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The cult of saints

Source and origin of the practices

By Russell Hardiman

Introduction

These last months in Australia have seen great attention dedicated to the dribbling news about the final processes leading up to the declaration of Mary MacKillop's cause being recognized. This was caused by the second miracle through her intercession had been accepted in Rome. The final touch at the end of the process was the announcement that October 17th 2010, be the proposed date of her canonization in Rome.

At the time of expectation that the final news was imminent, there were many commentators making rather facetious comments about who next may be put forward as a saint and thereby revealing their ignorance, their sarcasm which surpassed any truth, and thereby revealing how difficult it was for the journalists and shock jocks to seek out commentators who did know what they were talking about.

Throughout Christian history, through its many forms and practices, there has been a prominent meandering pathway that has undergone some shaping and developing through nearly every century of the Christian Era and even before.

Saints in the Hebrew Scriptures

In the Hebrew language two words reflect the human qualities that would seem to mirror or duplicate these special qualities of God.

The word *hesed*, or saint, was the expression of esteem for someone who shows faithfulness to the God of the Covenant, the God who shows *hesed*, meaning the Covenant of promise.

Another word *q'deschim* testifies that special people share in God's holiness, especially for their dedication in their service of God and hence they were esteemed by being separate and prominent in their service of God.

As the Lord God was the leader of his people, so it was that "holy ones" are special for the way they share in God's plan. These saints of God were expected to accompany the Lord in the final coming of the last day.

In the corporate relationship through the Covenant the people of Israel, "a holy nation" shared in the Lord God's blessing because they were to be "a people sacred to the Lord. . . a people sacred to his own" (cf. Deut 7:6 and Ex 19:6). In the Jewish tradition, all people were called to be holy, as God is holy, but in special instances some individuals were given the designation as saints: Aaron, (Ps 106:16) and, in general priests, of the tribe of Levi (Ps 132:9, 16).

The tradition that evolved about the remnant, who would remain faithful, further nurtured this tradition of saints and they were specifically called the saints of God (Is 4:3). Many of the prophets encouraged the pious upholders of the Law that they will share in the Kingdom on the final day of judgment.

Saints in the New Testament

There are dozens of references in the New Testament where the Greek word *hagios* specifies a person dedicated or reserved to God's service. In the plural the word *hagioi* generally refers to Christians as distinct

from others who have not accepted Jesus. As decades unfolded that same word in the plural referred to the faithful, who had died before the coming of Christ and were designated as saints. In his own writings St Paul frequently urged Christians to be conscious of their calling as saints, how their vocation is to be as a consecrated people (1 Cor 12:13). Because they were incorporated into the one Body of Christ and therefore now share his Spirit, the word had a corporate context and not an individualistic style.

St Paul developed the common designation for Christians as "*Hagioi*" who are members of a local Church as the congregation of the Body of Christ in a particular house church. He referred to them as the saints of the assembled Church of a particular place where they gathered for the breaking of bread in Christ's name.

Martyrs as saints

In the last book of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation (in 16:6; 17:6; 18:24) refers to the Christian martyrs as "saints or holy ones". Just as the saints and prophets of Hebrew times, the Christian martyrs also came to be judged by their faithfulness when they had demonstrated that they are holy and share in the promises for God's chosen ones.

After the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70AD, the diaspora led to the Jews being expelled from Jerusalem and the Christians too were forced to migrate to many other areas around the Mediterranean Sea.

The apostle Paul, through his missionary journeys, had built up Christian communities in several places now entitled by other names.

Paul himself became a classic example of how his death and burial became a celebrated venue in both cases. His place of execution, at *Tre Fontane*, is very close to what eventually became the *Basilica of San Paolo*. In itself this cluster of venues becomes a living witness to the microcosm of events of that one place which illustrate the macrocosm events of the earliest Christian centuries. The erratic sequence of times of persecution had the concurrent result of martyrdom for many.

The place of Paul's death is remembered across the centuries; the building of a church near to the place of his death; and subsequent to a severe fire in the nineteenth century, the place of his burial is still a magnificent monument, being rebuilt after the fire and now looking so pristine.

The apostle Peter also was martyred in Rome in 64AD, close to the traditional *Campidoglio*. There is still a major shrine of his suffering and death, when he refused to be crucified like Jesus and asked to be crucified upside down. Today's modern city still has a church dedicated to St Peter in Chains (*San Pietro in Vinculi*).

