

THE CANONIZATION OF SAINTS

BRO. GREGORY O'CONNOR, O. P.



BENEDICT XIV devotes the first chapter of his monumental work, *De Servorum Dei Beatificatione et Beatorum Canonizatione*, to refuting the claim advanced by some writers, that the origin of canonization is to be found in the ancient pagan apotheosis. The learned Pontiff shows that such a vast difference exists between them, that they are not to be identified, nor is one the origin of the other. Apotheosis is defined as "the act of exalting or the state of being exalted to divine honor." We know from history that in Rome, only emperors and members of the imperial family were deified, although it was common for children to worship (privately) the *manes* of their ancestors. Apotheosis was accomplished by a formal decree of the Senate; henceforth the emperor so deified was called *divus*. At the *consecratio* of a Roman emperor, the body was burned on a funeral pyre, and, as the fire ascended, an eagle was loosed, carrying, as it was believed, the soul of the emperor from earth to heaven. Very often the decree was based on the statement of a single person (possibly bribed or enticed by promises) that while the body of the new god was being burned, an eagle, or in the case of an empress, a peacock, was seen to carry heavenward the spirit of the departed. Emperors whose lives had been marvels of tyranny and lust were apotheosized in order that popular hatred might be averted from them. According to some, Romulus was deified by the very senators who slew him; according to others, he appeared splendidly clothed, and demanded that divine worship be paid him, and that a temple be erected in his honor, and that he should no longer be known as Romulus but as Quirinus. This is the first example of the Roman apotheosis. According to St. Gregory of Tours, Tertullian, Eusebius Caesariensis and others, Caesar himself sought to obtain from the Senate a decree of deification for Jesus Christ, having received from Pontius Pilate (according to Tertullian) an account of His life, miracles, death and resurrection. St. John Chrysostom also mentions this.

Canonization is something so entirely different from apotheosis, that only those actuated by a spirit of hostility towards the Church could claim it is derived from the pagan custom. The Catholic Church raises to her altars only those whose lives have been remarkable for the exercise of heroic virtue, and only after this has been proved by common repute for sanctity, and by the sworn testimony of witnesses of known integrity. Saints have come from the highest and lowest walks of life. Kings and peasants alike have had their virtues and holy lives held up for the admiration and imitation of the faithful. The Emperor Domitian deified himself and assumed the title "Lord and God" during his lifetime; the Saints on the contrary have been noted for their lives of self-effacement and humility. The recipients of the *consecratio* were numbered among the gods; the Saints are merely considered as friends of the one true God. St. Augustine and St. Cyril of Alexandria say plainly that divinity is not to be attributed to the Saints, but they are to be honored for their virtues.

When the term "worship" is used in connection with the reverence which we manifest towards the Saints, it is not to be understood in the sense of *latría*, or worship in the strict sense which we give to Almighty God alone. We pay the Saints the worship of *dulia*, or worship of honor and reverence. To the Blessed Virgin as excelling all the Angels and Saints in virtue and in glory, we pay a higher degree of homage called *hyperdulia*, because as Benedict XIV says, "she is our Queen and our Lady."

Nor does the honor we pay to the Saints detract from the honor we owe to God. God Himself has so intimately associated holy men and women with Himself in the work of man's sanctification, that it is impossible to celebrate the great mysteries of the Christian Religion without giving due recognition to the human instruments which He has deigned to employ in the regeneration of mankind. Neither is this honor opposed to the mediatorship of Christ, as He is indeed our Mediator because He is our Redeemer, but not our sole mediator by way of intercession. If we ask the help of the Saints, we ask only for such help as they can give us by interceding for us. They are humble petitioners like ourselves, but far more powerful. That the honor we pay to the Saints is pleasing to God is shown by the fact that He has been pleased to work great miracles by their relics. The Old Testament furnishes a remarkable example of this. After

the death of the Prophet Eliseus, a funeral was halted by the approach of the Moabites. The mourners hurriedly placed the corpse in the tomb of the prophet, "And when it had touched the bones of Eliseus, the man came to life and stood upon his feet."¹

The true origin of canonization is not to be found in the superstitious apotheosis of the pagans, but in the Catholic doctrine of the cultus, invocation and intercession of the Saints, and this had a beginning in the ancient discipline and practice of the Church. Even to this day, there can be seen on the walls of the Roman Catacombs, the representations, not only of our Redeemer, but also of His Blessed Mother and the Apostles, and this fact supplies clear evidence of the manner in which the thought of these holy persons mingled with the devotion felt for the person of our Lord, Himself.

