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Some question speed of John Paul II's beatification

by Joshua J. McElwee



A woman in St. Peter's Square holds photos with the words, "Blessed Pope John Paul II," written in Italian as Pope Benedict XVI leads the Angelus prayer at the Vatican Jan. 16. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Prominent Catholics, reacting to the Jan. 14 announcement that Pope John Paul II will be beatified, have expressed a tension between the desire to recognize the late pope's holiness while still investigating his actions during his pontificate.

News of the beatification came following official declaration of a miracle attributed to John Paul -- the healing of 49-year-old French Sr. Marie Simon-Pierre, a member of the Little Sisters of Catholic Motherhood, from an aggressive form of Parkinson's disease.

John Paul's beatification will take place in a ceremony at the Vatican May 1.

NCR interviews and e-mail exchanges with more than two-dozen prominent Catholics found opinions mixed, with many reluctant to speak publicly on the late pope's progress toward canonization.

The miracle seems to show that "God is behind" the late pontiff's beatification, said Jesuit Fr. James Martin, author of *My Life With the Saints*. "You can't argue with that."

Yet Martin also expressed another sentiment echoed by some who spoke with *NCR*. Referring to Pope Benedict XVI's 2005 decision to waive the normal five-year waiting period for John Paul's cause for canonization, the *America* magazine editor said that while Benedict is "responding to the will of the people" by speeding up the process for the late pontiff, there is also "wisdom in waiting" to pursue sainthood.

The tension of that dynamic permeated nearly all of the *NCR* interviews.

With the approval of the miracle coming as more details of John Paul's dealings with disgraced Legion of Christ founder Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado have come to light, Fr. Richard Vega, president of the National Federation of Priests' Councils, said that the normal five-year wait would have allowed more time to examine John Paul's relationship with Maciel.

Vega said that while there are many things about the late pope's witness "that invite us to look more closely into his life," recent revelations cause him to ask more questions, such as whether John Paul's dealings with Maciel clouded the pope's vision.

"Time allows us to adjust things and to view things from a different mode," said Vega. "We really didn't see the wisdom that we have learned through the ages, that time gives us a better perspective, a clearer lens and allows emotions to stop and to look at this from a better perspective."

Others put their opposition to the news a little more directly.

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Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister said John Paul's "attitude toward clerical sex abuse of children embodied the worst kind of clericalism."

Said Chittister: "The least the church could do in respect for those who have already suffered insult at the hands of the church is to let the perspective of time decide whether or not canonization is in order."

Anthony Padovano, a professor at Ramapo College in Mahwah, N.J., said the late pontiff's use of power during his papacy set a bad example for "the kind of life you expect the people in the church to emulate."

"The witness of John Paul II has been extremely disappointing," said Padovano. "It should not be presented as a model for what a Christian is supposed to do."

Among some of the positive points mentioned in the interviews was the significance of John Paul's outreach to the global church, particularly his travels to developing countries.

Benedictine Fr. Anscar Chupungco, secretary of the Philippine bishops' Episcopal Commission on Liturgy, pointed out the late pope's focus on integrating local customs and cultural traditions into the liturgy.

"I dare call him "father of liturgical inculturation,"" said Chupungco. "I would like to regard his beatification as an affirmation of his liturgical ministry to the local churches outside the Western Hemisphere."

South African Cardinal Wilfrid Napier said John Paul II made a point of supporting the creation of the

African synod by ensuring major steps in the synod's formation were announced while the pope was visiting the continent in 1995.

"I think he had a soft spot for Africa, actually," said Napier, who was elevated to the College of Cardinals by the late pope in 2001.

Napier remembered having lunch with John Paul in his private chambers in Rome, along with other senior leaders, as well as having breakfast with him during the African Synod.

"It was very familiar. You felt like you were part of the family with him," Napier said. "He wouldn't offer you advice. Most of the time he would let you speak and he would ask you questions about the diocese, the local church and all that kind of stuff."

Even among those who were critical of the beatification in interviews with NCR, few disputed John Paul's personal piety. They took opposition, rather, to the image and thrust of his papacy, and the priority of his sainthood.

Fr. Charles Curran, professor of theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, said that although he had no objection to the news of the beatification, the church "would be a lot better off if we stopped canonizing popes, bishops, clergy and religious."

Mercy Sr. Theresa Kane said other causes for canonization should have more priority -- particularly Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero's -- and called the late pope's beatification "somewhat premature."

Kenneth Woodward, author of *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why*, said the late pope had a "profound prayer life."

Yet Woodward, a contributing editor for *Newsweek*, also bluntly said that John Paul "ruined the Catholic hierarchy" by making agreement on the issues of women's ordination and a married priesthood a virtual requirement for episcopal elevation.

Padovano, who also holds a sacred theology doctorate from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, said a person's prayer life should not determine whether that person should be considered a saint.

Said Padovano: "Personal piety is less important than the kind of public sense of the individual the church has. After all, a saint is a public person. And canonization is a public action that is not just dealing with personal piety, but is looking at the kind of behavior that it sees should be emulated."

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For more information on the process of a sainthood cause, see John Allen's piece:

With beatification of John Paul II, what makes a 'fast-track' saint?.

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