The most remarkable memorial to Peter the apostle is the Basilica itself. Even so, the vast majority of pilgrims never see the *Scavi*, the excavations done during World War II that uncovered the family burial *mausolea* which

are the most hidden shrines in Rome. In fact, one can walk on sloping streets, like a pathway all the way from under the dome of St Peter's to underneath the Obelisk in St Peter's Square.

A Roman Emperor was the only authority to desecrate a graveyard, so it needed the authority of Emperor Constantine for the graveyard on the Vatican Hill to be levelled to make a single level platform for the first construction on the same site. Walking down the *Scavi*, from underneath the altar of St Peter to the Obelisk, is a pathway through over two thousand years, offering a living witness to the shared faith that began with the deaths of the martyrs but whose witness continues to challenge and inspire the contemporary world.

On a smaller scale, the stories about the early martyrs also developed the cult due to those who suffered and lived an exemplary way how a Christian can enter into the promise of the death and resurrection of Christ. These words of St Paul encourage us through our baptism and which is expressed in every sprinkling of holy water, but most dramatically in death, when expressed in the rituals of Christian burial.

Confessors as saints

In the year 312AD, when Christianity was recognized as a legal religion by the Emperor Constantine, and in a few decades under his grandson, Christianity then became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 381AD.

When martyrdom tapered away there developed a new process as a different medium for the leaders of the Church to honour the dead who had shown in their life that they were witnesses for the others of their Church. These saints were recognized as confessors of the faith (not to be confused with the confessor who hears confession).

Because of their strong witness these role models were seen to be living connections with the next world. This meant they could act as patrons, intercessors, and friends who could support those who appealed to them in prayer to move beyond any fear of the day of judgment or to intercede a person's case with God in judgment.

An important element of formation in faith grew more and more with passing on the stories of the confessors. The stories of the *hagioi* or the ones who were recognised for the quality of their Christian life, were carried further into an art form of sainthood now described as hagiography. These written forms of narrative about the sufferings and passion of the martyrs were also used to strengthen some aspects of the Christian liturgy by the preparation of many stories bound together to make up *martyrologium*.

Another example concerns Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, who was burnt to death in 156AD. The parallels in his story link with those of Christ's passion. This story also includes some of the phrases of the original text called the Roman Canon (Eucharistic Prayer I). The reference from the Eucharistic Prayer refers that the saint is burned, like "bread baking" in the fire.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* quotes the words of Polycarp as witness from the acts of the martyrs. They form the archives of truth written in letters of blood:

I bless you for having judged me worthy from this day and this hour to be counted among your martyrs. . . You have kept your promise, God of faithfulness and truth. For this reason and for everything, I praise you, I bless you, I glorify you through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved Son. Through him, who is with you and the Holy Spirit, may glory be given to you, now and in the ages to come. Amen.
(CCC 2474)

Similarly to the practices about martyrs, confessors became acknowledged by where they were buried. Altars could be built on their graves or relics were cherished and placed in altars elsewhere. As comfort at the thought of death, Christians were encouraged to allow the holiness of the saint to strengthen oneself.

Saints nominated by the local bishop

In late antiquity, the Roman Church dominated in the Western Roman Empire, just as Constantinople, in the Eastern Empire, grew in similar strengths to dominate the Eastern Mediterranean areas.

Some of the veneration of martyrs became quite bizarre and led to competition to claim the greatest relics to be the most famous. This growing practice of various cults developed more than a few problems. In this context the devotion to the saints had to be watched so that it was not at the same level of the veneration or worship reserved for God alone.

Without the likelihood of martyrdom, the Church began to honour the dead who had lived honourable lives, yet did not suffer a violent death, as these could be persons in many places and at long distances from the leadership of the Church. This was partially resolved in the practice where the bishop of the local Church could accept the *vox populi*, the clamour of the ordinary people, who wanted to honour their local saints. This led to some process of verifying the person's holiness which was to be the prerogative of the local bishop for nearly a millennium before the process reverted to Rome and the administration around the Pope.

Reference

¹ Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P. General Editor [et al.] (1996) *The Collegville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press pp863-865.

² *op cit.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*