In the very earliest days of the Church, private moral certainty of the holiness of life of some deceased person, even though that person had died for the faith, did not suffice for public veneration. The permission for the cultus had to be obtained from ecclesiastical authority. The Church is indeed zealous for the honor of her Saints, but she has never granted liturgical honors indiscriminately to all who have led holy lives or shed their blood for Christ. A certain noble lady, Lucilla, was publicly reprimanded by Caecilian, Archdeacon of Carthage, for having kissed before Holy Communion, the relics of one who either was not a martyr, or whose right to the title was unproved. Another example occurred many centuries later. At the canonization of St. Catherine de Ricci, there was question of the devotion she had exercised toward Savanarola. The *Promotor Fidei*, Prosper Lambertini, later Benedict XIV, opposed her on this point, affirming that in this matter she had sinned. It was shown, however, that Savanarola had died in communion with the Church, having received the Sacraments and a plenary indulgence at the hour of death. The Fathers concluded that in view of these facts, Catherine could have addressed private prayers to him without sin, for they maintained with Suarez, that the only thing necessary to justify the faithful in privately offering homage and prayers to the soul of one whom they regarded as their advocate with God, is that they should have "a highly probable opinion that such a soul is in the possession of eternal glory."

The cultus of the Saints was at first local, and under the direction of the bishop of the place in which the saint had lived or

¹ 4 Kings xiii, 21.

suffered martyrdom. The cultus of Martyrs is more ancient than that of Confessors. Today the term Confessor is generally understood to signify one who has lived a holy and virtuous life and died a tranquil death. In the early days of the Church however, the term sometimes meant one who had confessed the faith before the authorities, and had even suffered torment for doing so, but lived to end their lives in peace. Those whom we now revere as martyrs are those who died for the faith, or perished soon after from the effects of their sufferings. In the councils of St. Cyprian, some of the bishops present signed themselves as "Confessors" and others as "Martyrs." Appolonius tells of a certain Montanist named Themison, who fraudulently assumed the title of Martyr. He had indeed suffered for the faith, but had secured his release from prison on payment of a bribe. Martyrs were also known as *designati*, *consummati* or *coronati*, and *vindicati*. The first were those who had been condemned to death, but whose sentences had never been executed. The *consummati* were those who died under torture or shortly after. The *vindicati*, or proved martyrs, were those who were known and proved to have died for the faith, and whose cultus had received ecclesiastical approval. The fame of these *vindicati* spread from place to place, bishops notifying each other of the facts in each case, so that the cultus might be spread. Popes St. Clement and St. Fabian divided the country into districts under the supervision of notaries who were to collect the acts of the martyrs, and St. Fabian in his first decretal, warns the bishops to be most faithful in this duty, "lest any deception be found in these things." This explains the almost universal veneration paid very quickly to some martyrs, as St. Lawrence, Polycarp and St. Cyprian of Carthage. The relics of the martyrs were carefully collected, and the day on which they had met thier death was celebrated as a festival in their honor.

The general opinion is that confessors first received ecclesiastical honors in the fourth century, although many of the earlier Fathers give them high praise. St. Cyprian awards them the crown of patience and continence. The reason for the veneration paid to confessors may be said to lie in the resemblance of their lives of sacrifice and heroic virtue to the sufferings of the martyrs. They are called the "bloodless martyrs." St. Isidore writing in the sixth century says of them, "They bear many assaults of the enemy and resist all the desires of the flesh . . . and have become martyrs of peace."

