

Some like the idea of a moratorium on declaring popes saints

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 5, 2007 All Things Catholic

Imagine a media outlet running a "breaking news" story that the earth was completing its nocturnal rotation, and that dawn would shortly be breaking. Given that we all pretty much expect the sun to come up, I suppose most of us would wonder what exactly the news is.

I confess to having felt much the same way this week when reporters started calling me about the close of the diocesan phase of the beatification of Pope John Paul II. On the "inevitability meter," John Paul's beatification rates somewhere up there with the rising of the sun; it's a slam dunk, a done deal, a foregone conclusion. While Vatican officials will insist on meticulous observance of the procedural formalities, there is no suspense whatsoever about the outcome.

With regard to timing, the best parallel is offered by Mother Teresa, the only other recent case in which the five-year waiting period to launch a cause was waived. She died in 1997 and was beatified in 2003, a span of six years. It seems eminently safe, therefore, to expect a beatification ceremony for John Paul before 2011. In fact, things could move far more quickly; many would like to see the beatification in October 2008, coinciding with the 30th anniversary of John Paul's election to the papacy.

In a complex global religion of more than 1.1 billion people, however, nothing is ever completely uncontroversial. As I've moved around the Catholic world in recent months, I've heard a few nagging doubts about the sainthood drive for John Paul -- not because anyone questions his worthiness, but on other fronts. Most people won't voice these concerns publicly for fear of appearing to call into question the late pope's personal sanctity or his mammoth accomplishments, both of which most regard as beyond dispute.

At one level, some observers find the speed with which things are moving unseemly. The Catholic church prides itself on thinking in the long term, on following its own rhythms. Even if John Paul represents what many regard as a "no-brainer," the fear is that the fast-forward setting creates a worrying precedent for other cases. (This is why Msgr. Slawomir Oder, the postulator for the cause, has taken such pains to insist that all the normal steps are being carefully observed.) A few even wonder if perceptions of haste, in the long run of history, might taint John Paul's halo. Such an outcome may seem improbable today, but who knows what historians 200 years from now might make of things?

More broadly, some bishops, theologians and others have told me they wonder about the idea of beatifying and canonizing popes in the first place. Their argument runs as follows.

First, which popes do you beatify? This is no longer the Dark Ages or the Renaissance, so one can take for granted that anyone elected pope today is likely to be a very holy person. Should they all be beatified? If so, it could cheapen the gesture, turning beatification into an entitlement of office. If not, then one has to pick and choose.

The latter is the current model. There have been 78 popes canonized in the history of the church, and 10 more who are currently blessed. That's 88 out of a total of either 265 or 266 popes, depending upon how one counts, which means that just 33 percent of popes have been singled out for this honor, or one-third. A disproportionate share comes from the pre-modern era. Since the 17th century, only three popes have been formally numbered among the saints or blessed: St. Pius X (1903-14), Blessed Pius IX (1846-78), and Blessed John XXIII (1958-63).

When only some popes make the cut, those choices inevitably invite speculation about political motives. For example, why has Pius IX been beatified but not, say, Leo XIII? Is it due to the influence of Catholic traditionalists in Italy, who sought a halo for Pius IX as a final vindication for the self-proclaimed "prisoner of the Vatican"? Although experts on saint-making are always careful to explain that the beatification of a pope is a judgment on the person, not on their policies (a point made repeatedly in 2000 for Pius IX), that distinction is often a tough sell to the broader public.

If we're honest with ourselves, it's also a point sometimes lost on protagonists inside the church. There's little doubt that some admirers of John Paul are anxious to see him beatified and canonized ahead of Paul VI not because they believe Karol Wojtyla was a holier man than Giovanni Battista Montini, but because they are more attracted to the pontificate of John Paul II than of Paul VI. While understandable and natural, such considerations are not supposed to be what saint-making is about.

Second, the critics ask, what's the logic for beatifying and canonizing popes at all? It's basic Catholic theology that if someone is a saint, that person is already in Heaven, and a formal declaration from the church is merely an *ex post facto* recognition. Saints do not require a beatification or canonization ceremony to improve their standing in the afterlife. Further, the church fervently believes there are many more saints than those formally honored as such; that's the purpose of "All Saints' Day" on the liturgical calendar.

Instead, the logic of formally canonizing someone, beyond doing justice to their memory, has usually been to offer them to the world as a role model of holiness, as an exemplar of the Christian life. But in the case of popes, their election has already accomplished that. A pope is easily the most visible Catholic figure in the world, and as the Vicar of Christ, is already looked to as a moral and spiritual exemplar.

For these reasons, skeptics say that making popes saints is, at best, superfluous, and at worst risks tarnishing the sainthood process with suspicions of hidden agenda. Their solution is generally an informal moratorium on declaring popes as saints.

That idea will be the subject of interesting conversation in seminaries, theology faculties, and around water coolers. But in the case of John Paul II, the train has quite obviously left the station, and no amount of theoretical debate is going to change its destination.

Even the skeptics often concede that perhaps this is as it should be. Saint-making is supposed to be among the most democratic procedures in the life of the church. It begins with a spontaneous local cult, meaning a sense among the faithful in a given place that an individual lived a life of exceptional sanctity, leading them to seek that person's intercession after death. Officialdom comes in to subject this popular sentiment to critical examination, distinguishing passing fits of enthusiasm from lasting devotion.

Sometimes it's possible to debate how wide or deep devotion may be, but with John Paul II, as with Mother Teresa, such arguments seem almost self-parodying. Their "local cults" are the global Catholic village. Beginning with the cries of "*Santo subito!*" at the funeral Mass, grass-roots Catholic sentiment in favor of the swift beatification and canonization of the late pope seems clear.

For that reason, it may be only after the church has formally declared that John Paul II is "in the Father's house," to use the language of Benedict XVI, that the theoretical question of papal beatifications can come up for a hearing.

A blessed Easter to all!

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