

# Saints – The Church Triumphant

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I once asked a group of primary school students, “What can you tell me about who saints are?” One student put up his hand and gave a reply that I will never forget: “Saints are dead people!” The truth out of the mouth of babes never stops to astound me!

The student's answer was not incorrect. It was just the innocence of a young mind making a connection with only one aspect of sainthood. A simple answer to my question could be, “Saints are individuals who are in heaven”. They are people who have lived lives of "heroic virtue" and are or have been officially declared by the church to be in heaven. I explained to the students afterwards that we sometimes also refer to some living people as ‘*saints*’ because of the outward manifestation of their holiness. But then, who are we to declare someone a saint? After all, even the holiest person may fall from grace from time to time, due to being tarnished by Original Sin and human frailty. This propensity to sin in us is understood by the secular world. There is, for example, a long-standing international convention that **no** image of a person is ever put on banknotes until after the person is dead. While still alive, the most respectable of humans may fall from grace, and their positive achievements may be marred by scandal, misbehavior, or controversy, and their fame turns into infamy.

It must be noted that having one's image on secular currency is not necessarily a statement about the person's (good) character. It could simply be the wielding of power to exercise vanity. Julius Caesar, for example, made history by becoming the first living Roman to place his own portrait on a coin. Until then, Roman currency only featured mythological figures or long-deceased ancestors. History is known to repeat itself, so we should not be surprised if and when it happens in our time.

In New Zealand, the exception to the rule of not having an image of a living person appearing on currency happened with Sir Edmund Hillary. He appeared on the New Zealand five-dollar note bill in 1992, but he died in 2008. The secular world recognised

him as a person who was inspirational. This concept of popular acclaim by the people, which practically canonises a person, has been in the Church right from her beginnings. The Roman Canon (Eucharistic Prayer I) lists many saints, including martyrs and early popes, in two distinct litanies. These lists came from the early Church in Rome, from a time, well before the process of official canonisation process of our modern time. Captured on the list are several saints who were elevated almost entirely by local populations who witnessed their holy lives or believed in miracles attributed to their intercessions. This *vox populi*, or literally, ‘*the voice of the people*’, was seen as reflecting also the “*vox Dei*”, or the voice of God. In our time, we witnessed it in Karol Wotyla, or Pope John Paul II. We heard cries of “*Santo Subito*”, Italian for “Saint(hood) immediately”, even before his body was interred.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Church introduced a more centralised and formalised process to declare someone a saint. Normally, the *process* of documenting the life and virtues of a holy man or woman for the cause of beatification cannot begin until 5 years after death. This ensures that the person has an enduring reputation for sanctity. The five-year ‘postponement’ means it could take more than a generation for a person to be officially declared a saint by the Church. Nevertheless, the postponement could be waived by the Pope, as was the case for St Mother Teresa of Calcutta and St Pope John Paul II. The gathering of evidence of their sanctity was fast-tracked, leading the former to be canonized 19 years after her death, and the latter 9 years and 25 days after his death. The process of beatification normally starts from a petition by the Bishop of the diocese (of the saint-to-be declared) to the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints. If there is no objection by the Dicasteries, in particular the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the permission, or *nihil obstat* (nothing stands in the way), is communicated to the initiating Bishop. The church then typically requires evidence of miracles attributed to the person's intercession, and therefore the faithful are asked to pray to God on their behalf.

Interestingly, there is an *urban legend* of a saint being ‘decanonized’! In 1961, in the pontificate of Pope St John XXIII, the Sacred Congregation of Rites issued a directive that the feast day of St Philomena be removed from the General Roman Calendar. It led to widespread rumours about her ‘decanonization’. This is incorrect, as she was never ‘decanonized’. The Church merely reduced her feast day (11 August) to be celebrated at a local level, rather than to be observed on the universal calendar. This apparent ‘demotion’ stemmed from doubts about the authenticity and historical accuracy of her hagiography.

Her veneration first begun in 1802 when skeletal remains of a young girl were discovered in the Catacombs of Priscilla in Rome. She was identified as a martyr because the terra-

Relic of St Philomena, at her Shrine,  
Mugnano del Cardinale, in Naples, Italy



cotta tiles sealing her tomb had the symbols of martyrdom (an anchor, arrows, and a palm), and with the words, "*Pax tecum Filumena*" or "Peace be with you, Philomena". Further investigation eventually suggested that the original tiles may not have been meant for her, and the name "Filumena" might have been reused from an older, separate burial. But the plot thickens!

In 1835, Pauline Jaricot, *the Founder of the Pontifical Mission Societies of Propaganda Fidei*, declared a 'Blessed' in 2022, was gravely ill with advanced heart disease and travelled to Rome to seek the Pope's blessing before she died. She proposed a deal to Pope Gregory XVI, that should she survive and walk back to the Vatican after visiting the shrine of St. Philomena in the town of *Mugnano del Cardinale*, in Naples, Italy, he should officially investigate the saintly status of St. Philomena. As providence would have it, Jaricot was miraculously healed at the Shrine. Since the Pope personally witnessed her recovery, he officially authorized the liturgical cult of St. Philomena. Pauline herself built a chapel dedicated to St. Philomena at her home in Lyon, France. The chair, which was used to transport her when she was ill, has now come to be known as the Chair of Transport and Healing. It is on display in the Shrine, along with the bodily remains of St. Philomena. These are our tangible connections with heaven!



The saints make up a fundamental part of the *Celestial Hierarchy*, functioning alongside angels, archangels, and cherubim. The Church's teaching on the Communion of Saints, that the Church Triumphant, the Church Militant and the Church Suffering are in an unbroken communion bond of prayer always strikes a chord with me. Wherever I am, I know I have family and friends who have died, whom I could still call on, both in my private prayer and the Mass I celebrate. By that, I include my loved ones, who are unlikely to be officially declared saints. As the words of the third Eucharistic prayer of the Mass beautifully remind us, "*...on whose constant intercession in your presence we rely for unfailing help*".

Knowing that the saints journey with me gives me great comfort.

- Blessed Pauline Jaricot – Pray for us.
- St Philomena – Pray for us
- St John Paul II – Pray for us
- All holy men and women – pray for us.