The permission to venerate the Saints given by the Bishops was of course only local, and since only the Bishop of Rome could command or permit it in the Church, his acceptance of the cultus made it universal. However, abuses crept into this form of discipline, due to the over-zealousness of the people and sometimes to the carelessness of the bishops in inquiring into the lives of those whom they permitted to be venerated as Saints. Near the close of the eleventh century, the Popes restricted the authority of the bishops on this point, and decreed that the virtues and miracles of persons proposed for public veneration should be examined by councils and especially by general councils of the Church. Even then the abuses did not entirely cease, and in the year 1170, Pope Alexander III reserved exclusively to himself the right of sanctioning a liturgical cultus. Some of the bishops did not obey in regard to beatification, and at length Urban VII published a bull in 1634 which put an end to all discussion by reserving to the Holy See exclusively the right of beatification and canonization.

Formal canonization is the final and definitive decree of the Church declaring a person to have lived a holy and virtuous life and to be numbered among the Blessed, and proposing such a one to the faithful for their veneration and invocation. St. Uldaric, Bishop of Augsburg, was the first to be so canonized, about 993. Besides formal canonization, there is also equivalent canonization, by which the Church orders and approves the veneration paid to certain holy persons, without the usual judicial process. We have many examples of this form of canonization with regard to the Saints of the early ages of the Church, and as an example of the caution with which the Church proceeds in this matter, the cultus of St. Romuald, the first to be so honored, was not made obligatory on the universal Church until 439 years after his death.

A formal decree of canonization is preceptive and universal, and therefore binding on the whole Church. If the decree is not preceptive but only permissive, either locally or universally, it is termed beatification. This decree may be also locally preceptive. Universal permission was extended by Sixtus IV for the cultus of Blessed John Boni. Preceptive but local veneration was ordered by Clement X with regard to Blessed Rose of Lima, when she was made Patroness of all America, the Philippines and the Indies. Under the present legislation of the Church, beatification is a permission to venerate granted by the Pope and restricted to certain places and liturgical exercises. Religious Orders have special indulgences to venerate their own *beati*. Canonization therefore differs from beatification in this,

that canonization implies a precept binding on all the faithful, while the decree of beatification is previous and only permissive.

Only a very brief sketch of the process can be given here. Beatification is the first and most difficult step. The request for the beatification of a servant of God is made by a Postulator-General. Through an assistant, the Vice-Postulator, an informative process is instituted, to obtain all necessary information and proofs of heroic virtue and miracles. All writings of the person for whom beatification is sought are collected, including sermons, diaries and autobiographies. If the originals cannot be found, authentic copies must be procured. In places outside of Rome, the inquiries can be made by the local episcopal authority. The *Promotor Fidei* popularly known as the "Devil's Advocate" must protect the rights of the law and prepare the objections against the case. The judge, by virtue of his office must also propose objections, should the *Promotor Fidei* refrain from doing so. A *Cardinal Relator* or *Ponens* is appointed by the Holy Father to study the case. He must refer all his findings to the Sacred Congregation of Rites. Notaries must be present at each process. If there is necessity, a religious may fill this office, but never in a case involving one of his own institute. Proofs of heroic virtue and of miracles must be furnished by eye-witnesses or by the evidence of authentic documents. Processes *de non cultu* are instituted to prove that the decree of Urban VIII, prohibiting public cultus before beatification, has been observed. Four witnesses are required to prove that a cultus has not existed, and the tomb of the servant of God is examined for evidence of veneration paid to him. If any such evidence is found, the case is suspended until the contrary is proved. (For equivalent canonization, *cultus immemorabilis* must be proved by authentic writings which antedate the Constitutions of Urban VIII by 100 years.) Eight witnesses are required to prove the repute for sanctity and miracles. All the faithful (the confessor excepted) are held to give their testimony if they have knowledge of facts which might militate *against* the beatification. *Proses-suli diligentiarum*, which have for their object the writings of the person whose beatification is sought, are instituted after an "Instruction" has been obtained from the Postulator-General. *Revisores* are appointed to examine the writings for anything contrary to faith and morals.

