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Article Title: Strategic canonisation: sanctity, popular culture and the Catholic Church

Year of publication: 2011

Link to published article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2010.544726>

Publisher statement: This is an electronic version of an article published in Bennett, O. (2011). Strategic canonisation: sanctity, popular culture and the Catholic Church. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*. Vol. 17(4), pp. 438-455. *International Journal of Cultural Policy* is available online

at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10286632.2010.544726>

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# STRATEGIC CANONIZATION: SANCTITY, POPULAR CULTURE AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

**Oliver Bennett**

## *Abstract*

*In his twenty-seven year reign (1978-2005), Pope John Paul II created not only more saints than any other pope in history, but also more saints than all the other popes put together since Pope Urban VIII centralised control of saint-making in 1634. This article argues that the elevation of 'celebrity saints', such as Padre Pio and Mother Theresa, can be seen as an attempt on the part of the Catholic Church to strengthen its presence within the arena of popular culture. Through a sustained programme of 'strategic canonization', John Paul II promoted models of sanctity that conveyed very clear social and political messages. Such messages were amplified through extensive Catholic media and, where 'celebrity saints' were involved, through the secular media too. These processes are analysed first, in relation to the general area of sexual politics; and secondly, to the Church's historic relationship with Nazism. Whilst John Paul's programme may not have achieved all that it intended, it clearly demonstrated the Catholic Church's unique capacity to reinvent very old forms of cultural policy for changing times.*

**Keywords:** Roman Catholic Church, cultural policy, saints, popular culture, celebrities, religion

## **Saints, Celebrities and Popular Culture**

In the early years of the fourth century, a young woman, known as Catherine of Alexandria, had, by the age of eighteen, reputedly acquired an extraordinary level of intellectual and scholarly ability. Not only had she surpassed all her contemporaries in knowledge of philosophy, languages, science and medicine, she had also developed powers of argument that few were able to resist. These were utilised to great effect in defence of Christianity, to which Catherine had converted in the course of her development. Christians were at the time being persistently tortured by the Roman authorities that governed Alexandria.

In an attempt to undermine Catherine's influence, the Roman Emperor, Maxentius, devised a plan which he believed would result in her intellectual humiliation. She would be invited to debate her Christian principles with Rome's top fifty philosophers, who would then, in public, expose the fallacy of her arguments. Although Catherine happily accepted this invitation, Maxentius's strategy back-fired: instead of silencing her, all fifty philosophers ended up converting to Christianity themselves. This was followed by the conversion of Maxentius's wife and the general of his army, Porphyrius, who both visited Catherine in the prison to which she had been confined. Catherine herself was then tortured, by being placed upon a revolving wheel from which sharp and pointed knives protruded. Although this was intended to induce a drawn out and painful death, the instrument of torture miraculously fell apart, producing further conversions amongst those watching. Maxentius finally had her beheaded, whereupon milk instead of blood was reported to flow from her severed neck. Angels allegedly stepped in to transport her body to Mount Sinai, on which a monastery was built that stands today and still bears her name.

By the beginning of the ninth century, Catherine was being publicly venerated as a saint. The cult around her spread rapidly and subsequently developed into one of the most popular in mediaeval Europe. She was celebrated by the crusaders, featured in Jacobus de Voraigne's enormously influential 'Lives of the Saints' (the *Golden Legend*, c.1260) and depicted in many statues and paintings, including those by Raphael and Caravaggio. Numerous churches, chapels and shrines were named after her. In France, her popularity soared after it was reported that she was communicating with Joan of Arc. In the Rhineland, she was selected to join that elite

group of saints, known as the 'Fourteen Holy Helpers', whose collective cult spread throughout Germany, Hungary and Sweden. In England, she was the subject of poems, miracle plays and numerous church murals, thirty-six of which still survive.

Today, of course, Saint Catherine no longer features prominently in the European popular imagination, though she does live on in the name, amongst others, of a mountain range in Arizona, a Californian Channel Island, several towns in Mexico and a Lunar crater. 'Catherine Wheel' fireworks continue to be popular. Her image (after Raphael) appears on the cover of the *Smashing Pumpkins* album, 'Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness' and a new movie, *Katherine of Alexandria*, is reputedly being made by 'Spiked Wheel Films'.

All this is some achievement for a young woman, who, in the opinion of many historians, almost certainly never existed. In an acknowledgment of this, the cult of Saint Catherine was suppressed by the Roman Catholic Church in 1969, when she was removed from the official calendar of saints, but only to be restored for optional veneration in 2001. As readers of this Journal should know, she remains, along with Thomas Aquinas and two lesser-known saints, the patron saint of scholars, academics and students.

The story of Saint Catherine is of course just one of the many thousand that contribute to the literature of sanctity. In a critique of Richard Dawkins's book, *The God Delusion*, Terry Eagleton has noted in passing that religion has produced 'the richest, most enduring form of popular culture in human history' (2006). Within the Christian tradition,<sup>1</sup> or, more specifically, the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, the lives of

saints have clearly been at the centre of this culture. The stories and legends that have built up around them, particularly those involving martyrdom, have throughout history provided most of the ingredients that we can still recognise in contemporary, popular culture: strong narratives, heroes and villains, human interest, extreme violence, fantastic happenings, exotic locations and so on. Catherine is thus a fairly typical example – one of ‘the action figures of Christendom’, to borrow a phrase from Michael Higgins’s recent study of saint-making (Higgins, 2006, 9). These saints achieve huge personal fame, they have the effect of *personalizing* theology and they becoming a significant part of peoples’ everyday life. In many respects, they can be seen as prototypes of modern celebrities.

