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Is the saint-making machine outdated?

Isabella R. Moyer | Jul. 19, 2013 NCR Today

Is the "making" of saints worth it? Is there value in giving official recognition of sanctity to women and men in our church?

On the plus side, the church is truly Catholic, universal in spirit and in reality. We are women and men of diverse cultures, vocations and life choices. We embrace different charisms and spiritualities woven into the tapestry of our personal and local history. We need to know saintly women and men who lived lives like ours: people to whom we can relate, look up to and be inspired by. We need heavenly patrons, a personal link to the powerful prayer machine called the communion of saints.

For a religious congregation or ecclesial movement, having a founder or member elevated as Blessed or Saint is a source of great energy and pride. It not only affirms the person's sanctity; it's also an affirmation for the spiritual path their followers have chosen.

On the negative side, there's no denying that beatification and canonization is a bureaucratic process. It is an intense and expensive venture requiring years of painstaking research and investigation before the cause is even presented to the Vatican for consideration. If the cause is successful, even more money is needed for the beatification or canonization ceremony.

There can also be political overtones. Elevating a person to sainthood does not automatically canonize all their thoughts and teachings, but the appearance of ideological support is hard to ignore. Pope John Paul II canonized Opus Dei founder Josemaría Escrivá a mere 27 years after his death while Archbishop Oscar Romero's beatification remained stuck in limbo.

The beatification and canonization process of John Paul II himself was fast-tracked at a breathless speed despite questions about his handling of the sexual abuse scandal and his support of now-disgraced Legionaries of Christ founder Marcial Maciel Degollado. Rather than putting the brakes on the process to appease detractors, Pope Francis surprised us with the announcement of a joint canonization ceremony of Blesseds John Paul II and John XXIII.

Many interpreted this move as a bridge-building gesture. An editorial at *The Tablet* [1] acknowledged it was an astute, reconciliatory move between supporters of these two popes who are viewed by some as "rival heroes." The editorial also mused that perhaps it is time to put all other papal canonization processes on the back-burner to avoid looking like an "unedifying exercise in papal self-congratulation."

I couldn't agree more. Enough is enough. With all of the issues facing our church today, should we be expending so much energy weighing the sanctity of each modern-day pope against the historical record of his actions? Do we really need an official Vatican announcement to tell us that Mother Teresa can now be counted as one of the saints in heaven?

Every pope inherits unfinished business from his predecessor. Pope Francis has a knack for bringing in newness

while maintaining continuity. It was a brilliantly astute move to have Blesseds John XXIII and John Paul II share the canonization limelight: It's a loving nudge for us all to experience the unity of faith amid our often diverse ideology. But once this grand celebration is done, perhaps we should slow down the saint-making machine.

We all know many personal saints who have gone before us. Most don't reach superstar status in the church or the world. The hidden lives and names of these holy women and men will never be raised for our edification at Vatican altars or given an official slot in our liturgical calendars, but they share in the same glory as the great saints of history. They are happily hanging as one with those whom the church has formally raised to the ranks of saintly greatness. Their lives, faithfully lived, inspire us. Their prayers comfort and support us. The knowledge that we may join them one day gives us hope.

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[1] http://www.thetablet.co.uk/article/164380