

Becoming a Saint

In the Catholic Church, canonization is an official process by which the Church, through the Holy See, elevates a holy man or woman to universal veneration in the Church. Contrary to popular opinion, the Pope does not “make” an individual a saint; rather the Holy Father recognizes and affirms that the person is with God in heaven and is a paragon of faithful discipleship to Christ, worthy of imitation and prayer as an intercessor to God.

Saints can be *martyrs*, whose lives were a miracle of grace as they sacrificed themselves in death for the love of Christ and the Church, or *persons of sanctity* whose lives have been marked and evidenced by heroic virtue—lives of exemplary faith, hope and charity in service to our Lord.

Saints are role models for faithful. As St. Thomas Beckett referenced them as follows: “Remember the sufferings of Christ, the storms that were weathered...the crown that came from those sufferings, which gave new radiance to faith. All saints give testimony to the truth that without real effort, no one ever wins the crown.”

Historically, canonization has evolved over the centuries to the current system initially begun in 1917 (*Code of Canon Law*), simplified by Pope Paul VI, and finally reformed by Pope John Paul II in 1983. In the Church’s early years, saints were selected informally by local public acclaim or by bishops, but the Vatican tightened the process in 1234, making canonization a formal, centralized process of the Holy See. Since Pope John Paul II’s 1983 revisions, which made the process simpler and less adversarial, canonizations have increased dramatically; for example, Pope Francis’ first canonization as pope included 813 people who were martyred for their faith. He explained that these newly canonized saints “are examples of this daily habit of choosing to love God and do His will.”

Today, becoming a saint is a step-by-step process that may take many years to accomplish. Typically, there is a five-year waiting period after a person’s death before application can be made, but this requirement may be waived by the Holy Father in certain cases.

Step One: Diocesan Investigation/Servant of God

If a person dies who is considered to have *fame of sanctity* or *fame of martyrdom*, the bishop of the diocese of residence can initiate an investigation to determine whether the candidate is worthy of consideration as a **Servant of God**. Writings, interviews and other information-gathering methods are compiled, under the auspices of a diocesan tribunal who are charged with rendering a judgement of toward further consideration as a saint.

Step Two: Congregation of Causes of the Saints’ Investigation and Findings

The results and documentation (*Acta*) of the diocesan tribunal process are sent to the Congregation of Causes of the Saints in Rome, where a Relator is appointed to handle the case and ensure that a summary (*Positio*) of the life and virtues of the candidate is prepared. This summary is given to a theological commission and, if the case is approved, the cardinals and bishops of the Congregation of Causes vote on whether the candidate’s cause may continue to move forward. If this outcome is positive, the recommendation of a *Decree of Heroic Virtues* is sent to the Pope for his final consideration.

Step 3: Decree of Heroic Virtues/ Venerable Designation

Once the Congregation of Causes recommends to the Pope a *Decree of Heroic Virtues*, that is, the candidate is heroic in the theological qualities of faith, hope, and charity and in the cardinal qualities of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance, the Holy Father will make a final determination on merit. (In the case of martyrdom, other standards are used.) If the Pope approves the Congregation's recommendation, he will bestow the title of **Venerable** onto the candidate, leading to a possible canonization as a saint. A Venerable has as of yet no feast day, but prayer cards may be printed to encourage the faithful to pray for a miracle wrought by his or her intercession.

Step 4: Investigation and Recognition of a Miracle

The next step in the process is beatification, a statement by the Church that it is "worthy of belief" that the Venerable is in heaven and saved. When a person is martyred, he/she may be beautified and declared blessed by virtue of the circumstances of death. However, in the case of heroic virtue, the candidate must be credited with a miracle that supports the case. In verifying the miracle, the Church looks at whether God truly performed a miracle and whether the miracle was in response to the intercession of the candidate saint. Miracles have to be verified through commissions and testimony, as scientifically unexplainable and theologically-based. This verification takes place at the diocesan level where the miracle was performed. While miracles can be of any type, they are usually medical in nature, show instantaneous success, permanency, completeness, and are not attributable to a natural treatment or remedy.

Once the scientific and theological commissions document the cure is without natural explanation and is attributable to God through the intercession of the candidate, the decision is sent to the Congregation of Causes where a vote is taken on its merits. If the miracle is approved, a *Decree of Miracle* is prepared and sent to the Holy Father. With this final approval of the Pope, the candidate can be **Beautified** and declared **Blessed**. Blesseds may receive public veneration (only with clergy or designated laity) and/or a feast day may be designated at the local or regional level closely associated with the person's life. Catholics are also free to privately venerate the candidate or can do so in a group acting in their own name.

Step 5: Investigation and Recognition of a Second Miracle/ Sainthood

After beatification, the same process in Step 4 is repeated to look for another miracle before proceeding to canonization. Usually, two miracles are required for a person to be canonized, but the second miracle requirement can be waived by the Pope, with the approval of the Sacred College of Cardinals and the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

With the documentation and approval of this second miracle, the Holy Father's consent, and executed *Decree of Miracle*, a formal declaration of sainthood for the Blessed is realized.