

Catholicism 101

Who are the Saints?

Who are the Saints?

The saints are those who are in Heaven. From this definition it gets more complicated. The most important starting point is to know that the Saints are human like us. They were born, lived their lives in their respective towns and cultures, and died. We must understand that the saints had not abilities or special qualities that we do not have. They were ordinary humans who lived extraordinary lives. Often, especially because their lives are strange to us or they had strange encounters with God, it can be hard for us to understand them and even harder to figure out how to imitate them.

The Church uses the word saint in two different ways. The most common usage of the title “saint” is to describe those we know are in Heaven. These are the men and women who have lived holy lives and the Church has infallibly declared that they are in Heaven. Hence, we know with certainty that they are in Heaven. The other usage of the word “saint” is to describe all the people in Heaven. Usually this term describes the whole multitude of people that we hope are in Heaven but are not certain. When we speak of the saints declared in Heaven, we use a capital “s”. For those whom we are hopeful but not certain, we use a lowercase “s”.

How does one get declared a Saint?

The process of declaring a person a Saint is called Canonization. The word “canonization” literally means to measure them worthy of the status. The term “canon” describes the process of measuring and thus setting a standard for a process. The first stage of the process of canonization is that the person needs to die. We cannot declare someone living a saint because they cannot possibly be in Heaven while still alive. After the person’s death, those who knew the person open a cause for canonization. The process can be quite lengthy and involved. The first stage is to get support for opening a cause. Usually it take many people, the approval of the local bishop, and money. Once the cause is open, the people who opened the cause need to submit a record of the person’s life. They gain testimonies of those who knew them and documents regarding their lives. These records and documents are sent to the Vatican for review. The office of the Vatican responsible for the saints and saints causes is called the Dicastery for the Cause of the Saints.

The first step in the process of canonization is called “Servant of God.” The Vatican evaluates the life of the person looking for specific traits. The first and most important trait is holiness of life. Did the person live a life close to God? Did they witness to the goodness of God in their lives? Was the person faithful to God? The second part of the process is to examine the person’s life for heroic virtue. We may want to think of this process as declaring the person a “good person.” What does a good person mean? What standard do we use to evaluate the “goodness” of a person? Thus, the standard for measuring the holiness of a person is not based on their goodness but on heroic virtue. Did the person go beyond and above the normal way of life to witness to the Gospel? Did the person excel beyond the normal “good” and virtuous behavior? If the Church declares that the person lived a holy life of heroic virtue, the person is declared a “Servant of

God.” At this stage, the person’s life can be celebrated as a person who lived a good life but not yet worthy of venerated by the Church.

The second step in the process of canonization is called “venerable.” At this stage in the process, the Church has evaluated the life of this person, declared that they lived a holy life of heroic virtue, and now they evaluate the way the person lived. Is the life of this person worthy of imitation by the faithful? Did the person live a life that is worthy of veneration by the faithful? This second stage in the process asks the question, “should the faithful imitate this person’s life? Did they witness to the Gospel with such virtue and holiness that they are worthy following it? If the person’s life is worthy of imitation, then the person is declared “Venerable”, namely, worthy of veneration. The word veneration means that the person’s life can be imitated, that their character and example are worthy of praise by the Church, and that they can be honored by the holiness of their life.

The third step in the process of canonization is called “Beatification.” This third step is a major jump in the process. Many people remain in the first two stages and can stay there for centuries. Beatification is the first major step in that we now assume the person is in Heaven and worthy of praise by the Church. The event that moves a person from Venerable to Blessed (Beatified) is a post-mortem miracle. After the person dies, the most important event that the Church looks for in moving someone forward in the process of canonization is a miracle after the person had died. Not miracles during the person’s life. Miracles during a person’s life are common and signs of God’s action in their lives. God can perform a miracle through a person who is not holy and not worthy of veneration. A miracle attributed to a person after they have died is a clear sign of their intercession and that the person is in Heaven. Therefore, the most important event the Church looks for in order to declare someone Blessed or to beatify them is a post-mortem miracle. The beatification process is an official ritual in the Church celebrated by the Pope at a Papal Mass in Rome. Once the person is declared Blessed, they are worth of veneration by the whole Church, they are given a feast day on the calendar, and they are added to the list of saints.

The fourth step in the process is called “Canonization.” Whereas in the third step the person is assumed to be in Heaven and worthy of veneration, once a person is canonized, we declare infallibly that the person is in Heaven. In order to declare a person Blessed, we need one post-mortem miracle. To declare a person a Saint, we need two post-mortem miracles. These miracles are highly scrutinized by the Church. They go through a process in Rome in which experts in the field evaluate the miracle for possible natural explanations, the Church interviews witnesses to make sure the miracle was attributed to a particular saint, and then the Church evaluates the nature of the miracle. The most common form of miracles is healing miracles. Other types of miracles include, acclaim, visions, apparitions, founders of religious communities, and more. Once the second post-mortem miracle is approved, the person is declared a saint through a special ritual in Rome. Basically, the Church is ratifying the reality that the person is in Heaven. Once a person is canonized, the people of the Church are encouraged to venerate the person, to celebrate their lives, and to include them in the list of those whom we know are in Heaven.

