
THE MAKING OF SAINTS

Fr Raphael Pérez, O.S.A.

The Congregation at work

Q. How seriously does the Congregation for the Causes of the saints go about its work?

A. The seriousness and professionalism of the work of the Congregation is beyond question. Those who are employed there examine even the slightest difficulty which may arise in relation to any cause. And as long as the difficulty remains they do not proceed to the next step. Moreover, the staff of the Congregation is extremely competent and take their job very seriously indeed.

Q. To beatify or canonize someone what grade of certainty must exist about the holiness of the candidate?

A. There has to be a well-founded moral certainty, that is, one which excludes any reasonable doubt. Afterwards, through the required miracle attributed to the servant of God, God gives *his* sign.

Q. Can pressures be exerted for or against a particular cause?

A. If there were such pressures they would be totally disregarded and, in any case, would be ineffective and fruitless for the simple reason that very many individuals are involved in the different stages of each cause.

How causes are processed

Q. Why do some causes go faster than others?

A. For two reasons — one intrinsic, the other extrinsic. By intrinsic I mean the very person of the servant of God under examination. For this reason some causes are quite complicated while others are more simple. It depends on the quantity and quality of the evidence adduced, be it by way of documents or from eyewitnesses.

The second reason — what I have called the extrinsic one — depends on the postulators. A cause goes ahead when the postulators know what they are doing and when they give to the cause all the time that is needed. Finally, the technical competence of the tribunals and careful attention to procedural norms also play a role in the process.

Q. Is the work of the postulators all that important?

A. Absolutely! If some causes go slowly it is because the promoters are not really interested, or because the postulators have more causes than they can handle. Another factor might be lack of competence on somebody's part. Once evidence regarding a cause has been collected and presented to the Congregation for the decision-making phase, a good deal of work has still to be done by the postulation office so that the evidence can be studied by the competent bodies. When a cause is ready for examination and discussion, it follows a rigid chronological order through each of the steps which every cause must take in the Congregation.

Let me give you an example or two in which I was personally involved. When I first began to work as promotor general of the faith I came across a cause which had neither a postulator (the former one had died) nor funds to pay its expenses. I informed the bishop of the diocese where it had originated and vigorously encouraged him to take it in hand. It was arranged for a religious order to take charge of the cause and thus it prospered.

I remember another wonderful cause which might have done much good for the Church. We were still only involved in the initial steps when the promoters wrote me to say that they were abandoning the cause. I was dismayed and so informed the people concerned. In this case the cause foundered, not for lack of resources, but through a lack of love for their founder.

Money is not a factor

Q. Often one hears it said that the pace of a cause depends on the financial strength of its office of postulation. How much truth is there in this statement?

A. Money will never succeed in making a saint. But without resources it is not possible to promote a cause. Those involved in such work are not pure spirits. Officials of the Congregation, translators, consultants, lawyers, doctors, printers, etc. have to be paid a just wage.

When such gossip does the rounds, one can be sure there is a tendentious slant far removed from reality. A canonization costs much less than what one would imagine. The fact is that when the promoters are really interested in the cause they obtain what finance they need from whatever sources, without great difficulty.

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This brings to mind the canonization, by the Pope, in Seville in 1982 of Sister Angela of the Cross, Foundress of the Company of the Cross. They are one of the poorest religious congregations, yet they had no trouble in getting the finance they needed. These good sisters did not promote the cause because they had money but because they had a great love for their foundress.

Need for modern canonized saints

Q. It is said sometimes that it is good to let a lengthy time elapse before canonizing a person so as to be able to judge the candidate with a historical perspective. What do you think of this?

A. I disagree. The less time it takes, the better. Saints are models which the Church places before the faithful. Obviously, for the men and women of our time a person of the 17th century is not as fitting a model as a person of the 20th century, whose life we can know in detail. A saint of today is a model who lived in a world like ours, who had the same opportunities to do good that we have, and who met the same difficulties and temptations in life we meet with. This very similarity encourages us to imitate them and invoke them more fervently and more confidently.