Indeed, within the sociology of celebrity culture, much has been made of this connection with religion. Ellis Cashmore, for example, contends that celebrity culture provides fans with experiences that are as meaningful as religious experiences (2006, 253). He notes the religious associations of the word ‘fan’ – derived from the word ‘fanatic’ – and suggests that in many instances fans do actually engage in a form of worship (79). This involves many of the trappings of religion, including pilgrimages to shrines (John Lennon, Jim Morrison, Princess Diana, etc.), the collection of relics (pop memorabilia, for example) and so on. Chris Rojek notes that celebrity culture has even been represented as secular society’s answer to the decline of religion, in that it provides symbols of belonging and recognition in what has been described as a ‘post-God’ world (2001, 57).

However, although the rituals of religion have been thus identified in the observances of celebrity culture, little attention has been paid to how, and with what effect,

religious institutions promote celebrities of their own or, more broadly, continue to promote their own forms of popular culture. Indeed, religious institutions barely feature in studies of modern<sup>2</sup> popular culture in general.<sup>3</sup> This can be attributed to the inherent secular tendency of most modern social sciences, which can themselves be seen to reflect what Steve Bruce and others have called the ‘secularisation paradigm’ (Bennett, 2009, 157-8). Put simply, this holds that, as modernisation develops, the importance of religion diminishes. (Bruce, 2002, 235).

However, organised religion has clearly shown no sign of giving up as easily as secularists have predicted. For example, there are around 1.15 billion Catholics in the world, and this is forecast to rise to 1.6 billion by 2050, the majority of new Catholics coming from the developing world, and, in particular, Africa. (Saenz, 2005). According to the Vatican, there are even more Muslims - exceeding the number of Catholics by about 200 million (Catholic World News, 2008). These two religions alone thus account for over 36% of the total world population. It is this persistence of religion in the face of modernisation that has led Habermas and others to speak no longer of a secular but of a ‘post-secular’ world (Habermas & Ratzinger, 2006, 46).

Nor has public debate between the advocates of religion and their opponents let up, as the controversies around Richard Dawkins’s book, *The God Delusion*, so clearly illustrated (Bennett, 2009, 159-162). Indeed, it can at times seem that we are so far from Bruce’s notion of religion ‘ceasing to be that important’ that we are re-running some of the impassioned debates of the eighteenth century. Within less confrontational intellectual traditions, we find Habermas and Cardinal Ratzinger, not long before his election as Pope Benedict XVI, finding common ground in the

struggle against the destabilising forces of global capitalism (Habermas & Ratzinger, 2006, 35-39).

So, rather than thinking in terms of whether or not secularism will win out in the end, it is perhaps more helpful to recall Stuart Hall's view of culture as 'a constant battlefield ...where there are no once-and-for-all victories but where there are always strategic positions to be won and lost' (Hall, 1981, 233). Although Hall did not have religion in mind, this does seem to describe very accurately how religious institutions operate within the arena of popular culture.

Looked at through this lens, all the major religions can still be seen to be highly active in promoting their own forms of popular culture, with which, after all, their historic success has been intimately bound up. In the contemporary world, some institutions and denominations are clearly more adept at it than others. For example, Karim Tartoussieh notes how private-sector Islamic organisations have recently been challenging the religious monopoly of state-controlled institutions in Egypt with an inundation of market-oriented, media products, such as Islamically inflected films, religious pop songs and talk show programmes (Tartoussieh, 2009, 171-173).

The focus of this article, however, will be on the institution which, as far as longevity is concerned, has been the most successful agent of popular-cultural policy in world history: namely, the Roman Catholic Church. In particular, it will focus on the promotion of popular sanctity during the pontificate of John Paul II, through a sustained programme of what I call 'strategic canonization'. The article builds on an earlier contribution to this Journal (Bennett, 2009), which called for religious

institutions to be brought more centrally into the field of cultural policy studies. It explored how the pope and his officials, in an example of what Jeremy Ahearne (2009) has called ‘implicit’ cultural policy, exercised cultural and theological authority to shape attitudes and behaviours within the Catholic population during the decades following the controversial Second Vatican Council of 1962-1965. Strategic canonization can be viewed in a similar framework.

From these preliminary observations, it should therefore be clear that this article departs from dominant conceptions of both modern popular culture and cultural policy. Although Guins and Cruz, in surveying studies of the former, declare that ‘there is no longer a clearly dominant paradigm’ (2005, 11), the heterogeneity that this implies rarely extends to religious forms of popular culture. Similarly, within the study of cultural policy, religious institutions have infrequently been seen as agents of cultural policy. Indeed, despite various attempts to broaden the scope of cultural policy studies, either in the direction of a more general politics of culture<sup>4</sup> or through attention to unacknowledged but arguably more powerful forms of ‘implicit’ cultural policy<sup>5</sup>, the focus of cultural policy studies remains largely on ‘explicit’ cultural policies towards the arts or the so-called creative industries. In conceptualising the modern canonization programme of the Catholic Church as a strategic intervention within the field of popular culture, it is hoped that this article will bring a novel perspective to studies in both popular culture and cultural policy.

### **The Saint Factory**

The pontificate of John Paul II (1978-2005) has sometimes been described as a ‘sainting machine’ or a ‘saint factory’ (Higgins, 2006, 235; *Daily Telegraph*, 2001),



on account of the 482 canonizations and 1300 beatifications that he authorised during his twenty-seven-year reign. He created not only more saints than any other pope in history, but also more saints than all the other popes put together since Pope Urban VIII finally centralised control of saint-making in 1634.

