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Beatification Q&A #5: Is it the pope or the papacy?

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ROME -- Whenever a pope is beatified or canonized, inevitably people wonder if the act amounts to an endorsement of his papacy. More cynically, there's a tendency to suspect that what's really going on is an effort to nail down a pope's legacy -- or, perhaps, to apply a sort of *ex post facto* spin to it.

When Pope John XXIII was beatified in 2000 alongside the 19th century Pope Pius IX, critics saw it as an attempt to domesticate the legacy of Pope John and, by extension, the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Likewise, the fact that John Paul II is being beatified so quickly has led to speculation that the act is a way of cementing his policies and whitewashing his record -- especially given that the people in charge are mostly former John Paul aides and protégés.

Yesterday, for instance, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, the main advocacy group in the United States for victims of clerical abuse, issued a statement referring to the beatification as a "callous PR juggernaut."

Politics can't help but color the way people think about sainthood for popes. Liberals want to see John XXIII "fast-tracked," while conservatives complain about a slow-down on the cause of Pius XII. In each case, the reactions often have more to do with what those papacies symbolize than with the pope himself.

So, here's the question: Does the beatification of Pope John Paul II also imply a ratification of John Paul's papacy?

Officially, the answer is "yes and no." To qualify for sainthood, a pope needs to have been righteous while in office, but not necessarily right.

When Pius IX was beatified, for instance, officials stressed that it was not an endorsement of his stance on

the "Roman question," meaning his refusal to acknowledge the end of the papacy as a temporal monarchy, or his Jewish policy ? which famously included herding the Jews of Rome back into their ghetto after a brief emancipation, and refusing to return a Jewish child to his parents after he had been secretly baptized.

At the time, Monsignor Carlos Liberati, the Vatican official responsible for the cause of Pius IX, insisted that one cannot judge Pius by the standards of today. In particular, Liberati said the beatification did not imply a rollback on subsequent improvements in Catholic/Jewish relations. Instead, it meant that Pius IX acted with integrity by the standards of his day ? and that, not his concrete policy decisions, was the basis for the beatification.

Certainly, no one ever suggested that a successful papacy is a requirement for sainthood.

Were that the standard, for instance, it would be hard to explain the canonization of Pope Celestine V, a pious Benedictine monk and ascetic elected to the papacy reluctantly in 1294. He resigned after just five months, citing "the deficiencies of his own physical strength, his ignorance, the perverseness of the people, [and] his longing for the tranquility of his former life." Famously, Dante consigned Celestine to Hell for his "great refusal."

Despite all that, Pope Celestine V was canonized in 1313.

At one level, therefore, the answer would be that John Paul's beatification is not the same thing as declaring every element of his papacy beyond reproach.

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Yet at the same time, the Vatican acknowledges that you can't simply decouple a pope from his papacy. In fact, the official case for beatifying John Paul II leans heavily upon various aspects of his almost 27 years on the throne of Peter.

When a decree of beatification for John Paul II in January by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, the text cited several elements of John Paul's papacy as proof of his worthiness, beyond his prayerfulness and deep Marian spirituality:

?"His "peace offensive" in an effort to head off the Iraq war

?"His celebration of the Great Jubilee in 2000

?"His attention to youth and sponsorship of World Youth Day

?"His promotion of the Divine Mercy devotion of Polish St. Faustina Kowalska

In each case, however, the pitch wasn't that these were necessarily the best policy choices available, and certainly not that they were all unqualified successes ? after all, John Paul II did not stop the war in Iraq in 2003.

Instead, it was that John Paul's motives reflected personal integrity and commendable aims. In the case of Iraq, for instance, the decree asserted that John Paul acted not only "in order to save people's lives, but also to bring to a halt the growth of hatred and of the insane ideas about civilization clashes."

Thus, in response to the question as to whether the beatification of a pope also implies the beatification of a papacy, the official answer is "it depends." If one means that the pope did everything right, the answer is no; if it means that the pope acted on the basis of what the church traditionally calls "heroic virtue,"

regardless of outcomes or even the practical wisdom of his judgment, then the answer is ?yes.?

Bottom line: The papacy is obviously relevant, but what?s being beatified is nevertheless a man, not an administration.

Whether that answer will satisfy either the most ardent admirers of John Paul II, or his most determined critics, is of course another question.

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