



The Holy See

**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE PLENARY SESSION
OF THE CONGREGATION FOR THE CAUSES OF SAINTS**

To my Venerable Brother

Cardinal JOSÉ SARAIVA MARTINS

Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints

On the occasion of the Plenary Assembly of this Congregation for the Causes of Saints, I would like to address my cordial greetings to you, Your Eminence, which I gladly extend to the Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops who are taking part in the meeting. I likewise greet the Secretary, the Undersecretary, the Consultors and Medical Experts, the Postulators and all the Members of this Dicastery.

Together with my greeting, I also express my sentiments of appreciation and gratitude for this Congregation's service to the Church in promoting the Causes of Saints, who "are the true bearers of light within history, for they are men and women of faith, hope and love", as I wrote in the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (n. 40).

This is why from the outset the Church has held their commemoration and worship in great honour, dedicating down the centuries ever more vigilant attention to the procedures that lead the Servants of God to the honours of the altar.

In fact, the Causes of Saints are "major causes", both because of the nobility of the subject treated and their effect on the life of the People of God. In light of this reality, my Predecessors often intervened with special legislative measures to improve the examination and celebration of their Causes. In 1588, Sixtus V willed the Sacred Congregation for Rites to be established for this purpose.

Then how can we forget the provident legislation of Urban VIII, the promulgation of the 1917 Code of Canon Law, the norms of Pius XI for ancient Causes, the Motu Proprio *Sanctitas Clarior* and

Paul VI's Apostolic Constitution *Sacra Rituum Congregatio*?

My Predecessor Benedict XIV, rightly considered "the master" of the Causes of Saints, deserves a grateful mention. More recently, in 1983, beloved John Paul II promulgated the Apostolic Constitution *Divinus perfectionis Magister*, followed in the same year by the publication of the "*Normae servandae in inquisitionibus ab Episcopis faciendis in Causis Sanctorum*" [Norms to be Observed in Inquiries made by Bishops in the Causes of Saints].

More than 20 years' experience has prompted this Congregation to draft an appropriate "Instruction for the process of the diocesan inquiry in the Causes of Saints".

This Document is addressed primarily to diocesan Bishops and its preparation constitutes the first item on the agenda of your Plenary Meeting. Its intention is to facilitate the faithful application of the "*Normae servandae*" cited, in order to ensure the seriousness of the investigations carried out in diocesan inquiries into the virtue of Servants of God and in cases claiming martyrdom or possible miracles.

The evidence for the causes is collected and studied with supreme care and with a diligent search for the historic truth through testimonies and documentary proof "*omnino plenae*", for they have no other aim than the glory of God and the spiritual good of the Church and of all who are in search of the Gospel truth and perfection.

The diocesan Pastors, deciding "*coram Deo*" on which causes deserve to be initiated, will first of all evaluate whether the candidates to the honours of the altar truly enjoy a firm and widespread fame of holiness and miracles or martyrdom. This fame, which the Code of Canon Law of 1917 stipulates should be "*spontanea, non arte aut diligentia procurata, orta ab honestis et gravibus personis, continua, in dies aucta et vicens in praesenti apud maiorem partem populi*" (can. 2050 2), is a sign of God who points out to the Church those who deserve to be set on the lamp stand to "give light to all in the house" (cf. Mt 5: 15).

It is clear that it will not be possible to introduce a Cause of Beatification or Canonization if proven holiness does not exist, even if the person concerned was distinguished for conformity with the Gospel and special ecclesial and social merits.

The second theme that your Plenary Assembly is treating is "the miracle in the Causes of Saints". It is well-known that since ancient times, the process for arriving at canonization passes through the proof of virtues and miracles, attributed to the intercession of the candidate to the honours of the altar.

As well as reassuring us that the Servant of God lives in Heaven in communion with God, miracles constitute the divine confirmation of the judgment expressed by the ecclesiastical authority on

his/her virtuous life. I hope that the Plenary Meeting will be able to examine this subject in greater depth in the light of the Tradition of the Church, of present-day theology and of the most reliable scientific discoveries.

It should not be forgotten that in the examination of events claimed to be miraculous the competence of scholars and theologians converges, although the last word is given to theology, the only discipline that can give a miracle an interpretation of faith.

This is why the process of Saints' Causes moves from the scientific evaluation of the Medical Council or technical experts to a theological examination by the Consultors and later by the Cardinals and Bishops. Moreover, it should be clearly borne in mind that the uninterrupted practice of the Church establishes the need for a *physical* miracle, since a moral miracle does not suffice.

Martyrdom, a gift of the Spirit

The third subject reflected upon at the Plenary Meeting concerns martyrdom, a gift of the Spirit and an attribute of the Church in every epoch (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 42). The Venerable Pontiff John Paul II, in his Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, noted that since the Church has once again become the Church of Martyrs, "as far as possible, their witness should not be lost" (n. 37).

The martyrs of the past and those of our time gave and give life (*effusio sanguinis*) freely and consciously in a supreme act of love, witnessing to their faithfulness to Christ, to the Gospel and to the Church. If the motive that impels them to martyrdom remains unchanged, since Christ is their source and their model, then what has changed are the cultural contexts of martyrdom and the strategies "*ex parte persecutoris*" that more and more seldom explicitly show their aversion to the Christian faith or to a form of conduct connected with the Christian virtues, but simulate different reasons, for example, of a political or social nature.

It is of course necessary to find irrefutable proof of readiness for martyrdom, such as the outpouring of blood and of its acceptance by the victim. It is likewise necessary, directly or indirectly but always in a morally certain way, to ascertain the "*odium Fidei*" [hatred of the faith] of the persecutor. If this element is lacking there would be no true martyrdom according to the perennial theological and juridical doctrine of the Church. The concept of "martyrdom" as applied to the Saints and Blessed martyrs should be understood, in conformity with Benedict XIV's teaching, as "*voluntaria mortis perpessio sive tolerantia propter Fidem Christi, vel alium virtutis actum in Deum relatum*" (*De Servorum Dei beatificatione et Beatorum canonizatione*, Prato 1839-1841, Book III, chap. 11, 1). This is the constant teaching of the Church.

The subjects being examined at your Plenary Meeting are of indisputable interest and the reflections, with the possible suggestions that may arise, will make a valuable contribution to the achievement of the objectives indicated by John Paul II in the Apostolic Constitution *Divinus*

Perfectionis Magister, in which he says: "Most recent experience, finally, has shown us the appropriateness of revising further the manner of instructing causes and of so structuring the Congregation for the Causes of Saints that We might meet the needs of experts and the desires of Our Brother Bishops, who have often called for a simpler process while maintaining the soundness of the investigation in matters of such great import.

"In light of the doctrine of the Second Vatican Council on collegiality, We also think that the Bishops themselves should be more closely associated with the Holy See in dealing with the Causes of Saints".

To be consistent with these Instructions, elected to the Chair of Peter, I was glad to act on the widespread desire that greater emphasis be placed in their celebration on the essential difference between beatification and canonization, and that the particular Churches be more visibly involved in Rites of Beatification on the understanding that the Roman Pontiff alone is competent to declare a devotion to a Servant of God.

Your Eminence, I thank you for this Congregation's service to the Church and, while I wish those who are taking part in the work of the Plenary Meeting every success through the intercession of all the Saints and of the Queen of the Saints, I invoke upon each one the light of the Holy Spirit. For my part, I assure you of my remembrance in prayer as I cordially bless you all.

From the Vatican, 24 April 2006

BENEDICTUS PP. XVI

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