Moves towards the systematic control of saint-making began in earnest during the late twelfth century, when the growing prestige of the papacy meant that papal approval could enhance the status of a local saint.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, there were increasing doubts about the authenticity of some saints, and, although little could be done about the cults that had already built up around them, or the trade in their associated relics, at least procedures could be set up for the approval of new ones. It took nearly 500 years for these procedures to be fully established.

Before the papacy achieved this control, the recognition of saints was very much a local affair. The earliest saints were martyrs, victims of the Roman persecution that took place between the first and the fourth centuries. Following their deaths, their bodies would be collected by the faithful and buried in safe places, at which believers would congregate to celebrate the anniversary of the martyrdom. These places could also become sites of liturgical celebration, at which churches would later often be built. Even today, an altar is defined in the Catholic Church's Code of Canon Law as a 'tomb containing the relics of a saint' (Woodward, 1996, 59).

From the fourth century on, those who later came to be known as 'confessors' joined martyrs as objects of public veneration. Although not actually dying for their beliefs, confessors had either demonstrated their willingness to die or, alternatively, made

great personal sacrifices in the pursuit of the holy life. In this model of sanctity, monks or ‘solitaries’, for example, might come to be recognised as saints, after a life of renunciation devoted to the service of God and others.

Of course, martyrdom or asceticism was not in itself enough to confer sainthood. In Christian theology, a saint is not only someone whose exceptional holiness has been recognised by other Christians, but is also one who, by virtue of this holiness, has reputedly joined God in heaven (Attwater, 1995, 4). This could only be demonstrated through the exercise of supernatural powers. A key criterion, therefore, in the identification of the early saints - a criterion that the Catholic Church retains to this day - was their apparent capacity to perform miracles.

Prior to the involvement of popes, elevation to sainthood was thus a matter of local popular acclaim, although from the fifth century on bishops started to take on a more direct role in the supervision of emerging cults. Nevertheless, the procedures remained relatively informal and, within the Eastern Orthodox churches, continue to be so even today. It was through these informal systems that the vast majority of Christian saints, which now run to well over 10,000, were created. In contrast, the number of saints canonised by popes, up until the election of John Paul II in 1978, amounted to no more than around 350 or so. The rapid escalation of saint-making during John Paul’s reign may not have marked a return to mediaeval rates, but it was certainly unprecedented in the history of the papacy.

## **Making Saints**

In theological terms, popes do not actually *make* saints, as saints can only be made by God. What popes do is *recognise* them, either by their martyrdom or by some other act of heroic Christian virtue. It follows from this, of course, that if the saints listed in the records (variously known as martyrologies, menologies or synaxeries) are only the recognised ones, then there are many more unrecognised ones in the total saint community. Recognised saints get to have their own feast day (typically the day of their death), of which there are usually several for each day of the year. All the unrecognised ones are celebrated on November 1<sup>st</sup> (All Saints Day).

For readers unfamiliar with these processes of recognition, it may be useful to explain briefly the procedures involved. An understanding of these procedures and, in particular, of how they have evolved, enables us to see more clearly how a programme of ‘strategic canonization’, with its concomitant interventions in the field of popular culture, could be effectively developed.

Becoming a saint is now a three-stage process: first, the candidate has to be nominated to the local bishop by a group of supporters – this is invariably a religious order or an ecclesial group (*Opus Dei*, for example). This is known as initiating a ‘cause’ and cannot normally be started until at least five years after the candidate’s death. If the nomination is accepted the candidate gets to be called a ‘Servant of God’. The second stage is beatification, which can only be granted by the pope, after a recommendation from an office within the Vatican known as the Congregation for the Causes of Saints (CCS). Once beatification is agreed, the title of ‘Blessed’ is conferred. The final stage – also agreed only by papal decree - is canonization, after which the candidate is officially designated a saint. The whole process can take up to

hundreds of years, though for strategic reasons, as we shall see, things can and do get fast-tracked. Once sainthood is conferred, it cannot be revoked.

The criteria for sainthood remain much the same as they always have: either martyrdom in the cause of the faith or an exemplary life of ‘heroic virtue’. Martyrdom, however, is now more liberally interpreted. Traditionally, to be recognised as a martyr, the victim must have died explicitly for his or her faith. In other words, there had to be an unambiguous profession of faith, which, through the response it provoked, directly resulted in the victim’s death. The classic model of martyrdom, as in the case of Catherine of Alexandria, was derived from the Roman persecution and remained broadly the same for hundreds of years. However, through a series of individual cases (rather than through papal decree) the concept of martyrdom was broadened in the 1980s, so that it could include those who were murdered for their Catholic principles as well as those who were killed for the explicit profession of their faith. As we shall see, this opened up the field to a much wider range of candidates, allowing the Church to promote those who, whilst undoubtedly deserving, also clearly had significant strategic value.

The early confessors provided the first models for the other criterion of sainthood, that of ‘heroic virtue’. According to Kenneth Woodward, the term first entered the Church’s vocabulary via the 1328 translation of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* by Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln. The phrase was subsequently adopted by Thomas Aquinas, whose synthesis of Aristotelian and Christian ideas still provides the basis for the Church’s assessment of virtue today. It was formally enshrined in the procedures for saint-making by Pope Benedict XIV in 1735 (Woodward, 1996, 393).

