

NAMING SAINTS—HOLINESS UPDATED: “ON THE OFFERING OF LIFE”

Typically, following the great Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul on June 29, the Vatican congregations effectively shut down for the summer, with few major initiatives or documents released. In truth, most parish programs slow down for many of the same reasons. But on July 11, Pope Francis released an Apostolic Letter *motu proprio* (on his own initiative) entitled *Maiorem hac Dilectionem*, taken from St. John’s Gospel, “Greater love than this no man has, than to lay down his life for his friends.” (Jn 15:13) The upshot is that “venerable” as they are (pun intended), the procedures for declaring someone to be a saint periodically need to be updated. Some cases do not demonstrate all the particular traits of the traditional paths, though all the paths to canonized sanctity must have a common denominator in charity. Interestingly, the official document was published in Italian—the Latin version (typically the “official” version) was listed as a translation. Once again, Latin takes it on the chin!

Traditionally, three main steps are followed as the cause for a person’s canonization is put forward. (1) A thorough examination of his/her life, with all the voluminous documentation, may result in someone being declared to have lived a life of heroic virtue. Such an individual is then declared “Venerable,” called a Servant of God. (2) If a miracle is attributed to that Servant of God’s intercession, he/she may be declared Blessed, called a Beatification. Then, a local celebration may be held in that country on a feast day. If an individual is martyred, the necessity for a miracle of intercession is waived, and he/she may proceed to beatification. (3) If a second miracle is admitted (or a single miracle in the case of a martyr), that person is eligible for a canonization ceremony in Rome, presided over by the Pope in Rome. The Blessed has then been raised to the full dignity of the altar.

In this document, a new criterion paves the way for new possibilities, when circumstances fall outside the strict definition of martyrdom, which requires the presence of a persecutor. The primary question to be determined in taking into account the new criteria may be summarized: “Does [the case of the Servant of God] consist of [an] heroic offering of his/her life up to death for the sake of supernatural love of God and also of the Christian virtues, at least in the ordinary degree, on the occasion and to the effect for which [the subject’s offering of his/her life] was made?” Article I states: “The offering of life (*oblatio vitae*) is a new kind of act on the path to beatification and canonization, which differs from the kinds “for martyrdom” and “for heroism of virtues.”

The “offering of life,” is thus a **new category** to be considered when evaluating the strength of a particular cause put forward for consideration. Causes for canonization **always** begin at a local level, for example with a particular religious congregation seeking its founder/dress or a diocese putting forward a member of the clergy or lay faithful. Copious documentation produces the evidence that is forward to Rome for a full investigation under the auspices of the **Congregation for the Cause of Saints**. The rules, revised under St. John Paul II in 1983, clearly spell out the procedures are followed assiduously. In this case, the Holy Father has altered the process to allow for a new category for consideration. If a second miracle is admitted (or a single miracle in the case of a martyr), that person is eligible for a canonization ceremony,, presided over by the Pope in Rome.

Here, the Holy Father has inserted some new criteria that, if applied, allow for the possibility of one’s lie to be determined to have contained an “offering of life,” a new kind of path if you will, towards beatification. What is that new path? It requires the following: (a) free and voluntary offering of one’s life and heroic acceptance, out of love, of certain and temporally proximate death; (b) a connection between offering of life and premature death (c) exercise, at least to an ordinary degree, of Christian virtues before the offering of life, and, thereupon, up to death (d) existence of a reputation of sanctity and at least, of signs after death (e) the necessity of a miracle, for beatification, having occurred after the death of the Servant of God and through the intercession of the same. In short, these norms **broaden the criteria**, fully aware that traditional martyrdom is tricky to demonstrate in some cases, even as it is crystal clear in others. Most theologians welcome these changes, while critically examining how some aspects will be carried out in the practical realm.

Could one not posit that soldiers, firefighters and police officers routinely satisfy the first requirement? It depends upon the meaning of “certain” and “proximate” death. The second criterion envisions a “connection” in time between the offering of life and one’s premature death— fairly straightforward. Would it apply to a case

like Fr. Damien, whose ministry among the lepers in Hawaii spanned decades, fully aware that he may contract the disease? The third criterion for virtue has been altered to include the exercise of Christian virtue, at least in an *ordinary grade*, which is a change from the “heroic” virtue previously demanded. Again, this distinction is not always clear, but appears to broaden the criteria for a man or woman to be declared Venerable. The fourth criterion demands a reputation of holiness and of signs, at least after death. As this process paves the way for more “ordinary” kinds of individuals (I am all in favor of this!), one could wonder how a “*reputation of holiness*” ought to be defined for “ordinary” folks? The final criterion still lists the necessity of a miracle **after** death—here nothing has changed as far as I can tell on my first read. I find this intriguing document worthy of more mature reflection, and it will be interesting to see its practical effect in the months and years ahead.

- Prior to beginning his first “post-University” full-time job, my nephew recently visited a friend of his stationed in **Ukraine** for work. Since I’d love to visit there myself, I enjoyed his stories, though he noted that Ukraine is visibly much poorer than Poland. **Cardinal Leonardo Sandri**, Prefect of the Congregation for Eastern Churches, also visited Ukraine, in a show of Vatican support. While there, he lamented the international silence on the fighting between pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian forces. Recall, the Russians annexed Crimea in 2014, though the move is not recognized by the U.N.
- **Cardinal Pietro Parolin** will meet with President Vladimir Putin next month in Moscow, the first visit by a Vatican Secretary of State since 1998. He is going as a “collaborator of the Pope, who wants to build bridges.” There is much work to be done with respect to Catholic-Russian Orthodox relations. But one must assume that the Middle East, Syria and Ukraine will also be on the agenda.
- Cathedral parishioner Andrena Guines was among 2000 delegates at the **National Black Catholic Congress**, held this year in Orlando, FL. She mentioned that the U.S. Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Christophe Pierre, attended the entire conference. Fittingly, while in sultry Orlando, she reminded him of his visit to St. Paul last December when he bestowed the pallium upon Archbishop Hebda. Somehow I do not think the Nuncio will ever forget his (-20°F) visit!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector