

The Lives of the Saints — Our Beloved Brothers & Sisters in Christ  
by Tom Perna

Have you ever wondered why, as Catholics, we ask for the intercession of saints? Or have you asked, “What is the purpose of the saints?” Where does the Church get the authority to declare the saints that she does? And why do churches have statues of saints and relics in them? A lot of people ask, “Isn’t that idolatry?” Well, today I’m going to answer some of these questions and many more.

First, who is a saint and what is the communion of saints? A saint is a holy one that leads a life in union with God. Through the grace of Jesus Christ lives in heroic virtue and receives the reward of eternal life. Not just the life of virtue but heroic virtue. In a way I think of the superheroes, you know the Marvel comic superheroes but these are saints that have lived heroic lives of virtue.

Devotion to the saints increases our union with the Church. Faith and devotion of saints can support our weaknesses and supply what is lacking in our own faith and devotion. The Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraph 961 talks about,

“The term, “communion of saints” refers also to the communion of "holy persons" (or in Latin, “sancti”) in Christ who "died for all," so that each one does or suffers in and for Christ bears fruit for all.”

The tradition of honoring saints, those who died for the life of Christ, began in the early Church around the year 100 A.D. It’s been part of the Christian faith from the beginning. This tradition developed from the Jewish tradition since they honor the prophets and the holy people with shrines.

Now, a question that will come is what is the difference between the saints with a small “s” and Saints with a big “S”? Paragraph 954 of the Catechism says there are,

“Three states of [saints in] the Church.”

The first one is the Church militant. Those saints that are still here battling on Earth. Each and every one of us are considered part of the saints militant. The second one is the saints suffering. Those are the saints in purgatory. And then the third state is the Church triumphant and those are the saints that are in heaven.

As the Church militant we should pray for the souls in purgatory and ask for prayers from the saints in Heaven And not just those canonized saints but also Archbishop Fulton Sheen, who is in the canonization process himself right now, talks about praying for the saints in our families; those loved ones in our own families and people that we've known that have gone on before us to also pray for them but also pray asking for their intercession as well.

Why and how does the Church have the authority to declare saints? The Church has the authority from Matthew 16:18. Jesus says to Peter,

"I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

It's the same authority the Church has to compile the Bible. It's the same authority to interpret the Bible and declare the truths she has for the past 2,000 years.

The declaration is for our good and to serve us on Earth. It's also to honor the saints virtue by naming a saint is not for their benefit but for ours. They serve as our models and intercessors for us at all times.

Do Catholics pray to or worship the saints? In today's sense of the word, "worship" no. Worship and adoration is meant for God and God alone. However, we do give honor to the saints and we give very high honor to the Blessed Virgin Mary because she is the Mother of God. We also give honor to those who deserve it.

We don't necessarily pray to Mary and the saints but we pray through them. We pray with them and we ask for their intercession. It's the same way as when we ask one another to pray for each other. So if I said I was sick or I'm dealing with something right now, I'm going to ask you to pray for me. Well, it's the same thing.

We believe that the saints are in heaven with Our Lord and that they see God all the time, perpetually and eternally, and that in the Presence they can pray for us. So, when a miracle gets granted it's not necessarily the saint that is doing it but it's God that is granting that miracle through the intercession of the saint. And we will get to that shortly as well.

St. Dominic has this great quote on his deathbed he says,

“Do not weep, for I shall be more useful to you after my death and I shall help you then more effectively than during my life.”

God alone is the one who answers all prayers and where all prayer is directed. He’s the one who answers everything. However, Mary and the saints are one with and in God, so it is good to pray to them and through them to God.

Where in the Bible does it say we should pray to saints? A lot of non-Catholics will argue that we worship the saints. They will quote 1 Timothy 2:5,

“For there is one God. There is also one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”

However, they fail to look at the preceding verses 1 Timothy 2:1-4 which states,

“First of all, then, I [St. Paul] urge that supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings be made for all men for kings and for who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life godly and respectful in every way. This is good and is acceptable in the sight of God our savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth.”

There are other scripture verses as well, we just don’t have the time to go through them today. I will say that there are numerous times where St. Paul says that he will pray for the people and he asks for the prayers of the people himself to pray for him. Think of Pope Francis. The first day of his papacy when he first came out on the balcony at St. Peter’s what did he ask? He asked for prayers just like St. Paul does. We should ask the saints for prayers as well.