In brief, the lives of candidates have to be assessed against a two-tiered structure of virtues: the three ‘supernatural’ (or ‘theological’) virtues that are supposedly derived through the grace of God, namely, faith, hope and charity; and the four moral (or ‘cardinal’) virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance, which were originally derived from the ethics of Aristotle.

Until the election of Pope John Paul II, canonization procedures had broadly followed the guidelines set out in the 1735 reforms. However, under John Paul’s direction, these were streamlined in 1983,<sup>7</sup> so as to facilitate the massive expansion of saint-making activity over which he presided. Not only were the strict criteria for martyrdom relaxed, as we have seen, but a number of changes were also made to the procedures for examining the credentials of a candidate for sainthood.

Chief amongst these was a shift from a juridical system, in which the case for and against a candidate was presented in adversarial terms, to a collegial system, based more on the disciplines of historical investigation and critical hagiography. Under the old system, a ‘prosecuting’ lawyer, known as the Devil’s Advocate, had been given the job of raising all possible objections to a candidate’s cause. Whilst this could undoubtedly be rigorous, it could also result in proceedings dragging on indefinitely or until resources were exhausted. In the new system, the prosecutor’s role was abolished, leading some critics to complain that the vetting procedures had become much less robust (Higgins, 2006, 39). Responsibility for the investigation of candidates passed to a group of scholars, known as the ‘College of Relators’, which was charged with assembling all the available documentary evidence that was relevant to a candidate’s case. This would be used to write up a critical biography

*(positio)*, which would be considered first by a group of expert theologians and historians, usually university professors, and then by the CCS itself. Finally, a recommendation would be made to the pope.

This procedure applies only at the beatification stage and is not repeated prior to canonization. Indeed, as far as either martyrdom or ‘heroic virtue’ is concerned, there is little to distinguish the beatified from the canonised. Canonization signifies only the theological ‘certainty’ that the candidate is actually ‘with God in heaven’. This distinction gives the saint his or her own feast day, a place in the Roman calendar and compulsory universal veneration within the Catholic Church. Veneration of the beatified, on the other hand, is optional and only permitted at a local level.

What enables the beatified to step up to the ranks of the saints is their reputed capacity to continue interceding in human affairs through the performance of miracles. In Catholic theology, a miracle is understood as an extraordinary effect, produced through divine intervention, that is ‘above, contrary to, or outside nature’ (Catholic Online, 2009). Prior to John Paul’s 1983 reforms, candidates for beatification were required to have performed two proven miracles, unless they were martyrs, in which case only one was necessary; in some circumstances, the requirement for martyrs could even be dispensed with altogether.<sup>8</sup> To progress to sainthood, it was necessary for all candidates, after beatification, to have performed two additional miracles.

According to the Catholic Church, a miracle can only be attributed to a candidate when it can be shown that the miracle has taken place as a result of the candidate’s intercession, in response to prayers from a person or persons in need. Throughout the

church's history, the vast majority of attributed miracles have involved the healing of illness or injury. However, with the development of medical science, it has become far more difficult for the church to claim that a miracle has actually taken place. What might have passed as 'miraculous' in mediaeval times, or even the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, will today often have a clear scientific explanation. In an acknowledgment of this, the church has, since 1948, relied on a consultative body, known as the *Consulta Medica*, to determine whether or not an allegedly miraculous healing can indeed be explained in scientific terms. The *Consulta Medica* is made up of around seventy distinguished physicians, mostly drawn from the professoriate of Rome's medical schools and the directorships of hospitals. At any one time, a group of five from the *Consulta* will be convened to consider the medical evidence surrounding a particular case.

As we have seen, prior to the election of John Paul II, growth in the community of centrally canonised saints was relatively modest. This could be attributed to a number of factors, of which the difficulty of 'proving' miracles was only one. Others included the number and quality of candidates proposed, the availability of resources, Vatican priorities, and so on. However, if the rate of canonization was to accelerate, as John Paul clearly intended, and if a sizeable number of his vast new army of the beatified was ever to go forward for canonization, then the difficulties of the miracle requirements would have to be overcome. Continuing scientific advances would almost certainly reduce even further the territory of the 'inexplicable'.

Under the 1983 reforms, the miracle requirements were therefore significantly reduced. From then on, miracles would no longer be required for the beatification of

martyrs and the required number in all other cases would be reduced by a half. In other words, candidates for beatification who were not martyrs would now have to perform only one miracle, as would all candidates put forward for canonization.

The broadening of the martyrdom criteria, the abolition of adversarial legal procedures and the lessening of the miracle requirement, as described in the above, constituted the most significant of the 1983 reforms. Together, they made it possible to speed up the processes of beatification and canonization, resulting in a massively expanded cohort, unprecedented in modern times, and inaugurating a new era of popular sanctity.

### **Sanctity and Popular Culture**

The idea of sanctity arguably retains a strong hold on the popular imagination. In his book, *Diana: The Making of a Saint*, Ted Harrison notes how Princess Diana, after her death, was widely seen as a kind of secular saint, who today continues to be worshipped at the ‘shrines’ associated with her (2006, 197). Although (at the time of writing) still living, Nelson Mandela has for many people also acquired the aura of sanctity (Roberts, 2008). Indeed, if we recall the two categories of Christian sainthood – martyrdom and ‘heroic virtue’ – Diana’s ‘sanctity’ might be said to correspond to a secular version of the former and Mandela’s to that of the latter.

