

Catholic

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The Gift of the Saints

HOW AND WHY THE CHURCH CANONIZES THEM

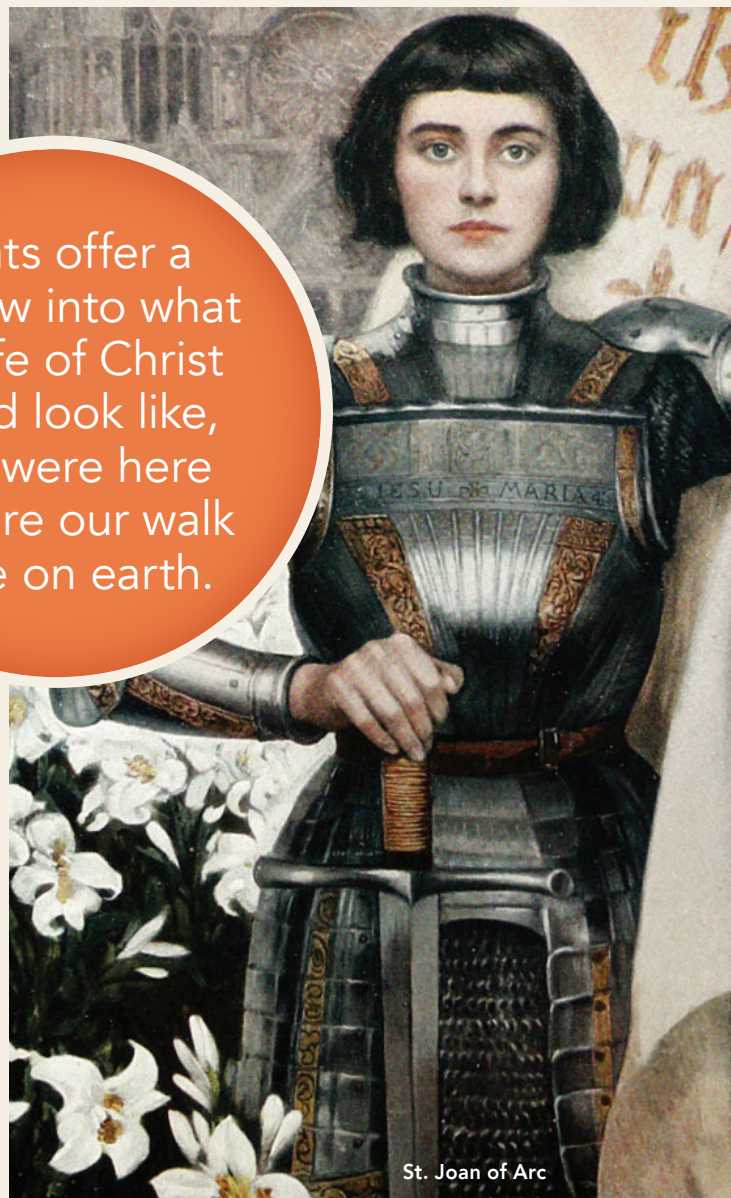
FR. BYRON MILLER, CSSR



St. Paul Miki



St. Kateri
Tekakwitha



St. Joan of Arc

Saints offer a window into what the life of Christ would look like, if he were here to share our walk in life on earth.

PAUL MIKI, BRONZE SCULPTURE, D.HATENA.NE.JP / HIROSHI KATAYANAGI / TATEYAMA, JAPAN

JOAN OF ARC ENGRAVING FROM FIGARO ILLUSTRÉ MAGAZINE, 1903 / WIKIMEDIA.ORG

PORTRAIT OF SAINT KATERI TEKAKWITHA BY FATHER CLAUDE CHAUCHETIÈRE AROUND 1696 / WIKIMEDIA.ORG

Reportedly, when C. S. Lewis was asked why so many Christians seemed far less than perfect, he replied, “You should have seen them before they became Christians.” In becoming Christian, people essentially aim to imitate Christ. To that end, the Church provides saintly role models when our desired imitation of Christ seems less than expected.

Saint Paul succinctly describes our Christian ideal: “This is the will of God, your holiness” (1 Thessalonians 4:3). Sanctification is not reserved for a privileged and elite corps, but is intended for everyone. “One might even say that the church exists to make saints of all its members, if by saints we mean those who become true imitators of Christ,” writes Kenneth L. Woodward in *Making Saints*.

Thus, our universal call to imitate Christ comes first with baptism; canonization is the recognition that one’s baptismal call was carried out to a heroic degree. Pope Benedict XVI said that recognition given to saints “paves the way to true spiritual resurrection, to lasting conversions, and to the blossoming of new saints.” In other words, saints encourage more saints among us. Sanctity loves company!

A great gift and function of the saints, according to John J. Cardinal Wright, is that because of them, “the living likeness” of Christ never quite disappears from the earth. “The saint represents the life of Christ so that each of us, seeing both something of Christ and something of ourselves in the saint” discover how Christ would have lived if he were here to share our walk in life. Fundamentally, then, saints exist for our benefit in making it easier for us to imitate Christ. “The life of the saints is the norm of life for all others,” wrote St. Ambrose.

What Is the Process?

Strictly speaking, “only God makes saints,” notes Woodward. “What the Church does is provide the mechanism for identifying exceptional holiness. The primary purpose of canonization is to provide contemporary examples of holiness for the edification and, it is hoped, the emulation of the faithful.” The canonization process is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the holiness of the Church’s members. “The Church recognizes the power of the Spirit of holiness within her and sustains the hope of believers by proposing the saints to them as models and intercessors” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 828).



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Priests carry the blood-stained shirt of Archbishop Oscar Romero during his beatification Mass in San Salvador.

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