

## Who gets canonized and why?

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

The feast of All Saints, celebrated on Nov. 1, provides an annual reminder that there are many more saints in heaven than the relatively few who have been officially recognized by the church.

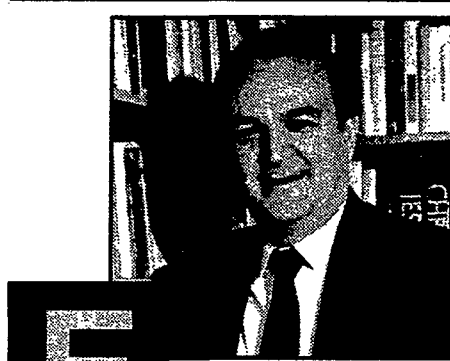
For every St. Francis of Assisi or St. Rose of Lima there are thousands of unknown and long-forgotten mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts and uncles, cousins, friends, neighbors, co-workers and other individuals who lived holy lives that were consistent with the values of Jesus Christ's Gospel.

Although each is in eternal glory, none of their names is attached to a liturgical feast, a parish church, a pious society, or any other ecclesiastical institution. The catch-all feast that we celebrate next week is all the recognition they're ever going to receive from the church.

Someone might interject at this point, "What's the difference? Isn't the important thing that they're in heaven, that God has recognized their sanctity, and that they have been given their eternal reward?"

Not quite.

Catholicism is a sacramental tradition. Catholics believe that the God whom we cannot see is made visible to us through other people, and uniquely through the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of faith.



### ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Catholics believe that this manner of revelation is absolutely necessary for us because God is spiritual and we are material, albeit with a spiritual principle we call the soul.

There is no possibility of communion between God and ourselves unless God somehow reaches us at our level. God has done so in Jesus Christ. The humanity of Christ provides the bridge between God and us.

Given our human limitations and the distance of centuries, however, it isn't possible for us to experience the historical Jesus in the flesh. He has already died, been raised and exalted, and now sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven.

The risen and exalted Christ who remains the great sacrament of God,

is now present to us through a kind of chain of sacramental being: the church, the seven sacraments, other people.

Even in the first century, however, very few of Jesus' contemporaries actually saw him in the flesh, much less knew him personally. Indeed, the only direct encounter the great St. Paul had of the Lord was his dramatic conversion experience on the road to Damascus.

After Paul fell to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts of the Apostles 22:7).

Although Paul (called "Saul" before his conversion) had never seen the Lord in the flesh, the voice was telling him that he had already encountered Christ sacramentally, through the Lord's presence in his disciples — the ones whom Paul had been persecuting.

It is in this sacramental context that we should read Paul's classic injunction to the Christian community at Corinth: "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1).

Those of us who have never seen Jesus in the flesh need some models or exemplars of Christ with whom to identify and through whom to experience Christ sacramentally.

Saints, such as Paul, fulfill that sacramental function.

The point here is that the church does not canonize saints simply to honor them or what is even farther from the mark to honor their religious

orders.

The church makes saints in order to provide a steady, ever renewable stream of exemplars, or sacraments, of Christ, lest our following of Christ be reduced to some kind of abstract intellectual exercise.

Saints help us understand what the Gospel demands of us as disciples of Christ. Saints also help us understand the church's nature and purpose.

If the church only canonized priests and women religious, for example, it would be teaching a seriously faulty message: namely, that the ideal Christian is celibate, unlike the 95 percent who marry and raise families.

Unfortunately, the great majority of those whom the church has canonized — and continues to canonize — are priests and women religious.

There is at least one practical reason for this, over and above the theological bias it reflects: the canonization process is costly. Apart from religious orders, large dioceses and well-endowed ecclesiastical groups, few can afford to promote the cause of an individual who may have edified a neighborhood, a city, or a region.

There is a solution to this, however. The church could return to the practice that was in force for the first thousand years of its existence. It could allow saints once again to be proclaimed spontaneously by local communities and their cults to develop naturally out of the people's devotional life.

In the meantime, the feast of All Saints will have to do.

## Love of neighbor depends on God's love

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

**Sunday's Readings:** (R3) Mark 12:28-34; (R1) Deuteronomy 6:2-6; (R2) Hebrews 7:23-28.

In Judaism there are two tendencies: one to multiply laws, and the other to codify them in a sentence or two. A proselyte once asked the famous rabbi Hillel to instruct him in the whole law while standing on one leg.

Hillel said, "What you hate for yourself do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole law. The rest is commentary. Go and learn."

When Jesus came, He perfected Hillel's statement. Hillel had said, "Do not do to your neighbor what you hate done to yourself." Jesus used a positive construction instead of the negative one: "Love your neighbor." Then, too, for Hillel and the Jews "neighbor" meant fellow-Jews. Jesus broadened the term to mean all men.

But better still, Jesus appended this law of love of neighbor to love of God. "Hear, O Israel! ... you shall love the Lord your God ..." The Hebrew word for "hear" is *shema*. The *Shema* is recited by Jews twice daily in their synagogue services. No one before Jesus had ever linked the love of God and



### A WORD FOR SUNDAY

the love of neighbor together.

Why do you think there are Ten Commandments and not eight, seven or five? The Jews wished to be able to count the basic laws on which rested their religious and social institutions on their 10 fingers. Five of the Ten Commandments protect the rights of God; five protect the rights of man. And when hands are folded in prayer, it symbolizes that the rights of God and rights of man go hand in hand.

The love of neighbor depends on

the love of God, as the earth's fertility does on the rain. If one were able to prevent rain from falling upon the earth on the pretext of making the earth more fertile, he would only create a desert. Likewise, those who would serve man and neglect to serve the Lord, would soon see their love of neighbor withering away.

St. Vincent de Paul said that it was not the poor who brought him to God, but the love of God that brought him to the poor.

And what are some of the signs that I love God?

First, I would like to talk with Him in prayer — morning, night and in time of temptation. I would share with Him my problems, hurts and secrets.

Secondly, I would like to hear from Him — a letter, at least. Therefore I would read the Scriptures faithfully each day, for when I read the Scriptures He speaks to me.

Thirdly, I would not mind doing things that He wants me to do, like loving and serving my neighbor for His sake. The disposition of the head to reason can make the philosopher, but the disposition of the heart to love can make the Christian.

And what are the signs of loving my neighbor?

Be pleasant. Be kind. Be loving. As a Broadway musical of the 1950s put it: "A song is not a song until you sing it; A bell is not a bell until you ring it; Love wasn't put in the heart to stay; For love isn't love until you give it away."

A dentist in Colorado moved into a new house and soon discovered that some unruly teenagers lived in the neighborhood. They littered his yard, rode their bicycles through it, and made life miserable for him. He found it a little difficult to "love thy neighbor." "To love the world to me's no chore; My big trouble's the person next door."

One night the group's ringleader had a terrible toothache and his mother asked the dentist to look at it. The dentist offered to extract the tooth, but the boy refused because they had no money to pay the bill. The dentist persuaded him to let him do it. The dentist sent no bill and forgot about the incident.

Later, he returned from a a month-long vacation to find that his lawn had been well cared for by the teenager. When the dentist tried to pay him, he refused the money commenting shyly, "A tooth for a tooth."

Love conquers all.

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