As noted earlier, sociologists of celebrity culture have pointed out the similarities of celebrity worship to some of the rituals of religion. However, it might be more accurate to suggest that the relationship between the two is complementary, with organised religion drawing on celebrity culture as much as the other way round.



Indeed, Chris Rojek hints at this in his study, when he compares the papal dispensation of sainthoods, which are often theatrically staged in front of vast crowds, to a Hollywood Oscar ceremony (2001, 98). From this perspective, the Catholic Church's renewed enthusiasm for making saints can, in part, be seen as a recognition of their celebrity power and their capacity to strengthen the presence of the Church within the arena of popular culture.<sup>9</sup>

Take the case of Francesco Forgione, for example, popularly known as Padre Pio, now Saint Pius of Pietrelcina. Pio was a Capuchin friar and mystic who died in 1968 at the age of 81, advancing to sainthood just thirty-four years later. He was famous particularly for the bleeding stigmata on his hands and feet and his alleged capacity to perform all sorts of miracles. He was supposedly capable, amongst other things, of curing illnesses, reading peoples' minds, levitation, prophecy and even bilocation (being seen in two places at once). He became a legend in his own lifetime, with millions of devotees around the world, including celebrities such as Sophia Loren and Graham Greene, who carried pictures of him around in his wallet (Higgins, 2006, 113; Woodward, 1996, 186-7). He was also a highly controversial figure, prone to inexplicable rages whilst hearing confessions, and repeatedly accused of both sexual harassment and of faking his stigmata. He was investigated several times by the Vatican and two successive popes considered him to be a fraud (Bronski, 2002; Higgins, 2006, 113; Margry, 2002, 90-91; Woodward, 1996, 186-7). During the beatification process, accounts of his behaviour were studied by the Roman psychiatrist, Luigi Cancrini, who found evidence of a histrionic personality disorder (Margry, 2002, 91).

Nevertheless, he was indisputably popular, particularly in Italy, and even more so after his death. Indeed, one historian has recently claimed that in the entire history of Christendom the cult of a saint has never before expanded so rapidly and intensely (Margry, 2002, 89). It is to this popularity – to Pio’s position in Catholic popular culture – that his extraordinarily rapid advance to sainthood can be attributed. Only St Theresa of Lisieux, who died aged twenty-four in 1897 and whose canonization took place just twenty-eight years after her death, progressed to sainthood in a shorter space of time. St Theresa, too, occupies a central position in Catholic popular culture and, indeed, along with Pio, remains the most popular saint of modern times.

Without the 1983 reforms, discussed above, it seems likely that Pio’s cause would have faltered, or at least been severely delayed, on account of the case that the ‘prosecution’ would have been compelled to make. Even though he was eventually cleared of all charges, on the basis of the 104 volumes of evidence that had been collected for his cause, he remained a divisive figure within the Catholic hierarchy. However, under the new system that John Paul II had introduced, objections could be more easily brushed aside when, as in Pio’s case, the Pope was pushing for a ‘result’. John Paul had been a longstanding supporter of Pio, having first met him in 1947, when Pio heard the young priest’s confession. Later, as Archbishop of Cracow, he had taken an active role in advocating Pio’s canonization, joining other senior members of the Polish Catholic church in writing a formal letter of support. As Pope, he had made a pilgrimage to Pio’s old friary and celebrated Mass at his tomb. With this level of pontifical endorsement, Pio moved – to use Michael Higgins’s phrase – ‘from rehabilitation to sainthood at warp speed’ (Higgins, 2006, 134). Both beatification and canonization took place within the duration of John Paul’s pontificate.

Since Pio's canonization, his cult has continued to escalate. In Italy, his image is ubiquitous. It can be found on T-shirts, key chains, and dashboard ornaments; in shops, homes and garages; even on the back of trucks. It is possible to buy Padre Pio ice cream, to order medallions online with his image engraved<sup>10</sup> and to find 'soft and huggable dolls' made up in his likeness.<sup>11</sup> In 2000, a radio station, *Radio Tau: La Voce di Padre Pio*, devoted to the life and times of Pio, started to broadcast across Europe via satellite.<sup>12</sup> In the same year, two major Padre Pio films were broadcast on Italian TV, the second of which went out at prime time and was watched by almost 50% of the Italian population (Margry, 2002, 102). The Catholic Enquiry Office in London has created a 'Don't Worry Be Happy Day' - or DWBH for short - after Pio's catchphrase of 'Pray, Hope, Don't Worry' (Catholic Communications Network, 2007). In 2008, Pio's body was exhumed and put on display in a glass coffin at his old friary in San Giovanni Rotondo, in Southern Italy. This small town now has over 100 hotels, attracts around 8 million visitors a year and competes with Lourdes as a magnet for religious tourism. It is sometimes referred to as the Catholic Las Vegas (Grimond, 2002).

Although at this stage still only in the ranks of the beatified, another 'celebrity saint' is, of course, the Albanian nun and charity worker, known as Mother Theresa of Calcutta. Born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu, she became an even bigger celebrity than Padre Pio, attracting massive media attention for her work with the destitute, first in India then in many other countries as well. She received countless awards and honours, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. Both during her lifetime and after her death in 1997 she was consistently found by Gallup to be the single most widely

admired person in the US (Newport, 1999). However, she was also a controversial figure, charged with being more interested in the acquisition of converts than the relief of suffering (Hitchens, 2003). She was also criticised for accepting money from the corrupt Duvalier family, which governed Haiti with brutal ruthlessness for nearly three decades, and from the convicted fraudster, Charles Keating (Hitchens, 1995, 64-71). After her death, it emerged that her faith had not been what it appeared and that for most of her life she had actually experienced the absence rather than the presence of God (Hitchens, 2007)

Nevertheless, Teresa, like Pio, was also put on the path to sainthood with extraordinary speed. Indeed, John Paul waived the normal five-year waiting period and permitted proceedings to start just two years after her death. Four years later, she was beatified in an extravagant ceremony in St Peter's Square, attended by thousands and broadcast on TV to millions more.