Another question we will often get is, “why do Catholics have statues?” Basically, we have the statues because they are the same thing that pictures do; they remind us of the person that went on, that lived the life before us and we believe now are in heaven. It’s like having pictures of your loved ones. We have icons and pictures in churches, stained glass windows of the saints in our churches.

It’s the same reason why we have pictures of loved ones in our house. You don’t worship the pictures of your loved ones you don’t worship the statues of Shakespeare or the statues of... Think of John Hopkins University. There is probably a statue of John Hopkins somewhere on that university not in numerous places. People don’t go and worship before like, “ooooooh ahhhh, ooooooh yahhhhh”

they don't worship that statue of John Hopkins just because there is a statue of John Hopkins on the university.

That statue there is just like the statue of the saints. It's to remind us of the person. Now the saints, differ from John Hopkins because we believe they lived lives of heroic virtue and that they are with God in heaven with Him right now. So, that's why we have statues.

Some non-Catholics will argue that the Bible commands us in Exodus 20:4-5,

“You shall not make for yourself a graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them.”

What many non-Catholics will fail to see is that statues are not graven images. They are holy images of Christ or a saint. a graven image is an image that reflects God or a saint in another way or as equal to God. So, a graven image is equal to God. You think of the ark of the covenant had angels on it. god instructed those angels to be there and the ark to be created that way. Those images are not graven because they are not equal to God.

So, there's a criteria when we look at the process of canonizing saints that the Church has developed over the centuries. So, why do we have this entire process for canonization? The process the Church uses for canonization, to name a saint, has only been used since the 10th century.

For hundreds of years a saints acclamation was just done by their popularity this was really done with the first martyrs who gave their lives up for Jesus Christ. Though this was a more democratic way to recognize saints, some saints stories were distorted by legend and some never even existed. Gradually, over time the bishops and finally the Vatican took over the authority for approving saints. Now we have the Congregation for the canonization of the saints and that's the Congregation that looks at when a person is brought before the Congregation. They are the ones that look at everything.

Now, there is a long, drawn out procedure. And I'm going to go through it pretty quickly just so you can understand it explain it to others but it is a long process.

Step one is that there is a 5 year waiting period before a case can be brought to Rome. To bring balance to the situation; to bring emotion to rest. That's really why

that 5 years is there. To let the emotions of the person's death go away and for things to kind of balance out. Now, Pope St. John-Paul II made the change to 5 years. He actually made sweeping changes to this process.

Second, first the bishop of the diocese in which the person whose beatification is being requested is responsible for beginning the investigation.

Witnesses are often called, the third step, before the tribunal to recount concrete facts on the exercise of Christian virtues that are considered heroic. Remember, I talked about saints living heroic lives. That is they lived lives focused on the theological virtues faith, hope and charity and the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude and others specific to this person's state in life. At this point, the person is given the title, "The Servant of God".

Once the diocesan investigation is finished the acts and documentation are passed off to the Congregation of Saints which is in Rome. The public copy for further work is put together here.

If the majority of theologians in Rome are in favor the cause is passed on by Cardinals and Bishops who are members of the Congregation. If their judgment is favorable the Prefect of the Congregation presents the results of their process of the cause to the Holy Father who gives his approval and authorizes the Congregation to draft the relative decree.

Beatification requires evidence of one miracle except for in the case of martyrs. Since miracles is considered proof that the person is in heaven and can intercede for us the miracle must take place after the candidate's death and as a result of the specific petition to the candidate.

The miracle is then examined by nine theologians to determine if the miracle is authentic or not. So, remember when I said before that when we have people praying for us and we ask the saints to pray for us? This is where we ask a saint or a person that we are trying to get through the canonization process for the Church to recognize the beautify that this person's life was in a saintly way. We ask for their intercession because we believe they are in heaven with God.

When the Pope declares the candidate Beatified or Blessed the person can be venerated by a particular group of people. So, when we think of Pope St. John-Paul II (now everybody the entire universal Church myself included) once he was Blessed we were venerating him. In the usual case only the Polish people would

have venerated him until he was then canonized and then the whole Church would be able to honor him.

