

Beatification Q&A #3: Why make saints out of popes?

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 27, 2011 | NCR Today

ROME -- Here's a true story, drawn from the only-in-Rome files.

I was sitting at a restaurant with a friend Monday night when the hostess came by to chat. She mentioned the bad weather (it's been raining off and on), but went on to say that as a believing Catholic, she finds a bit of gloom appropriate for Good Friday and Holy Saturday, a reminder of Christ's suffering and death. When she learned I'm a journalist covering the beatification of John Paul II, she became animated in talking about how much the late pope had meant to her as a Roman.

As I described some of the major events this week, she said she's not quite clear on one point: "When exactly," she asked, "are they making him a saint?"

I replied that technically they're not, because this is a beatification rather than a canonization. The hostess was stunned, then stepped away to pick up a copy of an Italian magazine called *Epoca*, the banner cover of which this week reads: "The Pope Saint." (For the record, I have a piece in that issue.)

"But they must be making him a saint," she insisted. "Everybody says so!"

Her reaction illustrates one of at least four reasons why some experts on sainthood over the years have suggested caution, if not an outright moratorium, on the whole idea of naming popes as saints. Those reasons are:

- It blurs the distinction between beatification and canonization
- It's unnecessary, since popes don't need to be canonized to serve as role models
- It risks cheapening sainthood by becoming an entitlement of office
- It also runs the risk of seeming political — a means of canonizing not just the pope, but his policies

The argument usually unfolds like this.

First of all, beatification and canonization do not "make" someone a saint. Theologically, the belief is that the person is already in Heaven. A formal declaration isn't so much for the saint herself or himself, but for the rest of us. It lifts the person up as a role model of holiness, and makes them available to the whole church as an intercessor.

With popes, however, their election already made them a role model. Popes today are global media celebrities, and they exercise vast influence on the church during their lifetime. John Paul II was certainly proof of the point: It didn't take a beatification for him to inspire an entire "John Paul II generation" of young laity, priests and bishops, animated by his robust missionary spirit.

Hence, there's arguably less urgency about beatifying and canonizing popes than for lesser known figures, whose elevation might have more impact in commending their example to the rest of us.

Second, beatification has traditionally been understood as an intermediate step before formal sainthood, allowing veneration of a candidate in the place where she or he lived. Put simply, beatification is for the local church, while canonization is for the universal church.

With popes, however, that distinction breaks down. Because they were the bishop of Rome, the local church is Rome itself. The beatification ceremony is generally held in Rome, presided over by the pope, and under those circumstances it's awfully tough to see it as a merely "local" event. Moreover, popes are well known figures whose beatifications attract wide media interest. Does anyone seriously believe that John Paul's beatification on Sunday will be a story only in Poland and in Rome?

Most people, like my hostess in Rome, will understand Sunday's event to mean that John Paul II is now a saint. When the canonization does eventually happen, they'll probably be surprised, wondering why we're doing it all over again.

Finally, when it comes to sainthood for popes, there's a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't dilemma. Do you declare them all saints, or do you pick and choose?

Early on, it seemed the church had opted for the former. The first 35 popes traditionally recognized by the church are all considered saints; it's not until Pope Liberius in the fourth century that we find the first non-saint pontiff, and he's an outlier. (Liberius, by the way, is considered a saint in Eastern Christianity, with the feast day of August 27.) It's not until the sixth century that canonization of popes is no longer a foregone conclusion.

The difficulty with that, of course, is that sainthood comes to seem almost pro-forma, arguably reducing the value of any given canonization — virtually making it seem a perk, part of a standard papal benefits package.

Eventually, the solution was picking and choosing. All told, 78 of the 265 popes on the Vatican's official list have been canonized, with only two in the last 500 years: St. Pius V, 1566-1572, and St. Pius X, 1903-1914. An additional ten popes are currently designated as "Blessed," awaiting canonization, a list that includes Pope John XXIII, who called the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

The problem with picking and choosing is the perception of politics. Why, for instance, was the anti-modernist Pius X canonized but not the pastoral, peace-making Benedict XV? (There may well be good reasons, including the fact that Pius X during his own lifetime and at the time of his canonization was better known as the "Pope of the Eucharist," having promoted frequent reception of the sacrament and expanded it to children, than for his crackdown on theological dissent. Inevitably, however, many people see a political agenda at work).

Today, some Catholic liberals grumble that John Paul is being beatified ahead of Paul VI, who guided the implementation of Vatican II reforms, and before the canonization of John XXIII. Some conservatives, meanwhile, wonder why John Paul II has leapfrogged ahead of Pius XII, the pope during the Second World War, whom they believe deserves to be acquitted from charges that he didn't do enough to resist the Holocaust.

Vatican officials and other commentators can insist until they're blue in the face that beatification and canonization of a pope is not the same thing as ratification of all their policies, but many people still won't buy it. This week, a broad swath of opinion inside and outside the church will draw the conclusion that the "rush" to declare John Paul II a saint is related to a desire to nail down his political legacy.

For those reasons, some observers believe it would be better either not to beatify and canonize popes at all, or at

least to wait for a long time after their deaths ? perhaps a century or more, so that the political passions they stirred during their lifetimes can dissipate.

The case for declaring popes as saints is easier to state.

First, there's a matter of justice. If a pope truly lived a life of heroic virtue, and if miracles have occurred in his name, why shouldn't he have the same right to be recognized as anyone else?

Second, the papacy is a bone-crushing job. A pope in the 21st century is expected to be a living saint, a voice of conscience, a global political titan, a media icon, a leader in ecumenical and inter-religious relations, and the CEO of a complex multinational organization. Moreover, the papacy is basically a death sentence. Technically a pope could resign, but traditionally they carry the burden of office from the moment of election until they die; not for nothing did Benedict XVI compare his election in 2005 to the guillotine. In that sense, bestowing sainthood is one of the few ways the church has of honoring the extraordinary commitment the papacy involves.

Third, the celebrity status of a pope could be seen as another argument for canonizing them. Unlike many sainthood causes which don't attract widespread interest, a pope's beatification or canonization is a big deal, which makes it a "teaching moment" about sainthood and the possibility of living a holy life. In an era in which the Catholic church often finds itself in the spotlight for all the wrong reasons, such opportunities to project a positive message are valuable.

Whatever one thinks about this debate, it doesn't seem the Vatican is inclined to stop bestowing halos on pontiffs anytime soon. After May 1, the countdown will begin for John Paul II's canonization. In the meantime, sainthood causes are still open for four of his 20th century predecessors: Venerable Pius XII, Blessed John XXIII, and the Servants of God Paul VI and John Paul I.

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[#1: What's the Rush?](#) [6]

[#2: What's the deal with miracles?](#) [7]

[#3: Why make saints out of popes?](#) [8]

[#4: What's the Divine Mercy connection?](#) [9]

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