

# ***"The Beatification of John Paul II"***

**Week of February 7, 2011**

ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

***By Rev. Richard P. McBrien***

Pope John Paul II, who died in April, 2005, will be beatified in St. Peter's Square on Sunday, May 1. Pope Benedict XVI himself is expected to preside at the Mass of beatification.

John Paul II was in office longer than any other pope (about 26 ½ years) except Pius IX, who reigned for almost 31 years and 8 months.

Benedict XVI had waived the normal five-year waiting period to begin the canonization process, partly in response to the demands of conservative supporters who, at John Paul II's funeral, demanded through the use of banners that the late pope be declared a saint immediately ("Santo Subito").

Benedict XVI signed a decree of "heroic virtue" for John Paul II in December, 2009, asserting that the late pope had lived a holy life and allowing him to be called "venerable".

For beatification, one miracle, usually of healing, must be unmistakably attributed to the candidate for eventual canonization. Such a miracle proves beyond all doubt that the candidate is in heaven and has intercessory power with God. One additional miracle is required for sainthood.

In the case of John Paul II's beatification, the miracle in question applied to a 49-year-old French nun, Sister Marie Simon-Pierre, who, according to the senior correspondent of the *National Catholic Reporter*, John Allen (see his dispatches of January 4<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>), had been diagnosed with an aggressive form of Parkinson's disease in 2001 and whose congregation prayed for her to John Paul II after his death.

Reportedly, after the nun wrote the late pope's name on a piece of paper one night in June, 2005, asking for help, she awoke the next morning completely cured of her illness. She was able to resume her work as a maternity nurse.

However, there were reports in the French media earlier this year that the nun had fallen ill again, and that at least one physician consulted by the Vatican had questioned

the original diagnosis of Parkinson's disease, suggesting that her illness may have been the result of some other nervous disorder.

The Vatican resolved the doubts in favor of the cure. The miracle was approved by both the medical and theological consultants, as well as the cardinals and bishops on the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, and finally by Benedict XVI.

Given John Paul II's worldwide prominence and his many years in the papacy, his beatification and eventual canonization, which is a foregone conclusion, are sure to be major news events.

But there are, as John Allen admits, at least two persistent strains of criticism likely to surface in the coming days. Indeed, some of it has already surfaced.

"First," Allen writes, "some Catholic liberals who saw John Paul II as overly conservative have suggested that his cause is being fast-tracked in order to secure political points in internal Catholic debates."

Some of them are also wondering why he is being beatified and eventually canonized so quickly when Pope John XXIII, who launched the Second Vatican Council and is regarded by many as the greatest pope in history, is still awaiting sainthood following his own beatification in September, 2000.

Moreover, "some victims of clerical sexual abuse and their advocates believe that John Paul II's record on the crisis is not worthy of sainthood." Indeed, he had a terrible record, full of denial and foot-dragging, on the greatest crisis to confront the Catholic Church since the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

He also stubbornly refused to consider the evidence against one of his favorites, Father Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the influential Legionaries of Christ. It took John Paul II's successor, Benedict XVI, to act against Father Maciel and suspend him from the public exercise of the priesthood because of grave and unchallengeable acts of sexual misconduct.

According to John Allen's report, Vatican officials have not thus far offered any response to the criticisms of John Paul II, insisting in the past that beatifying or canonizing a pope is not tantamount to endorsing every policy choice of his pontificate.

However, in the case of Pope Pius XII, it was his behavior during the Holocaust that has held up his eventual canonization because of negative reactions not only from the Jewish community, but from many Catholics as well.

We assume that John Paul II and Pius XII are in heaven. But holding them up as examples of sanctity is another matter entirely.

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