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Nuns from Brazil take photos in front of a large banner of Pope Francis, then-Blesseds John XX

Nuns from Brazil take photos in front of a large banner of Pope Francis, then-Blesseds John XXIII and John Paul II in Rome in this April 25, 2014, file photo. With the news that Pope John Paul I will be beatified, some have begun to wonder if being pope is a shortcut to sainthood. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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With the news that Pope John Paul I would soon be beatified, Twitter and other social media were filled — again — with the question: Has being pope become a shortcut to canonization?

"It is not a matter of beatifying or canonizing a papacy," insisted Cardinal Beniamino Stella, postulator of the late pope's sainthood cause.

Besides, he told Catholic News Service, Pope John Paul I — the former Albino Luciani — was pope for just over one month, and except for martyrs, "you can't determine someone's holiness just by 33 or 34 days of his or her life."

Even before he was appointed postulator — or promoter — of the cause, Cardinal Stella, former prefect of the Congregation for Clergy, was convinced the "smiling pope" was a saint. The former Bishop Luciani of Vittorio Veneto was his bishop from the time he was a seminarian until the bishop was named patriarch of Venice in 1969.

"I knew him up close, and I have beautiful memories of him, his human virtues and his virtues as a priest and bishop," the cardinal said. "He's someone I have always carried in my heart."

But with the canonizations in 2014 of Popes John XXIII and John Paul II and of Pope Paul VI in 2018, people can be forgiven for suspecting that the modern papacy is some kind of fast-track to canonization.

Although he said it jokingly, in a February 2018 meeting with priests from the Diocese of Rome, Pope Francis noted the trend of modern pope-saints. Retired Pope "Benedict and I are on the waiting list; pray for us," he said.

When Pope Francis' approval of the miracle needed for the beatification of Pope John Paul I was announced Oct. 13, Christopher Bellitto, a professor of history at Kean University in Union, New Jersey, tweeted a link to a blog he wrote in 2019 raising a series of questions about canonizing popes.

"The church position on canonization is that she makes a person and not a papacy a saint: we canonize Angelo Roncalli and not Pope John XXIII. But in practice, this is not entirely true: he is known as St. John XXIII, not St. Angelo. How do you easily and clearly separate the person from this unique institution?"

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Another question Bellitto raised was, "What happens if one pope does not quickly open a cause for sainthood of his immediate or recent predecessor? The way things are going now, it seems to be as automatic to put the prior pope up for sainthood as it was uncommon for hundreds of years."

In 2019, Bellitto saw two possibilities for moving forward: either a moratorium on the sainthood causes of popes or a much longer waiting period before opening the cause. Current rules say a cause cannot be opened for five years after the

candidate's death.

In an email response to questions Oct. 14, Bellitto said, "I used to be a total moratorium person, but what if you've got an obvious example so that it'd be wrong to fail to canonize? But I favor a moratorium of at least 50 years that cannot in any circumstance be waived."

"I'm not saying that some contemporary popes aren't saintly," he wrote. "I'm just saying that the papacy is too unique and complicated of an institution to rush. It's a special office and should have its own set of rules when it comes to canonization. History needs time to assess. Everyone is saying COVID will change our lives forever. Will it? I don't know. But I bet people said the same after the 1918 flu and that was followed by the roaring '20s."

But Stefania Falasca, a journalist and vice postulator of Pope John Paul I's cause, insisted "Pope John Paul I's pontificate was just the tip of the iceberg."

"The world knew him only briefly, but his papacy was a reverberation of who he was as a Christian and as a model pastor," she said.

The "positio" or position paper arguing for his holiness is 3,650 pages long and is divided into five volumes, Falasca noted. It includes a thorough biography from the day he was born; an analysis of how he lived the Christian virtues in an exemplary way; a collection of letters, homilies and documents he wrote as a priest, bishop, cardinal and, briefly, pope; and a summary of the testimony of almost 200 eyewitnesses, including retired Pope Benedict.

"This is not the beatification of a pontificate, but of a person," she said.

And there were no shortcuts, Falasca said. His cause was opened in 2003 — 25 years after his death.