

COLUMNISTS

A history of the sainthood process

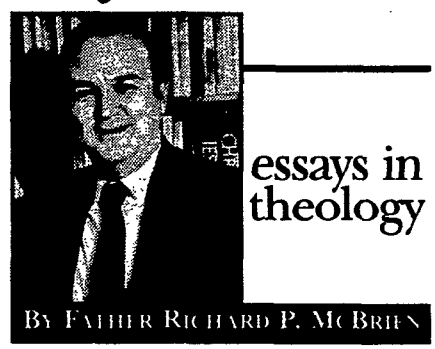
For most of the first Christian millennium, saints were proclaimed as such by the local communities in which they lived and died. If they were martyrs, they achieved immediate saintly status.

Martyrs' graves and relics were given special honor. The Eucharist was celebrated over the burial site on the feast day, the anniversary of their death. Their names were added to a list of martyrs, a martyrology, and were read to the community when it gathered for worship.

Liturgical calendars were eventually developed containing the names, dates of death and burial places of martyrs. Local churches, monasteries, regions and eventually whole nations kept their own calendars, which were often exchanged with one another. Not until the 17th century was a universal calendar established for the church in the West.

By the fifth century, the title of "saint" was extended to "white martyrs," who suffered, but were not killed, for the faith. Thereafter, bishops became more involved in the saint-making process.

As the cult of certain individuals grew, the bishop required written accounts (and sometimes eyewitness testimony) of their lives and miracles. These accounts were known as *vitae* (lives), and were read out in the bishop's presence. The



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

common use of "legend" with reference to the biographies of the saints is derived from the Latin *legenda* (to be read), used in connection with this public reading.

Once the bishop or a regional synod approved the deceased person's cult, the saint's body was exhumed and transferred to a resting place under an altar in a nearby church, a process known as "translation." It was tantamount to today's act of canonization. The new saint was assigned a feast day (almost always the day of death, or entrance into eternal glory), and his or her name was added to the local liturgical calendar.

Around 1170 Pope Alexander III sent a letter to King Canute of Sweden chastising a Swedish bishop for tolerating the cult of a monk who had been killed in a drunken brawl, but to whom miracles

had been attributed. The pope insisted that thereafter his approval would be required for cults. In 1234 Pope Gregory IX formally incorporated this ruling into the laws of the Western church.

In the following century, when the papacy was situated in Avignon, France, more detailed procedures were established. An official procurator was assigned to petition the pope, on behalf of a local group of Christians. The pope was represented in this process by a curial official known as the Devil's Advocate, whose job it was to uncover reasons to deny the petition.

Other requirements were added, including the necessity of formal letters of petition from bishops and temporal rulers. As a result, the number of canonizations declined sharply, at least for a time. Many holy persons, whose cult was popular in particular locales and who would previously have been canonized, were now simply designated as "blessed."

Pope Sixtus V created the Congregation of Rites in 1588 to manage the process of canonization and to authenticate relics. In 1634 Pope Urban VIII formally introduced the distinction between beatification and canonization, establishing detailed procedures for both. From this time on, no one could be venerated

publicly without first being beatified or canonized by a pope. The only exceptions were those individuals who had been recognized as saints "from time immemorial," that is, those who lived in the first Christian millennium, long before the new procedures were put in place.

These rules were incorporated into the 1917 Code of Canon Law and were revised by Pope John Paul II in 1983. Today the process begins at the local level, but the pope retains the final authority.

In the past, no cause for canonization could be initiated until 50 years after a candidate's death. Now it is only five. Four miracles were required before 1983 (two for beatification, and two for canonization), but John Paul II reduced the number to two: one for beatification and one for canonization. Only one miracle is required in the case of a martyr.

