

With beatification of John Paul II, what makes a 'fast-track' saint?

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 1, 2011



Mourners hold banners that read "sainthood now" during the funeral Mass for Pope John Paul II in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican April 9, 2005. (CNS photo/Reuters)

ANALYSIS

When John Paul II is declared "Blessed" on May 1, it will represent the fastest beatification of modern times, narrowly surpassing Mother Teresa. Both, of course, were global celebrities whose deaths prompted grass-roots campaigns for immediate sainthood, and they remain the only two recent cases in which the normal waiting period to launch a cause was set aside.

In light of the speed with which John Paul's beatification has unfolded, some wonder why the wheels are taking longer to grind for other notable would-be saints: Catholic Worker founder Dorothy Day, for instance, or Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, or the wartime pontiff Pius XII.

In effect, it raises the question: What makes a "fast-track" saint?

In 1983, John Paul overhauled the sainthood process to make it quicker, cheaper and less adversarial, in part because he wanted to lift up contemporary models of holiness. The result is well-known: John Paul presided over more beatifications (1,338) and canonizations (482) than all previous popes combined.

Since those reforms, at least 20 beatifications, the final step before sainthood, might be defined as "fast-track," occurring within roughly 30 years after the person's death. This privileged set includes a mix of the famous (Padre Pio and Opus Dei founder Josemaría Escrivá) and the relatively obscure (Anuarite Nengapeta, a Congolese martyr, and Chiara Badano, a lay member of Focolare). They include men and women, clergy and laity, from both the developing world and the developed.

Aside from a reputation for personal holiness and miracle reports, there are five traits most of these fast-track cases share.

First, most have an organization behind them fully committed to the cause, with both the resources and the political savvy to move the ball.

For another story on the late pope's progress toward sainthood, see: [Opus Dei, questions posed as John Paul II's beatification](#) [E].s, and they invested significant resources in the cause of their founder. An Opus Dei spokesperson estimated that the total cost of seeing Escrivá declared a saint, including staging two massive ceremonies in Rome -- beatification in 1992 and canonization in 2002 -- was roughly \$1 million.

That factor alone helps explain why other causes may languish. In the case of Dorothy Day, for example, there's ambivalence in Catholic Worker circles. Some question whether Day would have wanted to be made a saint, and others wonder if the resources would be better invested serving the poor.

Second, several of the fast-track cases involve a "first," usually to recognize either a specific geographical region or an underrepresented constituency.

Italian laywoman Maria Corsini was beatified in 2001, just 35 years after her death, along with her husband Luigi Beltrame Quattrocchi, the first married couple to be declared "blessed." Nicaraguan Salesian Sr. María Romero Meneses was beatified in 2002, 25 years after her death, as the first blessed from Central America.

It's also striking that of the 20 fast-track cases, 12 have been women. That's arguably related to an effort by officialdom to counter perceptions that the Catholic church is hostile to women.

Third, there's sometimes a political or cultural issue symbolized by these candidates that lends a perceived sense of urgency.

For instance, Italian laywoman Gianna Beretta Molla was beatified in 1994, thirty-two years after she died in 1962. (Molla was canonized in 2004). She's famous for having refused both an abortion and a hysterectomy that would result in the death of her unborn child.

In other cases, the perceived issue may be internal to the church. María de la Purísima, a Spanish Sister of the Cross, was beatified in 2010, just 12 years after her death in 1998. Vatican officials hailed her as a model of preserving the traditions of religious life in a period of "ideological turmoil" following the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

The linkage between a candidate and an issue also can help explain why things slow down. Caution surrounding Pius XII, for example, is obviously related to tensions in Catholic/Jewish relations.

Fourth, causes sometimes make the fast track because the sitting pope feels a personal investment.

For instance, two Polish priests moved through the process swiftly under John Paul: Jerzy Popieluszko, a Solidarity leader murdered by the Polish communists, and Michal Sopocho, the confessor of St. Faustina Kowalska, a mystic and founder of the Divine Mercy devotion, to which John Paul had a strong personal commitment. (The date for John Paul's beatification ceremony, May 1, has been observed since 2000 as "Divine Mercy Sunday.")

Fifth, fast-track cases generally enjoy overwhelming hierarchical support, both from the bishops of the region and in Rome.

Badano, beatified just 20 years after her death in 1990, is the first Focolare "blessed." The movement is admired for its spirituality of unity and its ecumenical and interfaith efforts, not to mention its loyalty to the bishops and to the pope.

The criterion of hierarchical support also may help explain why Romero's cause isn't moving with the same speed. Because of his association with liberation theology, Romero was a polarizing figure among his fellow Latin American bishops, some of whom are still on the scene.

All five criteria are present in droves for John Paul, which may augur a very brief interval before he's formally declared a saint. Padre Pio offers a term of comparison -- just three years passed between beatification in 1999 and canonization in 2002.

To some extent, how quickly things move may depend on whether the issue associated with John Paul's cause remains his impact on the world and his personal charisma, or whether his mixed legacy on the sexual abuse crisis looms larger as time goes on.

Some have argued that the study of John Paul's life and legacy as part of the sainthood process did not give sufficient weight to his handling of the sexual abuse crisis, such as the case of the late founder of the Legionaries of Christ, Mexican Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado. A longtime favorite during John Paul's papacy, Maciel was later disgraced as the Legionaries acknowledged he was guilty of various forms of sexual misconduct.

The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, known as SNAP, issued a statement asserting that the hierarchy is "rubbing more salt into the wounds" of victims with a "hasty drive to confer sainthood" on John Paul.

In the meantime, two footnotes:

- John Paul's process doesn't even come close to being the fastest on record. That distinction belongs to St. Anthony of Padua, who died in June 1231 and was canonized less than a year later by Pope Gregory IX. Anthony even beat out his master, St. Francis of Assisi, canonized 18 months after his death in October 1226.
- Despite perceptions that Pope Benedict XVI has slowed down the saint-making factory, he's actually churning out new "blesseds" at a more rapid clip. John Paul approved 1,338 beatifications over 26 years, an average of 51 a year; Benedict has signed off on 789 beatifications, or 131 a year.

Yet Benedict is not canonizing people with the same frenzy. John Paul's 482 canonizations work out to more than 18 a year, while Benedict's 34 so far represent an annual average just under seven.

That discrepancy could suggest that even John Paul may have to cool his heels, at least a bit, before he's formally fitted with a halo.

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