How do we venerate or celebrate the Saints?

The lives of the saints can seem very strange to us. St. Rose of Lima marred her face so that she would not be desirable to the suitors who wanted her. St. Waldo lived in a tree for 30 years. St. Ignatius of Loyola travelled across the world spreading the message of Jesus. Are we required to mar our faces, live in a tree, or give up our lives to be missionaries? The simple answer is no. The Saints each had their special way in which God called them to sanctity and the imitation of Jesus' life. No two saints followed the same path. Therefore, we should not assume that we need to follow the life of any particular saint exactly. Instead, the goal of the Saints is to inspire us with new possibilities. What does it look like to imitate Jesus? How should we follow his life? What ways did they use in their lives to come to know Jesus and to live lives dedicated to him? These questions are the most important when coming to understand the Saints.

A major part of venerating the Saints is to come to know them. Often people are overwhelmed by the number of Saints and stop paying attention to them. With over 30,000 Canonized saints and around 400,000 known martyrs coming to know the Saints can feel like a daunting if not impossible task. We should look at it the other way. Each time we come to understand or learn about the life of a Saint, we have made a new friend with someone in Heaven. These friendships are far more important than we realize.

Patron Saints:

Patron Saints are those Saints through which we have a special relationship. Each Diocese, country, and church has a patron saint. Additionally, each person has a patron saint for the birthday, baptismal day, confirmation day, and possibly wedding, profession, or ordination day. Additionally, we can have patron saints whom we choose because their lives interest us or they hold a special place in our lives. Sometimes the Saints choose us and choose to be our patrons. Our lives with the Saints is quite dynamic with a lot of options as relationships change and develop.

What does a Patron Saint do? Each Patron Saint does five things for the person the patronage. The first is that the patron saint prays for us. We now have another person in Heaven praying for us. The second is that the person inspires us along our path to holiness. We may find examples in the Saint's life that we wish to add to our own or ways that they encourage us to follow Jesus. The third is that the Saint encourages us on our path to holiness and union with God. The fourth is that the Saint can inspire virtues in us. Each Saint has specific virtues that they lived well during their lives. These virtues can be increased in us as we develop our relationship with that Saint. The fifth is that the Saint can give us special graces. Each Saint has special graces associated with their lives and the way they followed God. These graces can be given to us as well.

Additionally each saint has a patronage or something that connects them to their lives. These patronages describe their roles in earthly events and are, when invoked for the patronages, tend to be more effective. Many of the saints have been declared the patron saint of something. St. Joseph of Cupertino is the patron saint of aviation, St. Kateri Tekakwitha is the patron saint of the Native Americans, and St. Lawrence is the patron saint of chefs and barbeques. These

patronages express qualities about the Saint's life and help us select who would best help us with our daily problems.

Types of Saints:

The Saints fall into seven categories of Saints. Some Saints are given several categories that mark their lives and help us to understand them.

Mary, the Mother of God: Obviously only one saint fits into this category. Mary is the Queen of all the Saints and the highest of all the Saint due to her role in the salvation of the world. Additionally, she is the highest model of the Saints as one who is human, lived a holy life, and is worthy of imitation. Some claim this category doesn't exist.

Apostles: the next rank of categories are the apostles. These are the men who followed Jesus, listened to him speak, were inspired at Pentecost, and then continued the Church and the spread of the Gospel.

Martyrs: the next rank of categories are the martyrs. These men and women witnessed to the power of Jesus by the shedding of their blood and by death. They chose death to denying Jesus.

Pastors: The next category of saints are the pastors. These men witnessed to Jesus by leading the flock and living a life of imitation to Jesus. The pastors include popes, bishops, priests, deacons, and some founders of religious communities.

Doctors: The next category is the one that causes the most confusion. Some of the Saints were writers or through their lives expressed the faith in a way which is useful for the good of the Church. Those who added to the faith through their teaching and example the Church declares their works as worthy to be read by the faithful and their lives to be imitated are declared doctors. We currently have 36 doctors in the Church.

Religious: The next category are the religious. These men and women gave up their lives to follow Jesus living the virtues of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Those who lived this life well are celebrated through their life as a professed religious.

Men and Women: this final category encompasses all those other people who are not given any of the above titles and still lived a holy life and are in Heaven.

What do the Saints do? The Saints pray for us. They want God's will to be done in our lives, they want to help us through the challenges of life, and they want us to eventually be in Heaven. They cooperate with God's grace to bring us the graces we need. The Saints can never go against God's will neither would they ever do anything to challenge God's will. Additionally, the Saints are not gods. They have no power of their own neither can they do anything outside of God's will. The Saints pray for us called intercessory prayer. The most common term used is the Saints "intercede for us." Too often we use poor language when we talk about our faith. The most common use of poor language is when we say "pray to St. John." We only pray to God not the Saints. The Saints pray for us and we ask them to pray for us.