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The Two New Pope-Saints

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Distinctly Catholic

It tells us something, and something hopeful I think, about human nature that Pope Francis' decision to canonize both Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II has captured the imagination of even our secular media. Amidst all the banality of our modern consumer culture, there is still something attractive, something that fascinates, about the idea of sanctity.

That said, much of the commentary since the announcement of the canonizations on Friday has betrayed gross misunderstandings about sanctity. Let's start with the most obvious: Popes do not make saints. God makes saints. The Church can only recognize what God has already accomplished. The same is true of the sacraments. I think we all prefer to go to a Mass at which the music is congenial to our ears, at which the sermon stirs our minds, and the liturgical style, simple or elaborate, helps to animate within our hearts a desire to deepen our relationship with the divine. But, even at a Mass with no or bad music, even when the sermon stinks, even when we are distracted by the liturgy instead of focused by it, God still comes down upon the altar and makes Himself present in the Eucharist, the Word of God proclaimed in the readings is still authoritative revelation, and the whole Church, across the world and across the centuries, is gathered in prayer and in a mysterious way present, even if the liturgy is dull.

Secondly, I am not much of a fan of this idea of canonizing pontiffs. There is something a little self-congratulatory about the process, no? More importantly, it invites the kind of commentary which we have seen that equates a decree of canonization with some kind of historical verdict on the quality of the pope-saint's papacy. In this morning's Washington Post, E.J. Dionne makes many fine points but he, too, falls into this trap, noting that Pope John Paul II was a "world-historical figure." Indeed, he was. And, equally indeed, the Little Flower was not a "world-historical figure" yet she has become one of modernity's

favorite saints. She played no role in bringing down communism. She did not visit the countries of the world. She did not meet with the statesmen and cultural leaders of the day. Yet, her sanctity blazes.

I do not doubt that Pope John Paul II was a saint. I can remember seeing him for the first time in person, on a rainy night on Boston Common in 1979? it had rained all day it seemed and we had gotten to the Common first thing in the morning to secure a good spot. The scene was all spectacle but once or twice in the Mass, Pope John Paul II seemed utterly lost in prayer. He had the ability to commune with God with apparently complete indifference to all the eyes that were looking at him, all the minutanti who were scurrying around, all the glare of the television lights. Then, of course, there was his long slow suffering, and suffering is always a mark of sanctity if it is embraced as an opportunity to find grace. His physical decline was a disaster for the Church?s governance and blessings upon Pope Benedict XVI for sparing the Church another such episode. But, who can doubt that in his sufferings, John Paul II found himself drawn ever more deeply into the mystery of the Cross. Similarly, we know that Pope John Paul II was a very bad judge of character, yet I do not think being a good judge of character is necessarily a mark of sanctity. Quite the contrary. I am glad Pope John Paul II is being raised to the dignity of the altar, but that fact does not vindicate, nor condemn, his tenure as pope.

Pope John XXIII died when I was a little more than one year old so I have no personal memories of him. But, I have read enough to know that he was not exactly the caricature of a liberal churchmen that many make him out to be. Yes, he took on and called out the ?prophets of doom? and he opened the doors of the Church to the modern world. Although he personally loved the baroque liturgical traditions that surrounded the papacy, he began the process of demystifying the office, telling the editors of L?Osservatore Romano shortly after his election to stop writing, ?From the august lips of the sovereign pontiff?? and, instead, adopt a simple style, e.g., ?The pope said??. But, there can be no doubt that John XXIII did not invite the Church to adopt, willy-nilly, the ways of the modern world, but to engage the modern world. Always, for John XXIII, Christ was the measure.

I am very glad that Pope Francis dispensed with the requirement of a second miracle before proceeding with the canonization of Pope John XXIII. A dear friend reminded me of these words of Professor Richard Gaillardetz in America magazine a few years back:

"As one example, consider the procedures for the canonization of saints. Vatican regulations require that for beatification one verified miracle be attributable to the ?servant of God?; for canonization two are required. In these rules, miracles are described as events attributed to the intercession of the servant of God and certified as inexplicable according to modern science. Without denying the possibility of such events, I wonder whether the emphasis on their scientifically inexplicable character risks giving the impression that God?s action in the world cannot be reconciled with a scientific account of the workings of our physical universe. Does this interventionist view of divine action invite accusations of superstition and caricatures of divine activity by those outside the community of faith? It is vital that our religious beliefs and practices affirm a fundamental compatibility between divine action and scientific accounts of our world.

It may be opportune to consider revised procedures that would focus less on the scientifically inexplicable and more on diverse testimony to the continuing influence and impact of the servant of God on those who remain on their earthly pilgrimage. Pope Benedict?s recent encyclical on hope makes effective use of the lives of select saints as moving embodiments of Christian hope. I suspect that it is this evangelical witness rather than the verification of miraculous interventions that the contemporary skeptic is more likely to find compelling."

I agree with this wholeheartedly, and not least because the greatest miracle I have witnessed was brought

to me not only through the intercession of the Blessed Mother, but through the means of modern medicine. When my parents were in a horrible car crash, and both were closer to death than to life, I prayed that the doctors could save them both but especially that my mother would live long enough for my father, who was driving the car, to abandon any guilt he would understandably feel. This required contradicting my mother's expressed wish to never be hooked up to machines, a wish she had expressed when contemplating a slow decline from her Parkinson's, not the situation that night in the emergency room. In the event, the doctors saved them both and my mother, although unable to speak again or to eat again, lived another six months by which time my father understood that he need feel no guilt over having had a stroke while behind the wheel of the car. I am sure that the Blessed Mother interceded that night in the emergency room and I am sure, too, that her help consisted of aiding the surgeons.

So, let us be thankful that Pope Francis has made this decision. I believe, as E.J. notes, that the decision is a call to the Church to realize that we need both those with John XXIII's gifts and those who possess John Paul II's gifts. More importantly, I hope the time between now and the formal canonization will be a time when the Church reflects on sanctity, what it means, whence it comes, and how desperately our world needs more it, how desperately we need more of it in our own lives. The Church needs great popes ? and it is ironic that Pope Paul VI, who may be the greatest pontiff of the twentieth century, comes between the two new santi ? but she needs great saints more. If the two categories overlap, fine. But very few of you reading this will ever be pope. We are all called to be saints, and it is the saints who renew the Church precisely by evidencing all the hope that comes from holiness, the depth of faith that sanctity invites, and the charity that must be the mark of a Christian.

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