

THE STEPS ON THE PATH TO HOLINESS

Details

The fame of Holiness

The cause of beatification and canonization concerns a faithful Catholic who in life, in death and after death has enjoyed a reputation for holiness or martyrdom or the offering of life.

For the beginning of a process of beatification it is therefore always necessary to have a certain "reputation for holiness" of the person, that is, the common opinion of people that his life was integral, rich in Christian virtues. This fame must last and can grow. Those who have known the person speak of the exemplarity of his life, of his positive influence, of his apostolic fruitfulness, of his edifying death.

The diocesan phase

Canonization is only the last step of a ladder that presupposes others: the candidate, in order to become officially a saint, must first be a servant of God, then venerable, and then blessed.

The Catholic faithful whose cause for beatification and canonization has been initiated is called a servant of God.

The postulator, specifically appointed, collects documents and testimonies that can help to reconstruct the life and holiness of the subject. The first phase then begins with the official opening of the process and the candidate is called the Servant of God. The objective is often to verify the heroicity of the virtues, that is, the habitual disposition to do good with firmness, continuity and without hesitation. In other words, it is necessary to demonstrate that the candidate has practiced the virtues at a very high level, above average. In other cases, the object of the verification concerns the requirements of Christian martyrdom or the offering of life.

The reconstruction is done by following two tracks: by listening to the oral testimonies of the people who have known the Servant of God and can tell precisely facts, events, words; by gathering the documents and writings concerning the Servant of God.

If the preliminary conditions seem to agree, the Bishop can introduce the cause. The process of beatification, except for a particular papal dispensation, cannot begin before at least 5 years have passed since the death of the candidate. The diocesan bishop appoints a tribunal composed of his Delegate, a Promoter of Justice (at the level of the Congregation there will then be a Promoter General of the Faith) and a notary actuary. A special Historical Commission collects all the documents concerning the Servant of God and his writings. Finally, two theological Censors must evaluate the same writings, if there is something contrary to faith or morality. All the information is collected and then sealed during a closing session, presided over by the Bishop.

The Roman phase

At the end of this work, the diocesan phase of the process is concluded and all the material is delivered in Rome to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints

which, through one of its speakers, will guide the postulator in the preparation of the Positio, that is, the volume summarizing the evidence gathered in the diocese; this is the so-called Roman phase of the process.

The Positio must demonstrate with certainty the life, virtues or martyrdom and the relative fame of the Servant of God. It will be studied by a group of theologians and, in the case of a "Historical Cause" (the one concerning a candidate who lived long before and for whom there are no eyewitnesses), also by a commission of Historians. If these votes are in favour (at least in a qualified majority), the dossier will be subject to further judgement by the Bishops and Cardinals of the Congregation.

If the judgment of the latter is equally favourable, the Holy Father may authorize the promulgation of the Decree on the heroicity of the virtues or on the martyrdom of the Servant of God, who thus becomes venerable: that is, he is recognized as having exercised to a "heroic" degree the Christian virtues (theological: faith, hope and charity; cardinals: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance; others: poverty, chastity, obedience, humility, etc.), or of having suffered true martyrdom or of having offered one's life according to the requirements of the Dicastery.

In fact, the candidates for holiness can be: the martyrs, those who received the killing in Christianity in hatred of the faith; the so-called confessors, that is, those who were witnesses to the faith, but without the supreme sacrifice of life. Moreover, from 2017 it is possible to reach Canonization also through a third way: the offering of life, without killing in hatred of the faith and without the prolonged exercise of heroic virtues; these are people who have voluntarily and freely offered their lives for others, persevering "until death in this regard, in a supreme act of charity".

The beatification

Beatification is the intermediate stage in the process of canonization. If the candidate is declared a martyr, he immediately becomes Blessed, otherwise a miracle must be recognized, due to his intercession. This miraculous event is generally a healing considered scientifically inexplicable, judged as such by a medical commission convened by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints and composed of specialists, both believers and non-believers. It is important, for the purposes of recognition, that the healing be complete and lasting, in many cases even rapid.

After this approval, the Bishops and Cardinals of the Congregation also pronounce on the miracle and the Holy Father authorizes the relative decree. Thus the Venerable can be beatified. Following this proclamation, the Blessed is inscribed in the liturgical calendar of his diocese or of his religious family, on the anniversary of his death or on a day that is considered particularly significant.

The canonization

In order for him to be canonized, that is, so that he can be declared a saint, the Blessed must be given effective intercession in a second miracle, which took place after his beatification.

To establish who is a saint, therefore, the Church always uses canonical verification: if once one could become a saint simply by popular acclamation, for

several centuries now the Church has begun to equip itself with specific rules to avoid confusion and abuse.

As in all trials, there is a sort of accusation and defense. The defense lawyer, if we want to use this term, is the postulator, charged with proving the sanctity of the candidate. The one who is in charge of "making fleas" of testimony and documents is instead the promoter of faith (commonly known as "the devil's advocate"). The first is appointed by those who have made the proposal to instruct the cause, the second is in service at the Congregation.

Special cases

There are cases that proceed by equivalence, applied both to cases of beatification and canonization; it is a procedure by which the Pope, after due verification, approves a cult that has existed for some time, without waiting for the recognition of a miracle. It differs from formal beatifications and canonizations, for which the Church provides for a regular process and the respective miracle.

Moreover, the Pope can always take particular decisions. Pope Francis did so with regard to John XXIII, who became a saint because of his reputation for holiness, which had spread throughout the world for decades, without being recognized a second miracle. An extraordinary procedure was also followed by Benedict XVI with regard to St. John Paul II, whose cause for canonization opened a few weeks after his death, without waiting the five years.