Of course, these 'celebrity saints' could not acquire or maintain their global profile without the attention of the media or the kind of merchandising that we have seen in the case of Padre Pio. During her life, Mother Teresa's symbiotic relationship with the media was well-known, beginning in 1969 when the British satirist-turned-convert Malcolm Muggeridge made a documentary film about her for the BBC, entitled *Something Beautiful for God* (Higgins, 2006, 156). Muggeridge later converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism under Teresa's influence. Teresa and Pio both belong to that elite group of the sanctified that attracts international attention from both the secular and the religious media.

Media interest in lesser known saints tends to be either local or confined to religious media. The latter are nevertheless far-reaching. One inventory of Catholic media lists one hundred and thirty-nine magazines and journals, twenty newspapers, seventeen radio stations and nine TV stations (D'Costa, 2009). There are also extensive online resources, such as *CatholicCulture.org* and UCANEWS.com (Union of Asian Catholic News), both of which regularly carry stories on saints. *American Catholics.Org* devotes one of its listed web pages to 'saints' and offers a free 'saint of the day' alert. Subscribers receive a daily email about one of the saints whose feast day is celebrated on that particular day. In January 2009, Pope Benedict XVI launched his own dedicated channel on YouTube, on which canonization ceremonies can now be viewed.<sup>13</sup>

### **Strategic Canonization**

According to Kenneth Woodward, the Vatican has traditionally regarded sociological studies of sainthood as exercises in profanity. As we have seen, saints are represented as the product of divine, not human, agency and suggestions that institutional or political factors play a decisive role are strongly resisted (Woodward, 1996, 119). Humans may have devised the system for the recognition of saints, and they may be responsible for operating it, but the saints that emerge at the end of the process are ultimately seen as those that God wants. To the secular mind, this can come across as disingenuous. For it is very difficult to examine the record of John Paul II's canonizations without coming to the conclusion that, in a number of cases, they were determined as much by the strategic objectives of the Vatican as they were by the 'pure holiness' of the candidate. Only if it is assumed that God's strategies are synonymous with those of the Vatican is it possible to elide 'strategic canonization'

with the will of God; and, of course, it is precisely this elision that the doctrine of papal infallibility permits.<sup>14</sup>

Although, as we shall see, John Paul II took strategic canonization to new levels, he was not the first pope to recognise the strategic potential of sanctity within popular culture. Take the case of Maria Goretti, for example. Born in 1902, the daughter of a poor peasant family from the Marche region of Central Italy, Goretti was repeatedly harassed at the age of twelve by a male, adolescent neighbour. Eventually, he attempted to rape her, threatening to kill her if she resisted. Preferring to die than to sacrifice her virginity, Goretti was repeatedly stabbed by her attacker. She died twenty-four hours later, declaring forgiveness for her murderer shortly before her death.

Goretti rapidly became a powerful symbol of sexual purity and was beatified by Pope Pius XII in 1947. In an address given at the beatification ceremony that was widely reported throughout Europe, Pius denounced those in the entertainment and media industries, together with the military which had recently started to conscript women, for corrupting the chastity of youth. This was seen as an attack not only on American popular culture but also as an attempt to counteract the sexual behaviour of the American troops, most of whom were Protestant, that had liberated Italy in 1944 (Woodward, 1996, 124). Three years later Goretti was canonised by the same pope in front of the largest crowd yet to assemble for a canonization ceremony. Attending with Goretti's mother was her daughter's murderer, who, in the course of his twenty-seven-year incarceration in prison, from which he was now released, had repented and received the forgiveness of his victim's family. For years, the cult of St Maria

flourished, though her popularity has waned in recent decades, particularly amongst younger Catholics<sup>15</sup> (Higgins, 2006, 63).

During the pontificate of John Paul II, the saint-making process was used to pursue a much broader range of strategic objectives. Indeed, it arguably played a central role in underlining his whole vision for the church. When asked why so many saints had been created by John Paul, the prefect of the CCS at the time, Cardinal Saraiva Martins, responded that the Pope had wished to promote as many models of holiness as possible. He valued holiness above all else in the Church and saw it as having great ecumenical power (Zenit, 2006). However, models of holiness do not exist in some kind of transcendent zone, free from ideology or politics; on the contrary, they can carry with them very clear social and political messages. As we have seen, these messages are amplified through the Catholic media and, when ‘celebrity saints’ are involved, through the secular media too. Two examples from John Paul II’s pontificate will serve to illustrate the point: the first concerns the general area of sexual politics; the second the Church’s historic relationship with Nazism.

As Michael Bronski has observed, John Paul’s canonization strategy was used to advance his generally conservative political agenda (2002). Nowhere was this clearer than in the area of sexual politics. It is significant, for example, that his two key ‘celebrity saints’, Padre Pio and Mother Teresa, were both strident supporters of traditional Catholic teaching. Shortly before he died, Pio wrote personally to Pope Paul VI to thank him for *Humanae Vitae*, the 1968 papal encyclical that, against the advice of the commission his predecessor had set up to investigate the issue, reaffirmed the ban against all forms of artificial birth control (Higgins, 2006, 133). If

anything, Teresa was even more strident than Pio, implacably opposed to birth control, non-marital sex, homosexuality and abortion.