Q. The present Holy Father has beatified and canonized many persons. He has been criticised for so doing. What is the point of proclaiming someone a saint?

A. Today there is a greater need than ever for saints. In the first place, those declared saints by the Church glorify God; secondly, they serve (as I have just said) as models to be imitated and as intercessors before God. We should rejoice that the Holy Father has beatified and canonized so many people. These ceremonies show us a great variety of virtuous individuals. They are almost as varied as the diversified careers and employments of the faithful today. We should take joy in the growing number of intercessors before the Lord, who understand our needs, which are so similar to the ones they experienced during their lifetime, and who pray for us and for our needs.

Thriving on work

Q. After your retirement from the Congregation as Promotor General of the Faith have you continued working in beatification and canonization causes?

A. Yes indeed. Since my retirement in 1976 I have been involved in assembling evidence in a number of Spanish causes. Two of these stand out. First I was delegate judge in a tribunal examining a miraculous cure attributed to the Servant of God, María Rodríguez Sopena. From 1981 to 1984 I served as delegate judge in the Madrid section of the process inquiring into the virtues of the Servant of God, Josemaría Escrivá. Very recently I have been involved in the cause of Adolfo Lanzuela Martínez, a De La Salle brother. And still more recently I helped the González Barros family initiate the cause of their 14-year-old daughter Alexia who died of cancer after a ten-month illness.

Q. Who chose you as judge in the evidence gathering phase of Monsignor Escrivá's cause?

A. The Archbishop of Madrid. The bishop of the locality presides over all the processes as the ordinary judge. When the fact-finding process of Monsignor Escrivá's cause was opened Cardinal Vicente Enrique y Tarancón appointed me delegate judge. He also named the other personnel involved in the cause at that stage. When Cardinal Angel Suquía succeeded him the process was drawing to a close and he thought it best to confirm my appointment.

Credible witnesses, for and against, are heard

Q. The cause of the Founder of Opus Dei has moved along speedily? Why is this so?

A. Firstly because of the universal dimension of this Servant of God. And secondly due to the fact that those involved — petitioners and postulators — facilitated the process by providing the proper documentation required at each stage.

Q. Did the tribunal hear everyone who expressed interest in making a declaration?

A. Tribunals only listen to credible witnesses. For this reason, the first judgment is about a prospective witness's trustworthiness.

Once this is established those who want to be heard should be heard, even if they are against the cause, since adversaries are specifically sought in the edict which is published when a cause is opened. On the other hand, there is no need to call the 'enemies' of the cause or of the Servant of God to testify since they do not want the truth to be revealed but desire only evil; often they are

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acting on pure emotion or want to be heard for no other purpose than that of inflicting damage. These 'enemies' are easily recognizable because they refer exclusively to what is unfavourable and silence all that might be favourable.

In choosing favourable witnesses, a selection must be made. This selection is based on the closeness of their relationship to the Servant of God, on the period of his life in which they knew him, and other such criteria, until ample documentation is obtained covering his whole life.

Eyewitnesses are preferred

Q. How many witnesses testified in the cause of Monsignor Escrivá? How many of them were members of Opus Dei?

A. The Madrid process heard the testimony of 66 witnesses, of whom 30 were faithful of the Prelature and 9 former members of the Prelature. All these witnesses knew Monsignor Escrivá at different periods of his life. In the Roman process approximately 30 more witnesses were heard.

Q. Did these witnesses speak of what they knew directly, or did they recount events they had learned of through third parties?

A. All of them, whether they were in favour or against the process, were eye-witnesses who told what they had seen, although they also referred to what they might have heard or read. As I said, their combined testimonies cover the entire lifetime of Monsignor Escrivá. To have listened to still further witnesses would have involved us only in mere repetition of what was already known and documented. In any case, in putting together the record in a beatification or canonization process, special emphasis is placed on the last 10 or 15 years of life.