The result of these inquiries is printed and given to the Cardinals of the Sacred Congregation of Rites forty days before the date assigned for their discussion. When the Cardinals assemble, the validity of all the foregoing processes is discussed, and if favorable judgment

is rendered, a decree authorizing further action is published. This decree is then discussed and a *dubium* is proposed regarding the appointment of a commission for the introduction of the cause. If the Cardinals favor the appointment, a decree to that effect is promulgated and signed by the Holy Father, with his baptismal name, not with that of his pontificate. Henceforth the servant of God is judicially given the title of Venerable.

The Apostolic Process is now instituted to examine all the evidence concerning the reputation for sanctity and the miracles, or the fact of martyrdom. The evidence of the servant of God having virtues both theological and cardinal in an heroic degree is discussed in three separate meetings, over the third of which the Pope himself presides. If the evidence is favorable the Holy Father, after recommending the matter to God, signs a decree asserting that there exists evidence of heroic virtue.

The miracles are now discussed. (If there is conclusive evidence of martyrdom, the Pope may dispense *super miraculis*.) Two miracles of the first class are required, three if the testimony is only proved by hearsay (*de auditu*), and four if the testimony rests only on tradition and documentary evidence. The discussion of miracles proceeds in the same way as that of the virtues. If a favorable judgment is rendered, the Pope signs a decree that there exists evidence of miracles.

Another meeting of the Sacred Congregation of Rites is held, and, if it is voted upon favorably that, considering the approbation of miracles and heroic virtue, it is safe to proceed with the solemnities of beatification, a decree is signed by the Pope, and at a time appointed by him, the solemn ceremonies take place in the Vatican Basilica, and on this occasion a brief is issued permitting the public veneration of the beatified person now known as Blessed.

Canonization may be sought as soon as two miracles have been reported after beatification. (Three miracles are required after equivalent beatification.) These are discussed in three meetings of the Congregation. If the miracles are confirmed, another meeting is held, at which meeting it is discussed, whether it be safe to proceed with the ceremonies of canonization, (*Super tuto*). The matter is then commended to God in prayer, and the Holy Father gives his final consent, and the Bull of Canonization is issued, which not only permits, but commands, the public cultus, or veneration of the Saint.

When the solemn rites are held in the Vatican, the Postulator usually obtains permission from the Pontiff for a solemn novena or triduum in honor of the new Saint.

It is to be noted that in the ancient discipline of the Church, canonization did not presuppose beatification, but the new legislation demands that before the ceremony of canonization can be sought, authentic documentary evidence of beatification must be shown.

Is the Pope infallible in issuing a decree of canonization? The Dominican school, following the teaching of St. Thomas, has always held the affirmative. In *Quodlib.* IX, a. 16, the Angelic Doctor says: "Since the honor we pay to the Saints is in a certain sense a profession of faith, i. e., a belief in the glory of the Saints, we must piously believe that in this matter also the judgment of the Church is not subject to error."² An argument for infallibility seems to be found in the formula used, "By the authority of Our Lord Jesus Christ . . . we decree and define Blessed (name) to be a Saint." The Thomistic doctrine is, that it is impossible for the judgment of the Church to err in those things that pertain to faith. The "Communion of Saints" is an article of the Apostles Creed, and since in the case of all those raised to the altars of the Church, we have the incontestable evidence of miracles, works which only God can perform, it can be said without doubt, that in the canonization of God's servants, the Holy Father is guided by that same "Spirit of Truth" which has been with the Church from the beginning and will be till the end of time.

It is the general opinion that infallibility must not be extended to beatification, either formal or equivalent. In the examination of the miracles worked after beatification, the decree only states that the process of canonization may be *safely* proceeded with. Moreover the decree of beatification is only a permission, not a command. It is not the last step, but only a preparation for canonization. In most cases, the cultus permitted is limited to a determined locality or religious body. However it is to be presumed, according to the common opinion of theologians, that *de facto* in this matter the Church does not err.

² St. Thomas says, "we must piously believe." Papal infallibility was not defined till over six centuries after the death of St. Thomas.

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