The Catholic church has always considered virginity, or at least chastity, to be more conducive to sanctity than marriage (let alone sex outside marriage) and, indeed, in the entire canon of over 10,000 saints, there are estimated to be no more than around one hundred who were married at the time of their death (Holbock, 2002). This includes at least one, canonised by John Paul, who had actually abandoned his wife and children, in order to take part in a missionary expedition that, for him, ended in a martyr's death.<sup>16</sup> Although John Paul called for more married candidates to be put forward for sanctification,<sup>17</sup> the particular 'models of holiness' that emerged from this process served only to confirm the traditional superiority accorded to celibacy over sex.<sup>18</sup> For example, Luis Beltrame Quattrocchi (1880-1951) and Maria Corsini (1884-1965) were the first couple ever to be beatified together. John Paul used the occasion of the beatification ceremony in 2001 to affirm the traditional Catholic values of marriage, in opposition to non-married cohabitation, same-sex marriage and other modern trends. However, if the Quattrocchis were to represent a saintly model of married life, it was an unusual one. Three of their four children became priests, opting for a life of celibacy, and, after twenty years together, the parents themselves also opted for it, renouncing sex for the remaining twenty-six years of their marriage.

If the canonization of the Quattrocchis reaffirmed the Church's old doubts about the compatibility of sanctity and sex, even within the confines of a devout marriage, then that of Gianna Beretta Molla conveyed an uncompromising message concerning abortion. Born in 1922, Molla trained in medicine, subsequently specialising in



pediatrics. Following her marriage, she produced three children without complications, before experiencing difficulties while carrying her fourth, when she was diagnosed with a uteran tumour. The choices she faced were stark: either she could undergo a hysterectomy, which would remove the life-threatening tumour but at the same time terminate the pregnancy; or she could choose an alternative surgical procedure, which would enhance the child's chances of survival but which would pose severe risks to her own at the time of birth. She chose the latter option, requesting her husband to have no hesitation in saving the child rather than her, if a decision had to be made. As her medical advisors had feared, Molla developed severe complications during the birth and, while the child was born healthy and survived, she died a week later from septic peritonitis.

Molla was beatified by John Paul in 1992, thirty years after her death, and then canonised in 2004. In fact, hers was the very last canonization that he performed. Supporters of Molla have insisted that her sanctity cannot be reduced to one single act of heroism, and that it is her whole life, not her final act of sacrifice, that accounts for her elevation. Nevertheless, the circumstances of her death are highly significant and, regardless of her credentials for sainthood, it is difficult not to see her canonization as a powerfully symbolic strategic move in the Church's uncompromising campaign against abortion.

The second example of John Paul's use of strategic canonization concerns the Church's controversial relationship with Nazism. Much of this controversy centres around the alleged 'silence' of Pope Pius XII (1939-1958), who, in the view of his critics, failed to denounce with sufficient vigour the crimes of the Nazis before,

during and after World War II. Circumstantial evidence has also been put forward to suggest that Pius was involved in helping Nazi war criminals to escape to South America, on account of their potential value to the Church in its fight against Communism (Phayer, 2000; Goni, 2002). These are highly complex issues, which have been the focus of intense historical debate and analysis (see, for example, Blet, 1999; Craughwell, 2000; Rhonheimer, 2003; Higgins, 2006, 173-225). The Pope's alleged failures were also dramatised in a highly controversial play by Ralph Hochuth in 1962, entitled *Der Stellvertreter (The Deputy)*, which was subsequently adapted for a Costa Gavras film and released under the title of *Amen* in 2002. On the other hand, Pius has had strong defenders, not least amongst some prominent Jewish leaders and scholars, which have included Albert Einstein, Golda Meir and Sir Martin Gilbert.<sup>19</sup> One Israeli diplomat has concluded that Pius was instrumental in saving as many as 860,000 Jews from certain death (Higgins, 2006, 215).

It is not the purpose of this article to rehearse the arguments around this controversy or to comment here on the extent to which the allegations can or cannot be justified. However, what is indisputably clear is that the reputation of the Church did not emerge from this controversy unscathed. At the very least, suspicions were aroused in many peoples' minds that, during the Nazi era, the Church's moral authority was seriously compromised.<sup>20</sup>

It is in this context that the sanctification of Catholic victims of the Nazis has to be viewed. This, of course, is not to suggest that those sanctified did not make extraordinary sacrifices; even less, that millions of Catholics, particularly in Poland, did not suffer terribly from Nazi atrocities. Indeed, having lived through and survived

the Nazi occupation as a young Polish man, John Paul could not have been anything other than acutely sensitive to the suffering of his fellow citizens. This, as much as the broader strategic considerations, must at least partly have motivated the beatification of the 'Martyrs of Plock' during his visit to Warsaw in June 1999. On this occasion, he beatified one hundred and eight Polish martyrs, who had been executed by the Nazis between 1939 and 1945. These included three bishops, seventy-eight priests and eight nuns, amongst whom were several that had been killed for protecting Jewish children. The majority of the victims died in the Dachau and Auschwitz concentration camps.

