

AN OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY AND PROCESS FOR CANONIZATION OF THE 'SAINTLY SIX'

This overview seeks to familiarize St. Katharine Drexel parishioners with the process of canonization. In preparing this, I drew on websites from the Vatican and United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). I have included here (1) a description of the Roman Curia; (2) a brief history of canonization; (3) a summary of the work of the *Dicastery for the Causes of Saints*;¹ (4) the phases in the process toward sainthood; (5) the stages toward canonization and the 'Saintly Six;' and (6) a selected bibliography about some of the saints for further reading and study.

1. Description of the Roman Curia

The Dicastery for the Causes of Saints is one of more than a dozen departments of the Roman Curia or central government of the Catholic Church. The Curia was established in the 11th century by Pope Urban II. Its principal function is to assist the Pope in managing whatever pertains to the operation of the institutional church including among others, evangelization and communications, liturgy and sacraments, education and moral formation, theology and spirituality, the administration of justice within the church, and the church's economic matters.²

2. A Brief History of Canonization (from the USCCB)

"In the first five centuries of the Church, the process for recognizing a saint was based on public acclaim or the *vox populi, vox Dei* (meaning, voice of the people, voice of God). There was no formal canonical process as understood by today's standards. Beginning in the sixth century and continuing into the twelfth century, the intervention of the local bishop was required before someone could be canonized. The intervention of the local bishop usually began with a request from the local community for the bishop to recognize someone a saint. Upon studying the request and a written biography [of the candidate], if he found it favorable, the bishop would typically issue a decree, legitimize the liturgical cult³ and thereby canonize the person."⁴

Starting in the tenth century, a cause proceeded with the usual steps, i.e. reputation of the person's martyrdom or life of heroic virtue would spread, "a request to the local bishop from the people to declare the person a saint occurred, and a biography would be written for the bishop's review. [The] bishop would collect eyewitness testimony of those who knew the person and who had witnessed miracles, and he would provide a summary of the case to the Pope for his approval. The Pope then reviewed the cause, and if he approved it, he issued a decree declaring the person a canonized saint. The first documented case of papal [intervention] is by Pope John XV on January 31, 993 for the canonization of St. Ulric. When Pope Sixtus V reorganized the Roman Curia in 1588 he established the Congregation for Sacred Rites. One of its functions was to assist the Pope with reviewing causes. Except for a few canonical developments, from 1588 the process of canonization remained the same until 1917 when a universal Code of Canon Law was promulgated.

"The 1917 Code [of Canon Law] contained 145 canons (cc. 1999- 2144) on causes of canonization, and mandated that an episcopal process and an apostolic process be conducted. The

¹ Website for the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints: <https://www.causesanti.va/it.html>.

² Other departments include among others, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith; the Dicastery for the Laity, the Family and Life; the Dicastery for the Clergy; the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

³ The word 'cult' in American English usage has become negative. Here, however, the 'cult' means the practice of religious veneration and devotion directed towards a particular person or object; for example, saying the rosary in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary or visiting a shrine dedicated to her such as Lourdes or Fatima are examples of veneration of her cult.

⁴ Website for the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints: <https://www.causesanti.va/it.html>.

episcopal process consisted of the local bishop verifying the reputation of the person, ensuring that a biography existed, collecting eyewitness testimony and the person's written works. All of this was then forwarded to the Congregation for Sacred Rites [now known as the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints]. The apostolic process consisted of reviewing the evidence submitted, collecting more evidence, studying the cause, investigating any alleged miracles and ultimately forwarding the cause to the Pope for his approval. This process remained in effect until 1983 with the promulgation of the 1983 Code of Canon Law and new norms for causes of canonization issued in 2007 by Pope John Paul II. This revised process for causes of canonization is still in force."⁵

3. The Work of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints

The Dicastery for the Causes of Saints handles all matters that pertain to the processes of beatification and canonization. The current *prefect* or head of the Dicastery is Cardinal Marcello Semeraro. A description of their work is found on the Vatican website under the Roman Curia:

§ 1. The Dicastery provides special norms and assists with advice and direction the diocesan/eparchial⁶ Bishops who are responsible for the instruction of a cause.

§ 2. It examines the acts of causes already instructed, verifying that the process was carried out properly and expressing a judgment on the merits of those causes, in order to submit them to the Roman Pontiff.

The Dicastery oversees the application of the norms regulating the administration of the fund established to cover the expenses of causes.

