

## BECOMING A SAINT

In May, we were happy to learn that a miracle attributed to the intercession of the Knights' founder, Venerable Michael McGivney, had been accepted by the Vatican and that he will be beatified this fall. Just one more step to canonization as a Saint.

What is a Saint, and what does it take to get that status? The word "saint" derives from the Latin "sanctus," which means "holy." So holy people may be called saints, and indeed, St. Paul in his letters refers to the saints at the communities he writes to. And some people have been referred to as "living saints," in recognition of their holiness and virtuous living – Mother Theresa comes to mind. But our customary use of the term "saints" is to refer to those deceased people who are in heaven.

So what does it take to be canonized, that is, officially declared to be in heaven, presented to us as a role model for Christian living, and given the title "Saint"? Well, getting to heaven is the first requirement, and that may be the easy part. The Church has a very specific process to be followed before a deceased person is beatified that is, declared to merit the title "Blessed," and still further before being declared a Saint.

From Apostolic times, the Church has presented certain persons as exemplars of practicing Christian virtues, commending them to the devotion of, and imitation by, the faithful. For centuries, the Church relied on combinations of historical witness, attributed signs (miracles), and popular devotion as testimony to the holiness of these saints. In 1234, Pope Gregory IX established procedures to investigate the candidate's life and any attributed miracles. In 1588, Pope Sixtus V established the Congregation of Sacred Rites and assigned it the task of handling the Causes of Saints. New norms were added or revised over the following centuries, including modifications in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century by Popes Pius XI and St. Paul VI. In 1983, St. John Paul II issued an Apostolic Constitution that profoundly reformed the entire process, abrogating all prior church laws on the matter and establishing the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

The process starts in the diocese where the person died. A petitioner presents a request to initiate a cause and the bishop determines if the person has a reputation of living the Christian virtues in a heroic manner, or of martyrdom, as well as of intercessory power. From this review, the bishop consults at least the regional conference of bishops on the advisability of initiating the cause. He must also get the Vatican's approval to initiate it. A formal inquiry is conducted, examining witnesses who knew the deceased, the person's published and unpublished writings, and claims of intercessory power. Appropriate subject matter experts would be consulted, for example, doctors who would examine claims of physical healings. After an extensive local effort, the bishop can close the inquiry by ending the cause or by forwarding it to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints for further action.

At the Vatican, this Congregation reviews and cross-examines everything that has been gathered and presented by the local bishop. Congregation members who are experts in their fields may involve additional outside specialists in their reviews. They vote on the merits of the cause before sending it to the Congregation's Cardinals and Bishops, who in turn vote on whether to recommend it to the Pope, who makes the final decision.

To be declared Blessed, there must have been one miracle attributed to the intercession of the candidate, unless the candidate has been determined to have been a martyr. To be canonized a Saint, a miracle must have been certified as occurring after the candidate was beatified.

A quick review of recent canonizations gives some insights:

-- Your position in this life may improve your chances of being canonized:

- Be the pope – 4 of the 8 20<sup>th</sup> Century popes are now Saints (50/50 chance)
- Be the founder of a religious order or congregation, or a Catholic fraternal organization (lots of people to get involved in your cause)
- Be a bishop, priest or religious (consider who'll be approving your cause)
- Be a martyr for the Faith (hard to arrange, but it saves you a miracle later)

-- Be patient. Mother Theresa and Pope John Paul II were granted exceptions to the usual rule that a cause may not be initiated until at least 5 years after death. This is to indicate that a popular sentiment was not a passing emotion, and to give time for intercessory powers to become evident. But if it's more than 30 years after death, there must be certification that there wasn't a purposeful delay to cover up detracting information.

- In a 2010 ceremony, St. Andre Bessette was canonized, 73 years after his death, along with St. Stanislaw Kazimierczyk, 521 years after his.

-- Belong to the right family. St. Thérèse of Lisieux was canonized 28 years after death. Her father, Louis Martin, and her mother, Zélie, were the first married couple canonized together, 121 and 138 years, respectively, after their deaths. Their daughter Leonie's cause was opened in 2015, 74 years after her death as a Visitation sister. (Causes for their other 3 daughters, all Carmelites, have not been opened.)

-- If you want to choose your petitioner before you die, make it someone with a lot of money. The petitioner assumes the moral and **financial** obligations of the cause. This may explain why most petitioners are dioceses or religious congregations.

Fr. McGivney's cause was opened in 1997 by the Archdiocese of Hartford, 107 years after his death in a pandemic now thought to have been caused by a coronavirus. He was declared Venerable in 2008 and will be beatified in Hartford on Oct. 31.