Newsweek's religion editor, Kenneth Woodward, has written a lively study of the whole process, *Making Saints* (Simon & Schuster, 1990), now in paperback. A chapter of my new book, *Lives of the Saints* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), traces the history, process and politics of canonization.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

It takes effort to enter 'narrow door' of salvation

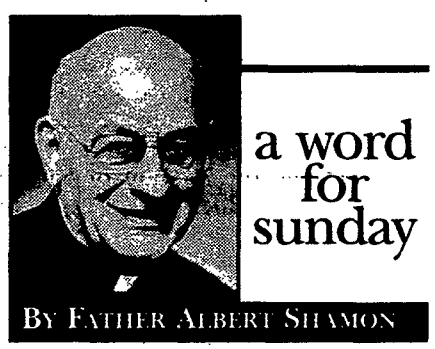
21st Sunday of the Year (Aug. 26): (R3) Luke 13:22-30; (R1) Isaiah 66:18-21; (R2) Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13.

"Lord, are they few in number who are to be saved?" The man was not talking about himself. He was probably a Jew and therefore felt no doubt about his salvation. Very likely, what he was talking about were the Gentiles. Would any of them be saved? A few, perhaps?

Jesus' answer was perhaps a shocker: "Try to come in through the narrow door." Jesus was saying that entry into the kingdom can never be automatic. It does not depend on who one is, nor on one's nationality. Rather, it is the result and the reward of a struggle, of what one does. "Try to come in," Jesus said.

The Greek word for "try to" is *agonizethe*, "to agonize, struggle, strive." It is easy to think that, once we have become members of the church, we've reached our goal, and that we can sit back and take it easy. There is no such finality to the Christian life. We can never say, "I've arrived now. I shall take my rest," like the rich fool in the Gospel (Luke 12:16-21).

The devil once said to St. Don Bosco, "Take it easy. You work too hard." The saint answered, "I'll rest when you do." We can never rest in the Christian life



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

any more than we can stop eating. On the physical level, food and drink are a daily necessity. On the spiritual level, daily prayer and the sacraments, too, are a necessity. If a person rowing against a strong current stopped rowing, he'd be swept backwards. To stop striving is to miss the narrow door and salvation.

So Jesus prophesied that there would be a reversal of roles in the judgment. "Some who are last will be first and some who are first will be last." Jesus was warning the Jews that even though they were first called, they could be last, whereas the Gentiles, last called, could be first.

St. Augustine said that in the judgment there would be three surprises. First, we shall see people there who we thought would never make it. Secondly,

we won't see people there who we thought would certainly be there. And finally, the third surprise would be to find ourselves there.

There is a story of a woman who had everything of this world's goods: she was rich, prominent, a socialite. She died and went to heaven. An angel was sent to conduct her to her heavenly home. They passed many lovely mansions and each time the lady thought that each must be the one allotted to her. They came to the suburbs and outskirts of heaven where the houses were smaller. Still the angel led her on till they arrived at a house which was little more than hut.

"That's your house," said the angel. "I'm sorry, but that is all we could build for you with the materials you sent up."

Many are so busy making it in this world that they have little time left for making it in the world to come.

Shakespeare put it beautifully in his *Merchant of Venice* (Act 2, Scene 9):

O, that estates, degrees and offices
Were not deriv'd corruptly! And
that clear honor
Were purchas'd by the merit of
the wearer!
How many then should cover that

stand bare!
How many be commanded that
command!
Ask God for the grace to put first
things first so as not to be last in the
Kingdom of God.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

- Monday, August 27**
1 Thessalonians 1:1-5, 8B-10; Psalms 149:1-6, 9; Matthew 23:13-22
- Tuesday, August 28**
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Psalms 139:1-3, 4-6; Matthew 23:23-26
- Wednesday, August 29**
1 Thessalonians 2:9-13; Psalms 139:7-12; Mark 6:17-29
- Thursday, August 30**
1 Thessalonians 3:7-13; Psalms 90:3-4, 12-14, 17; Matthew 24:42-51
- Friday, August 31**
1 Thessalonians 4:1-8; Psalms 97:1-2, 5-6, 10-12; Matthew 25:1-13
- Saturday, September 1**
1 Thessalonians 4:9-11; Psalms 98:1, 7-9; Matthew 25:14-30

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