No corners were cut

Q. Was the brisk pace of the presentation of evidence in the cause of the Founder of Opus Dei due to a lack of rigour or failure to adhere to certain formal requirements of the process?

A. No. The process was carried out with the maximum rigour. Current Church laws permit a cause to reach its conclusion in less time than hithertofore because some of the administrative procedures have been simplified. This happened in 1969, under Pope Paul VI, and again in 1983 with the promulgation of an Apostolic

Consitution by John Paul II. At no time was there any attempt to undermine the seriousness of the judgments rendered. Such seriousness has been the norm in the Congregation for the Causes of Saints since the processes were regulated in the 17th century.

In this particular cause — Monsignor Escrivá's — there were no dispensations from established procedures. In the Madrid process which I directed, the witnesses were questioned with the utmost care, in strict adherence to the exhaustive questionnaire which had been forwarded us by the Congregation. Moreover, I was joined, at various stages, by up to four auxiliary judges, two promoters of justice and four clerk-notaries. All of these men were very upright priests and highly competent. We held 600 sessions, which is more than usual.

The evidence was collected without haste in the Roman fact-finding process as well. When the results of the study went to the Congregation all was once more done meticulously, completing all the usual milestones, and again without undue haste. The short time which lapsed between the declaration on the heroic virtues of this Servant of God and the beatification decision was due to the fact that, immediately after the former declaration was made, a miracle attributed to his intercession was presented since the evidence concerning the cure had already been gathered in another process.

The ecclesial importance of the Founder of Opus Dei

Q. Now that the beatification of Monsignor Escrivá is scheduled for 17 May, what would you, who are familiar with him and his teaching, like to single out about his life?

A. I would dare say that he is a very distinguished figure, a colossus of the Church in the 20th century, an untiring apostle and the precursor *par excellence* of the universal call to holiness, a goal proposed to everyone by Vatican Council II.

Certainly he is not the 'inventor' of this teaching. This teaching stems from Christ himself. Nor is he the only person to recall it. As far back as the 5th century St Augustine preached that 'this precept — "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself" — does not refer only to virgins, to the exclusion of married people, or to widows excluding those who live in the married state; or only to monks and celibates or clerics, to the exclusion of lay people. The whole Church, the entire Mystical

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Body and each of its members, in keeping with their proper and specific function, should follow Christ.'

Also St Francis de Sales in the 17th century and other saints at different times in the history of the Church have written along the same lines. But the Founder of Opus Dei was the first who proposed it as a fundamental and central theme of his apostolate and teaching, developed it in his numerous writings, and preached this message to all and sundry.

During his catechetical trips around Europe and South America he emphasised that the life of a Christian should not be weak, resigned, tepid or plagued with repeated falls, but rather enthusiastic, fervent, cheerful, lively and filled with a head-over-heels love of Christ. And this for all classes of Christian faithful. Everyone, absolutely everyone, should aspire and strive (he insisted) to follow Christ closely, to be saints. Monsignor Escrivá preached this, leading from the front with his example as a man in love with God and faithful to the Church.

For the greater good of the Church

Q. What interest does his canonization have for the Church at large?

A. The only interest of those who took part in the cause of Monsignor Escrivá was the glory of God and the good of souls, that is to say, the very goals of the Church itself. I do not think it an exaggeration to say that the Venerable Josemaría, through the institution he founded, through his exemplary life and through his writings, has injected into the People of God of the 20th century a strong dose of vitality and a desire for holiness. I am sure that his approaching beatification will ensure, with God's help, the continued growth of this positive influence.

Fr Raphael Pérez, O.S.A. is a renowned expert in the process of beatification and canonization. For ten years he was the Promotor-General of the Faith —commonly called the devil's advocate. In his own words: 'I prefer to speak of "God's advocate" since the objections I formulate provide credibility and guarantees to the causes rather than place obstacles in the way of holy men and women being raised to the altar.' Fr Pérez now lives and works in Saragossa, Spain.