After a second miracle, again examined by theologians, the Pope will canonize the Saint. The title of, "Saint" tells us that the person lived a holy life, is in heaven and is to be honored by the universal Church. Canonization does not make a person a saint. It recognizes what God has already done.

Now, within these Saints that are canonized we have what are known as the Doctors of the Church. What is a Doctor and what is the role of the Doctor? When we hear the word, "doctor" we often think of a medical doctor. However, we must remember that there are doctors of philosophy. That's exactly what, "PHD" stands for, a doctor of philosophy.

The term doctor comes from the Latin word, "doker" which means, "to teach". Anyone designated with the qualifications to teach were given this term. As medical doctors care for the health of the body, it can be said that the Doctors of the Church care for the soul and spirit of the human person.

There are three requisites for this highly distinguished title as Doctor: holiness of life, importance in orthodoxy of their writings (which means that their writings don't contradict what the Church has been given in revelation), and then official recognition by the Church.

It's not the amount of writings that declares one a Doctor but it's the impact the person has on the doctrine and life of the Church. They help us answer more questions about the life of Jesus Christ. A

A perfect example would be St. Therese of Lisieux and St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Thomas Aquinas has volumes and volumes of writing. St. Therese has a lot but not nearly as the amount that St. Thomas Aquinas does. She is a Doctor just as he is a Doctor because her writings have impacted the Church in a way that his writings have. So her writings, her understanding of prayer, the importance of prayer, the importance of mercy have really been a huge impact on the Church especially in the modern age.

The Church has 37 Doctors of the Church and actually on my blog I've been working on (TomPerna.org) a series on the Doctors of the Church. It's my hope that I'll put that into book format as well.

As Catholics we also get questioned on relics. Why do we have heads that are cut off from bodies, arms that are cut off from bodies? Why do we keep clothing? Why do we keep jewelry of different saints?

So, throughout the history of religion the idea of relics has been a profound element. Yet, also a very mysterious arena since we're speaking about the body parts, possessions, fragments of a particular person or event in the life of a person. Such as the relics of Jesus Christ: the nails that were used to nail him to crucify him on the cross, the thorns and yes even the cross itself.

So, the question we would get from a non-Catholic is, "what is a relic?" Well, a relic is a sacred item either a body part, fragments of bones, clothes or other religious items associated with the saints remains.

There are three classes or categories of relics. the first class relic is the body of a saint or parts of the body such as limbs, bones and ashes. A second class relic are objects that had been in touch or physical contact with the saint such as clothing, rosary or devices that had afflicted pain and suffering on a saint like chains or some type of whip. And then the third class relic is a piece of cloth that has been in direct contact with a first or second class relic.

The naming of the churches in the early church came from what relics were in the church of a particular saint. The relic was placed in the church usually in the altar table. At my parish here we have a relic of St. John Vianney in the altar table. That developed over time with tradition and that's really where churches started to get their names where the relic of that saint was placed somewhere in the church.

So, to conclude, I just want to encourage you all to learn more about the lives of the saints. Take time to read them and Lent is a perfect time to read the lives of the saints. You can take a saint a day and learn more about them. You could ask for that saint to pray for you and ask for their intercession.

But you know, the saints will help us! What's great about the saints is they're just like us. They have our sufferings, they have all of our struggles, everything that we endure on a daily basis. They ensure spiritual darkness, like we go through spiritual darkness. They have the same emotions and the fears and the joys and the sufferings and everything. That's why the saints are so great because they went through everything that we go through even today.

So I would encourage you to read the lives of the saints, especially during Lent. Ask for their intercession! If you have a specific job or you know if you're a police officer ask for the intercession of St. Michael the Archangel. Figure out who your patron saint is and ask that saint to pray for you. And then choose a saint as a patron. Focus on having a patron saint and having that saint maybe pray for you not just on a daily basis or a weekly basis but maybe offer up prayer through that saint as you wake up in the morning.

So, I cannot emphasize the importance of the saints play in the history and life of the Church and I hope that this small teaching will help you discover the saints and learn to pray with them and through them on a daily basis. I hope that you will develop a devotion to the saints after hearing this teaching and that from here on out you'll have a great devotion to the saints especially during this Lenten season.

Take care. God Bless.