candidate's writings, speeches and sermons is undertaken, a detailed biography is written, eyewitness accounts are gathered and a series of events (lectures, retreats, prayer services, publications, etc) are planned in order to promote the cause.

When sufficient information has been gathered, the investigation of the candidate, who is called "**Servant of God**", is presented by the local bishop to the Roman Curia—the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints—where it is assigned a postulator (*postulatore*), whose task is to gather further information about the life of the Servant of God. Religious orders who regularly deal with the congregation often have their own designated postulator generals.

2. The bishop decides whether the evidence is compelling enough to take it to Rome. If so, he asks the **Congregation for the Causes of Saints** for permission to open the cause.
3. If permission is granted, the bishop opens a tribunal and calls witnesses to attest to the quality of the person's public life. The person must be shown to have been virtuous, devout, religious, and characterized by love, kindness, prudence and other virtues (concrete examples are required). Miracles are not necessary at this point, but they are recorded if mentioned. If the person passes this step, he or she is called a **Servant of God**.
4. "**Declaration 'Non Cultus'**" At some point, permission is then granted for the body of the Servant of God to be exhumed and examined, a certification ("non cultus") is made that no superstitious or heretical worship or improper cult has grown up around the servant or his or her tomb, and relics are taken.
5. The bishop sends a report to Rome, where it is translated into Italian. This step is called the *Apostolic Process*.
6. A summary called the *Positio* is presented to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

7. Nine theologians scrutinize the evidence and documentation. If majority pass it, goes to Congregation.
  
8. **"Venerable/Heroic in Virtue"** When enough information has been gathered, the congregation will recommend to the pope that he make a proclamation of the Servant of God's heroic virtue (that is, that the servant exhibited the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, and the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance, to a heroic degree). From this point the one said to be "heroic in virtue" is referred to by the title **"Venerable"**. A Venerable has as of yet no feast day, no churches may be built in his or her honor, and the church has made no statement on the person's probable or certain presence in heaven, but prayer cards and other materials may be printed to encourage the faithful to pray for a miracle wrought by his or her intercession as a sign of God's will that the person be canonized.
  - **"Blessed"** Beatification is a statement by the church that it is "worthy of belief" that the person is in heaven, having come to salvation. This step depends on whether the Venerable is a martyr or a "confessor".
    - For a martyr, the Pope has only to make a declaration of martyrdom, a certification that the venerable gave his or her life voluntarily as a witness for the faith and/or in an act of heroic charity for others.
    - If the Venerable was not a martyr – all non-martyrs are "confessors" as they "confessed" or bore witness to their faith by how they lived their lives – it must be proven that a miracle has taken place by his or her intercession: that is, that God has shown a sign that the person is enjoying the Beatific Vision by God performing a miracle in response to the Blessed's prayers. Today, these miracles are almost always miraculous cures, as these are the easiest to establish based on the Catholic Church's requirements for a "miracle." (The patient was sick, there was no known cure for the ailment, prayers were directed to the Venerable, the patient was cured, the cure was spontaneous, instantaneous, complete and lasting, and doctors cannot find any natural explanation.)
    - This allows beatification, giving the venerable the new title **"Blessed"** (abbreviated "Bl.") or, in Latin, Beatus or Beata. A feast day will be designated, but its observance is normally restricted to the Blessed's home diocese, to certain locations associated with him or her, and/or to the churches or houses of the blessed's religious order, if they belonged to one. Parishes may not normally be named in honor of a Blessed.

9. If any miracles are reported (which qualify the person for beatification or canonization), the Prefect presents the cause to the pope to decide. Canonization is considered a function of **papal infallibility**, as it is important that believers venerate and pray to only those who are actually in heaven.

10. The pope declares beatification or canonization at a special Mass in the saint's honor. To be canonized a saint, at least two miracles must have been performed after death. Canonization is a statement by the church that the person certainly enjoys the Beatific Vision. The saint is assigned a feast day which *may* be celebrated anywhere within the Catholic Church, although it may or may not appear on the general calendar or local calendars as an *obligatory* feast, parish churches may be built in his or her honor, and the faithful may freely and without restriction celebrate and honor the saint.

The fourth part of this series will bring to our attention the importance of miracles in the process of canonization.



