

# Church should probe canonization process

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

Canonization is the act of adding a person's name to the "list" of officially recognized saints. ("List" is one of the meanings of the word "canon.")

In the early centuries of the church, the saints were heroic Christians around whom a popular cult had developed following their deaths.

The first historically attested canonization was that of Ulrich of Augsburg by Pope John XV in 993. Almost two centuries later, in a letter to the King of Sweden, Pope Alexander III insisted that no one should be venerated as a saint without the authority of the Church of Rome.

When this portion of Alexander III's letter was incorporated into the Decretals of Pope Gregory IX in 1234, the papal mandate became part of the canon law of the church.

Since then, placing a name on the list of saints has required a lengthy and complex

process, involving political as well as theological considerations.

Countries and ethnic groups have regarded it as a matter of pride and honor to have one of their own canonized. The same has been true of religious orders and congregations.

That is why they have been willing to spend enormous amounts of money, time and effort to elevate one of their own to sainthood.

The overwhelming majority of saints are never officially recognized. Their sanctity was either unknown outside their own circle of family and friends, or they had no organized religious or governmental force willing to back their candidacy.

That's the major reason why so few married lay people have been canonized. They had no religious order or prominent members of state to promote their cause. (That's the "politics of canonization.")

A second major reason why so few married lay people have been canonized is that

those who have had the knowledge and the power to promote such causes have traditionally regarded the married state as inferior to that of the celibate clergy and religious. (That's the "theology of canonization.")

To be a lay person is already to be living a less-than-ideal Christian life (the "ideal" being that of a pure contemplative). To be a married lay person is even less ideal, since, as the pre-Vatican II textbooks put it, marriage is simply "a lawful remedy for concupiscence." It's for the spiritually weak.

Occasionally, politics and theology are merged in the canonization process.

For example, those who would like to have Pope John XXIII canonized encounter the stern opposition of others who thought him too liberal and who regard his calling of the Second Vatican Council as a disastrous mistake.

"You can't have John XXIII unless you give us Pius XII," they reply, in effect.

## ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

But there are those among John XXIII's supporters who balk at the thought of canonizing Pius XII, an aloof patrician whose pontificate embodied for them the bad old days of pre-conciliar Catholicism.

In other words, the personal Christian witness of Pius XII and of John XXIII are less important than what each one symbolizes and represents ecclesiastically and theologically.

Nowhere is the merging of politics and theology in the canonization process more clearly evident than in the recent controversy over Queen Isabella of Spain.

A behind-the-scenes effort has been made to elevate Isabella to sainthood even though she clearly doesn't measure up to the standards for canonization.

In 1492, the year Columbus discovered America, Queen Isabella signed an edict forcing Jews to convert or be expelled from Spain. It was also Queen Isabella who established the Spanish Inquisition, which tortured and exiled Jews and Muslims who pretended to be Catholic (out of fear for their lives), but who secretly practiced their own faith.

Furthermore, little evidence exists showing that Isabella enjoyed a reputation for holiness and there are no miracles attributed to her intercession.

With more than 1,200 candidates for canonization now awaiting official action, why was Isabella, with such dubious credentials, being advanced to the head of the line?

According to an op-ed piece in *The New York Times* (April 6) by Kenneth L. Woodward, religion editor for *Newsweek* and author of *Making Saints*, Isabella's cause is being promoted by an international committee of clergy and laymen representing an ultra-conservative party within the church: the head of Opus Dei and two U.S. cardinals with close links to Opus Dei, Bernard Law of Boston and John Carberry of St. Louis (retired).

"What this suggests," Woodward writes, "is that the queen's cause is fueled less by popular piety than by an ideological faction for whom she represents the fusion of Roman Catholic faith with the political order."

When more moderate forces in the church discovered the ploy, they managed to contain it. But Woodward is not satisfied. "Rome needs to explain how so questionable a candidate has come so close to becoming a saint."

We can hope that the blowup over Queen Isabella will serve to correct the situation, but one shouldn't count on it.

# Mary's trust sustained her in sorrowful moments

By Cindy Bassett  
Courier columnist

"What did you say, Mary?" John asked softly to the woman who stood beside him at the foot of the cross. Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"It is not right that a mother should survive her son," she repeated. "I never should have said 'yes' and then none of this would be happening now," Mary said, never once taking her eyes from Jesus. "And yet..." her voice trailed off and this time John did not press her to repeat herself.

Dear God, why is this happening? He had so many followers and now most have deserted him. How can your son be dying on a cross with such shame while I stand here and do nothing to relieve his suffering? It all began so long ago when I said "yes" to be his mother.

"Mary, you are greatly blessed! Do not be afraid for the Lord has chosen you to be the mother of the Messiah," the angel had said.

"I am not worthy. And I don't understand how this can be. I am not married," Mary had replied.

"If you say 'yes,'" the angel had continued, "you will have a Son, Jesus. He

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will be a great ruler and his kingdom will never end!"

Dear God, how can this be happening now? His kingdom was not supposed to end. This pain in my heart is overwhelming and too much to bear. Is that what the prophet Simeon meant when I saw him at the temple with Jesus just after he was born?

"Joseph, why is that old man staring at us so?" I told my husband that day. In accordance with the law, we had gone there with Jesus to present him to God.

"It is the one promised by God!" Simeon had cried as he rushed forward and took Jesus into his arms. "I can die in peace now! For I have seen the Messiah!"

Just before Simeon had given Jesus back to me, he had blessed us all. Then looking directly at me, he had uttered the strangest words: "This child will cause people to either rise or fall. For though many will accept him, others will reject him. And

your own heart, dear woman, will be filled with so much sorrow, it will be as though a sword has pierced through it."

God, my heart was pierced today. It is not right for a mother to witness the pain and degradation of her own son. When the soldier thrust his sword into Jesus' side, he did it to me, too.

"John, I think Jesus is trying to say something," Mary said, her thoughts coming back to the present.

"What is it, Jesus?" John cried. "John, take care of her, she is your mother now," Jesus said. "Mother, he is your son."

When at last the ordeal was over, Mary held her son one last time before Joseph of Arimathea when to Pilate and received permission to place the body in his own tomb.

Just before they took Jesus from her, she uttered one last prayer: "God, I don't understand any of this, but I am your servant and I will continue to trust you."

On Sunday, when she came with the other women to the tomb to anoint the dead body of Jesus, Mary knew with certainty why she had said "yes" to be his mother. Because of Mary's "yes," God is with us today.

She was part of the small group of followers who continued the kingdom that her son had begun. And she is the symbolic mother of us all.

Scripture reference: Luke 1:26-38; 2:22-35; John 19:25-27.

Meditation: Because of Mary, God is with us.

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