The Dicastery determines the canonical procedure for verifying and declaring the authenticity of sacred relics and for ensuring their preservation.⁷

4. Phases in the Process toward Canonization

The process toward canonization is long, complex, and entails multiple phases:

First, a *petitioner* initiates the process for canonization by asking the bishop of the diocese in which the person died to begin an investigation of that person's life with the hope of canonization. Any member of the Roman Catholic Church, whether lay or clergy, may act as a petitioner. The process usually begins at least five (5) years after a person has died, but the pope may dispense with this waiting period.

Second, the diocesan bishop begins the investigation of the person's life and writings. He does this through consultation with the conference of bishops (e.g., USCCB), the faithful of the diocese, and the Vatican. After these consultations are completed and the bishop receives from the Vatican what is called the *nihil obstat* (Latin meaning, nothing objectionable; that is, nothing objectionable has been discovered about the person's life), the bishop identifies and appoints a *postulator*. The postulator oversees the process at the diocesan level; the postulator may be a member of the clergy or a lay person. The members of the tribunal again investigate the candidate looking for concrete evidence that the person embodied the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, and the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude, as well as other virtues specific to her or his state of life. Witnesses (e.g., persons who knew the

⁵ USCCB website <https://www.usccb.org/offices/public-affairs/saints>

⁶ The word *eparchial* derives from *eparchy* refers to a province (similar to what we call a diocese) of the Orthodox Church.

⁷ The website for the Dicastery under the Roman Curia is <https://www.vatican.va/content/romancuria/en/index.html#dicasteri>; this is in English. The direct link to the Dicastery's website is in Italian: <https://www.causessanti.va/it.html>, but your web browser (e.g., Google Chrome) may provide an English translation.

candidate) are called and interviewed; documents (e.g., letters, books, or articles) that may have been written by and about the candidate are collected and examined.

Third, the findings from the diocesan investigation are submitted to the Vatican's Dicastery for the Causes of Saints. The *prefect* of the Dicastery appoints another *postulator* who oversees all aspects of the next phases. Ordinarily, this postulator lives in Rome, may be a member of the clergy or laity, and works under the direction of a member of the Dicastery's staff who is called a *relator*. The postulator and the relator prepare the *Positio* or summary of the documentary evidence from the diocesan phase of inquiry in order to prove martyrdom or heroic exercise of virtue. The *Positio* consists of a comprehensive summary of all material collected: this may include a biography, eyewitness testimonies about the candidate, reports from the diocesan tribunal, statements about and authentication of any alleged miracles.

The *Positio* for Venerable Henriette Delille comprises 753 pages and, for the most part, is written in Italian, although interviews with Sisters of the Holy Family, American historians and theologians are in English. Copies of the *Positio* are not readily accessible to the public, but I was given a copy of Henriette DeLille's by Sister Sylvia Thibodeaux, SSF, who at the time was general superior and recommended me to Archbishop Hughes to serve on the Theological Commission of the New Orleans Archdiocesan Tribunal. Venerable Henriette Delille's *Positio* will be available for parishioners to view during Black History Month 2025.

Fourth, the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints reviews the findings and then determines if the person is worthy of canonization.

5. Stages toward Canonization and the 'Saintly Six'

Servant of God: If the person's cause is accepted for review by the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, the person may be considered a "Servant of God."

Two of the 'Saintly Six' have been declared "*Servant of God*:"

Julia Greeley (c.1833/1848-1918) *Servant of God*, caused opened in 2016

Thea Bowman, FSPA (1937-1990) *Servant of God*, caused opened in 2018

Venerable: This title is given to a candidate for sainthood whose cause has not yet reached the beatification stage but whose heroic virtue has been declared by the pope.

Four of the 'Saintly Six' have been declared *venerable*:

Pierre Toussaint (1766-1853) declared *venerable* in 1996 by Pope John Paul II

Henriette Delille, SSF (1813-1862) declared *venerable* in 2010 by Pope Benedict XVI

Father John Augustus Tolton (1854-1897) declared *venerable* in 2019 by Pope Francis

Mary Lange, OSP (c.1789-1882) declared *venerable* in 2023 by Pope Francis

Blessed: The Church declares that the person is worthy of being believed that she or he is in Heaven. There must be demonstration of martyrdom or heroic virtue and the certification that a miracle has occurred.

When facing the main altar in our church, there is a statue in the left-side aisle of *Blessed Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi, OCSO* (1903-1964). Father Tansi was a Nigerian Igbo parish priest in the Archdiocese of Onitsha, Anambra State, Nigeria. After several years, Father Tansi became a Trappist monk at Mount Saint Bernard Abbey in Leicestershire, England. He was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1998.

Saint: In the final stage, the Vatican approves a second miracle that occurred after beatification.

6. Selected Bibliography on Black Catholic Candidates for Sainthood

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