

How can we know that the Saints are truly in Heaven?

By Graham Osborne

With the canonization of Mother Teresa, some question how the Catholic Church can actually know that she is a saint in heaven.

For starters, we need to be very clear - the Catholic Church does not "make" saints. Only God can do that. What the Church can do however, is declare with certainty those men and women that God reveals to it to be in His presence in Heaven. How does He reveal this? He uses miracles!

And I don't mean nice stories of good things happening to people. No, I mean rigorously documented, scientifically verified events that have no possible natural explanation -miracles in the truest sense.

So how can we be so certain a particular saint is in Heaven? Here is a *very simplified* overview of the Church's canonization process. The Church usually begins by examining the particular person's life, looking for things like holiness, unswerving faithfulness to the teachings of the Church, heroic virtue and more.

If things look favorable, the Church then looks for evidence of miracles through the intercession of this particular person, but that occurred **AFTER** the person's death. Why after? Because this is clear evidence they are indeed in the presence of God, bringing the intercessory prayers that have been directed to them and placing them before Jesus. But let us be sure, it is **NOT** the saint that performs the miracle, but God Himself who responds to this saintly intercession.

Many people are very aware of the first miracle accepted toward Saint John Paul II's canonization - the dramatic healing of a French nun suffering with Parkinson's disease, the same disease that essentially took the life of Saint John Paul II.

Blessed Mother Teresa's intercessory miracles have been no less remarkable. The final miracle involved a man with multiple brain abscesses. In terrible pain, then slipping into a coma, he was brought into surgery as his wife prayed for the intercession of Mother Theresa. When the surgeon came in to the operating room, he found the man awake and completely cured, with no possible medical explanation.

In most cases, persons declared saints by the Church have to have at least two scientifically and theologically verified miracles to their names [though there are exceptions]. This translates to literally hundreds of miracles, with St John Paul II alone canonizing some 464 saints!

But what does this process of determining whether a healing is miraculous or not look like? Almost invariably it involves medical healings that are usually total,

instantaneous and permanent. The Congregation for the Causes of Saints, a specially appointed body of the Church, then appoints a Medical Council [a board of world class medical experts] to examine all the evidence around each proposed miracle: medical records, lab tests, x-rays, interviews of all involved [whether Catholics, Muslims, atheists, etc.], and much more. The intent is to determine if there is any possible natural explanation to the healing. If their report determines no possible natural explanations, the case is then examined by a theological council, which will discern whether there is evidence of miraculous healing through prayer or not. The Pope will then have the final say on all of this.

But despite all these documented miracles, much disagreement surrounds the practice of praying [in this context, “praying” means “talking”] to saints. Some claim there is “*one mediator between God*” and man: Jesus [I **Timothy 2:5**]. But a Catholic would not disagree with this. Such a comment misunderstands the nature of intercessory prayer. Again, it is not the saint that answers the particular prayers addressed to him, he simply intercedes on our behalf, bringing these prayers to Jesus.

Most Christians wouldn't hesitate to ask someone on earth to pray for them. If this does not violate the one mediation of Jesus [and in fact, it actually shares in it, the way God intended], then neither does asking a saint in Heaven to pray for you. In **1 Tm 2:1-3**, St. Paul actually calls for intercessory prayer for *all* [and that would include the whole Body of Christ -those on earth, in Purgatory, and in Heaven] when he says that: "*supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings be offered for everyone . . . for this is good and pleasing to God our Savior*" (1 Tm 2:1, 3)

Some also contend that prayer to saints is a violation of the Old Testament command against necromancy. But necromancy involves communication with the shadowy underworld of the dead through mediums and wizards, particularly in Old Testament times. Praying to the saints is not praying to the dead, but to those who are fully alive and *in the presence of God Himself*. As Jesus clearly reminds us in **Mk 12:26-27** “*He is not the God of the dead but of the living. You are greatly misled*”. And at the Transfiguration in **Luke 9:29-31**, Jesus Himself talked with Moses and Elijah, both being long “dead”.

Finally, in **Rev 5:8-14**, we have a beautiful description of the prayers of the faithful being brought into Jesus' presence: ‘*The twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints...* [also **Rev 8:3-4**].

God has made it that we are “*surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses*” [**Heb 10:32-35**]. Let us never hesitate to ask for their help!