-Saint Augustine of Hippo-

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## **The Importance of Miracles**

If a person is martyred for the faith, miracles are irrelevant and not necessary to be declared a saint. As mentioned above, the purpose of canonization is to verify that the person lived an extraordinary life through the events and circumstances of his/her life and that he/she is now in heaven, and all those who die as martyrs are believed to go straight to heaven.

For those who died naturally, however, at least one miracle is necessary to be declared Blessed (beatified) and at least two miracles are necessary to be declared a saint (canonized). These miracles must have occurred after the person's death (to demonstrate that the person is in heaven and able to assist the living), but miracles during his or her lifetime are also taken into account as evidence of God's favor.

When considering a reported miracle, the Church often consults with medical, scientific and theological experts to see if there might be alternative explanations. If the experts can find no explanation, they report that to the Church (they do not declare the event to be a miracle, just that they could find no natural explanation).

Other phenomena may be investigated as miracles after a would-be saint's death include the following:

- **Healings** attributed to intercession of the saint or contact with relics.
- **Incorruptibility** – the saint's body does not decay after a long period in the grave. Example: St. Catherine of Siena (d. 1380) still has not decayed.
- **Liquefaction** – the dried blood of the saint liquefies every year on the day of his or her death. Example: St. Januarius (c.275-305), patron saint of Naples, September 19.
- **Odor of sanctity** – body exudes a sweet aroma instead of the normal stench of decay. Example: St. Teresa of Avila (1515-82) – sweet odor from her grave for nine months after her death.

Other extraordinary events during the life of the saint are also reported and investigated:

- **Levitation** – the saint floats in the air. St. Joseph of Cupertino (1603-63) often levitated during prayer.
- **Stigmata** – the saint's body exhibits five wounds of Christ, which usually bleed during Mass. St. Francis of Assisi and Padre Pio are examples.
- **Bilocation** – the saint reportedly appeared in two places at once. Padre Pio (1887-1968) is an example.

The fifth and final part of this series will describe the ceremony of canonization and some other conclusions.



–Mother Teresa of Calcutta–

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## **Ceremony of Canonization**

The formal declaration of beatification or canonization occurs during a special Mass conducted by the pope. It usually takes place outdoors in St. Peter's Square before large crowds, but sometimes is conducted in the saint's home country. In 2001, over a half million people attended the canonization of Padre Pío (1887-1968). Four months later, Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer was canonized before 300,000 faithful.

The canonization ceremony is conducted as follows:

1. The saint's life history is read aloud.
2. The pope chants the following in Latin:

"In honor of the Blessed Trinity, for the exaltation of the Catholic Faith and the growth of Christian life, with the authority of Our Lord Jesus Christ, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul and Our Own, after lengthy reflection, having assiduously invoked God's assistance and taken into account the opinion of many brothers of ours in the episcopate, we declare and define [name] to be a saint [or "to be blessed"], and we enroll

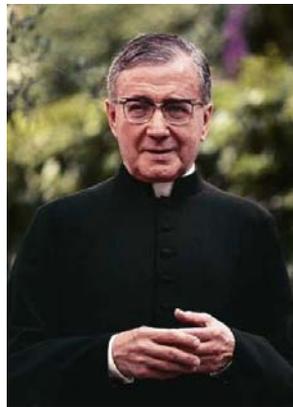
him in the Catalogue of the saints, and we establish that in the whole Church he should be devoutly honored among the saints. In the name of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

3. The person is officially recognized as blessed or as a saint at this point. A large tapestry with an image of the saint is unfurled before the faithful to admire and venerate.

## Conclusions

In the Catholic Church (both the Western and Eastern Churches) the act of canonization is reserved to the Holy See, although the beginning of the process occurs at the diocesan level following the regulations of Canon Law, the particular pontifical laws and the regulations and norms from the Congregation for the cause of the Saints, the declaration of a saint occurs at the conclusion of a long process requiring extensive proof that the person proposed for canonization lived and died in such an exemplary and holy way that he or she is worthy to be recognized as a saint. The Church's official recognition of sanctity implies that the persons are now in heavenly glory, that they may be publicly invoked and mentioned officially in the liturgy of the Church, most especially in the Litany of the Saints. Other Catholic churches still follow the older practice, for instance, the practice of the Orthodox Church as previously mentioned.

In the Catholic Church, canonization involves a decree that allows veneration of the saint in the liturgy of the Roman Rite throughout the world. However, for permission to venerate on a local level, only beatification is needed, not canonization.



–Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer–