Fact Sheet: Sainthood and Father Junipero Serra

During his visit to the United States, Pope Francis is scheduled to canonize Father Junipero Serra, who would be America’s first Latino saint. This will mark the first time that a canonization ceremony has been held on American soil.

Who can become a saint? Anyone can become a saint, although the church doesn’t technically make saints. Instead, the church recognizes someone who is in Heaven and whose life is worth imitating.

How to Become a Saint: For centuries, the general public chose saints. During the 10th century, however, Pope John Paul XV created an official canonization process. The original version of the canonization process involved a “devil’s advocate,” meaning one who argued in opposition to the candidate in hopes of exposing any flaws. However, Pope John Paul II removed the role of “devil’s advocate” from the process in 1983. The current canonization process is as follows:

- Five years postmortem (unless waived by the Pope), a person can be considered for sainthood. Typically, that person’s priest will submit their case to their bishop. Once someone is officially accepted for sainthood consideration, they become known as a Servant of God.
- The person’s bishop then investigates their life, looking for evidence of heroic virtue in both their personal writings and in witnesses. If the Bishop finds the person to be worthy, they are then submitted to the Vatican’s Congregation for the Causes of Saints.
- The Congregation for the Causes of Saints begins its own investigation of the considered, and if it chooses to approve the
person it declares that said person lived a heroic and Catholically virtuous life, making them Venerable. This is not an official declaration that the considered is in Heaven, but rather states that while on Earth, they possessed holiness.

➢ Once the Congregation for the Causes of Saints has approved the considered, a miracle must occur through the intercession of that person in order to prove that they are in Heaven, something known as the Beatification process. While miracles can take different forms, the most common of these forms is a healing. The healing must be instantaneous, permanent, and scientifically unexplainable as verified by a group of independent doctors. A panel of theologians must approve a miracle before it can gain final approval with the Pope. Once the Pope approves the considered, they are declared a Blessed. Martyrs can be beatified without the evidence of a miracle, and sometimes (though not often) Pope can waive a miracle.

➢ A second miracle (though the same verification process) is required for a Blessed to become a Saint.

➢ During a canonization ceremony, the Pope conducts a special Mass where he reads aloud the Blessed’s life history and follows by chanting a Latin prayer to declare that person a Saint.

Why is Father Junipero Serra becoming a Saint? **Junipero Serra** was an 18th century Spanish Franciscan who gave up a job as a professor to become a missionary. He established nine of the 21 Spanish Catholic missions in California. “Serra and the civil administration of upper and lower California could not imagine someone being part of the church, part of the Spanish realm, and not being settled in the city,” explains **Maureen Tilley**, Professor of Theology at Fordham University. “So once they were baptized, native Americans in California were confined to mission territory, even if the rest of their family was outside the mission. If they tried to run away, they were brought back and punished. Serra tried to mitigate punishments, tried to keep the Spanish soldiers from preying on native Americans.” She said that the Pope will be explaining more about his reasoning for elevating Serra during the canonization ceremony.
Why is his canonization controversial? “While Serra might be championed as an evangelizer who brought Catholicism to new places, the historical context of the mission system...means that he is also a champion of colonialism,” says Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Professor of Theology at Fordham University. “Even more than that, historical records reflect mission conditions that are quite disturbing: converts might be coerced into a mission system that they would not be able to leave, there were whippings as punishments for breaking rules, unsanitary conditions that bred disease as well as exploitation of native labor to serve the Church and Spanish rule.”

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