



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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Canonizations have always been a real feast for the Church. The people who attend canonization ceremonies are filled with joy, and it shows in their happy faces, exchanges of hugs and greetings, and their songs. As theologian José Luis Illanes says, “Every canonization begins from a social phenomenon: devotion to a particular person whom large or small sections of the Christian faithful recognise as being both outstanding and close to themselves.” Those of us who were lucky enough to be present at the canonization of Saint Josemaría undoubtedly found that it brought to mind, as in a flashback, the spring day in 1992 when he had been beatified. Ten years had passed since that ceremony, and perhaps some people might wonder what difference there was between that 17 May 1992 and this 6 October 2002.

A beatification is an exercise of the Pope’s supreme legislative power, authorising a Servant of God to be beatified and to receive public veneration in certain places. A canonization, however, is not only a legislative act but also an act of the Pope’s solemn teaching authority, making a definitive declaration of the holiness of a given Christian. Accordingly, each canonization teaches a truth which requires total assent on the part of the faithful.

From 6 October 2002 onwards, Josemaría Escrivá has been enrolled on the list of the Saints. He may be invoked publicly in the Church; he has a Mass in his honour and may be included in the divine office, the official prayer of the Church; a day is assigned as his feast day; churches, altars and shrines may be dedicated to him, and pictures and statues may show him with a halo; and, moreover, his relics may be exposed for public veneration in the Church.

But if by beatification the person is “raised to the altars”, meaning that they can be publicly venerated, why is canonization necessary? Strictly speaking, canonization is not necessary, and there is no problem if someone’s cause stops with their beatification, because many Blesseds are only known within certain circles. Beatification is a decree granting permission for veneration limited to given acts

and places. Canonization imposes the obligation of veneration on all the faithful, and because this ruling is universal in scope, it is the common opinion of theologians that the Pope is acting infallibly when he pronounces the canonization of a Servant of God.

What the Church is aiming to do by canonizing and venerating Saints is to give glory to God, praising him and thanking him for the abundance of his gifts. The veneration which is given to the Saints is called “dulia”, as distinct from “latria”, the worship given only to God, and from “hyperdulia”, the veneration we pay to our Blessed Lady. The veneration of the Saints is also shown by honouring their relics. As Lamberto de Echevarria, a writer on Canon Law, says, “If in the civil sphere the relics of famous people are kept with such care, and we are allowed to visit pantheons built as the resting-places of illustrious men, and museums where the flags and other glorious mementoes of the past are preserved, then it is licit to do something similar in the religious sphere too.”

“The finger of God”

To understand better what the process of canonization means, it is helpful to think about what is meant by the term “the finger of God”. When the process of someone’s canonization is opened, the first thing that is studied is whether that person practised the Christian virtues to a heroic degree. Given the complexity involved in such an investigation, this is the most difficult and laborious part. Moreover, there is obviously a degree of uncertainty in any such study, since it is human activity that is trying to prove a person’s holiness. The decree on the heroism of virtues, by which someone is declared “Venerable”, simply states, with the Pope’s authorization, that there is proof that that person practised the virtues to a heroic degree. Once that point has been reached, what the Church does is wait for what is technically known as “the finger of God”, meaning that God our Lord manifests his power by means of a miracle worked through that person’s intercession. Hence it just takes one miracle to be worked before the beatification and another before the canonization, to be able to consider a person a Saint. This is clearly an act of humility on the part of the Holy See.

The distinction between canonization and beatification is in this sense relatively recent. When the practice of honouring the Saints – first martyrs, then confessors – first arose, the bishop limited himself to declaring that the honour done to a given person was justified, after a formal enquiry which ended with that person’s name being enrolled on what was called the “Canon” of Saints, hence the term “canonization”. But this declaration which initially applied only to one diocese was then taken to authorise the honour done to the Saint by the whole Church as his or her reputation spread. From the tenth century onwards the bishops referred

these cases to the Holy See in order to regulate the whole proceedings and prevent abuses. Pope Alexander III (1159-1181) was the first Pope to declare that Holy See alone was competent to judge processes of canonization. Then in 1634 Pope Urban VIII clarified the difference between beatification and canonization. From then on there have been no really substantial changes, although the procedures adopted have obviously been updated and improved in the course of time.

Pope John Paul II has beatified and canonized many of the Christian faithful. Three reasons can be offered for this:

- 1) The twentieth century was the period in the history of the Church when the highest number of people were martyred.
- 2) The Church today is very conscious of its universality, and the Pope is mindful of the fact that many countries with a long Christian tradition, as well as countries in which Christianity has been witnessed by the blood of many believers, have no “national” Saints of their own. Accordingly, the Pope has tried to make sure that the causes of Saints from those countries progress quickly. Furthermore he has included beatification or canonization ceremonies in his programme when visiting the countries of origin of people whose causes had been completed.
- 3) Finally, over the past few years the Pope has beatified or canonized a large number of lay-people – young, old and even children – highlighting the universal call to holiness as recalled by the Second Vatican Council.

More universal veneration

The veneration given to Saints is basically the same for all, but may be restricted or widespread. Unless the Holy See decrees otherwise, however, the veneration given to Blesseds is limited to a specific place or religious family; nor can they have churches, chapels or altars dedicated to them, or be taken as a patron by institutions, without special permission from the Holy See. The veneration given to the Saints is universal, and may be celebrated throughout the world without any restrictions. In that sense, it could be said that the institution or country of origin of the Saint “loses” them, so that all Christians can turn to their intercession.

From 6 October 2002 any priest in the world may celebrate the Mass of Saint Josemaría on his feast-day, June 26. There may also be altars, churches and chapels dedicated to him, and he can be made the patron of all kinds of institutions.

The question of whether a person has been canonized or merely beatified does not alter the “quality” of that person’s intercession. Blesseds and Saints alike testify to holiness in the Church, and can be taken as models of virtues, and

invoked as intercessors. Beatification or canonization does not change their position in Heaven, in the sight of God. What changes is the acknowledgement of their holiness on the part of the Church, which allows not only private devotion, permissible for any of the faithful who has died, but authorizes and encourages public veneration of them.

Originally published in *San Josemaría. Crónica de la canonización*, Madrid: Palabra, 2002.