Nevertheless, the sanctification of Catholics who had died for their opposition to the Nazi regime, especially when that opposition had been expressed through solidarity with Jews, sent out a powerful message to those who criticised the Church for its alleged failings during the Nazi era and in its immediate aftermath. However, it was first necessary to broaden the criteria for martyrdom if Nazi victims were to be sanctified in this way. As we saw above, to be honoured as a Catholic martyr, it had traditionally been necessary to die at the hands of a tyrant for the explicit profession of one's faith. The Nazi leadership was well aware of this and had no intention of creating such opportunities. It never denounced Catholicism and, indeed, Hitler himself was baptised as a Catholic and never renounced his faith.

Maximilian Kolbe was the first victim of the Nazis to be canonised as a martyr. Although he had been beatified in 1971 by Pope Paul VI for his 'heroic virtue', he was not deemed to have met the traditional criteria for martyrdom. A Franciscan priest from Niepokalanow, near Warsaw, he had sheltered Jewish refugees in his

monastery following the German invasion of Poland in 1939. He was subsequently arrested and transferred to Auschwitz. Following an attempted escape by other inmates, ten men were selected for death by starvation in an underground bunker, as an act of reprisal by the camp commander. When one of those selected protested in despair that he was needed by his wife and young children, Kolbe volunteered to take his place. Once in the death chamber, he helped prepare the others for their own deaths, assisting them until they had either all died or passed into unconsciousness. Kolbe himself was finally killed by a lethal injection after sixteen days.

When Kolbe was canonized by John Paul II in 1982, the Pope declared that he should be venerated as a martyr as well as for his virtue, although the CCS had again confirmed its view that he did not meet the traditional martyrdom criteria. In making this declaration, the Pope had arguably created a new category of saint – the martyr for charity – and opened up the possibility of recognising martyrdom in a much wider range of candidates.

The beatification of Titus Brandsma in 1985 extended the process further. A Dutch priest, teacher and journalist, Brandsma repeatedly lectured and wrote about the dangers of Nazism. After the occupation of Holland in 1940, Brandsma, along with the Dutch Catholic hierarchy, continued to denounce the Nazis and their policies towards the Jews. He was arrested in 1942 and transferred to the Dachau concentration camp, where he joined 2,700 other imprisoned clergy, most of them Catholic priests (Woodward, 1996, 132). At Dachau, he was beaten, tortured and subjected to medical experiments, finally dying from a lethal injection of carbolic acid.

Although Brandsma, like Kolbe, failed to meet the martyrdom criteria as they had traditionally been understood, he was beatified by John Paul as a martyr to Catholic principles, which he had died defending. This was followed by the sanctification of further Nazi victims, such as the French missionary, Marcel Callo, who died in Mauthausen prison at the age of twenty-three, and, more controversially, the Jewish intellectual-turned-Carmelite nun, Edith Stein, who was murdered in Auschwitz. Whilst the Church saw her death as further evidence of the Nazi persecution of Catholics, many Jewish groups were outraged by the attribution of Christian martyrdom to a woman who had indisputably been murdered on account of her Jewish genes. Even more controversial were the moves to canonize Pius XII himself, which, although strongly supported by John Paul II, had not reached the beatification stage by the time of his death. The canonization of Pius would signal a definitive repudiation on the part of the Church of the criticisms surrounding his alleged 'silence'.

## **Conclusion**

The examples of strategic canonization discussed above, first within the general area of sexual politics and, secondly, in relation to the Church's historic relationship with Nazism, far from exhaust the strategic and symbolic uses to which the sanctification processes were put during John Paul II's pontificate. No pope travelled more widely than John Paul and, on his travels, he frequently used sanctification ceremonies as a kind of 'calling card'. These could have the effect of creating local 'celebrity saints', particularly in the relatively new churches of Africa and Asia, and at the same time serve to bond these churches more closely to Rome. New saints and 'blesseds' were

thus created in, amongst other places, Seoul, Lesotho, Kinshasa, Madagascar, Papua New Guinea, and Kerala, as well as most of the European countries newly liberated from Communism.

Strategic canonization was also used by John Paul to bring about a symbolic union between opposing factions within the Church. In the ecclesiastically significant year of 2000, he performed the simultaneous beatifications of the ultra-conservative convenor of the Vatican I Ecumenical Council, Pope Pius IX, and the liberal convenor of Vatican II, Pope John XXIII. In more populist vein, he beatified Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824), the so-called Seer of Dülmen, who reputedly experienced ‘ecstasies’, during which she was able to travel back in time and observe in minute detail the events between the Last Supper and the Resurrection (Emmerich, 2004). Emmerich’s diaries provided the principal source for Mel Gibson’s hugely popular film, *The Passion of Christ*. She was beatified less than a year after the film’s release in 2004.

In advancing the thesis of strategic canonization, three further observations need to be made. First, although the canonizations of ‘celebrity saints’ are necessarily always strategic, on account of the powerful signals that they send out, not all strategic canonizations involve the same degree of celebrity. Of course, candidates for sainthood will always possess some level of celebrity, even if only at a local level or within delimited religious communities, but this kind of celebrity clearly occupies a much less prominent place within popular culture than that possessed by international stars, such as Padre Pio or Mother Theresa.

Secondly, not all canonizations, nor indeed the majority of them, can be described as ‘strategic’. Nor should an all-powerful role be attributed to the pope. As noted earlier, the initiative for proposing candidates for sainthood lies not with the pope or the CCS, but with a group of local supporters. Moreover, it is the local bishop who decides in the first instance whether the proposal can be pursued. Those who make the proposals are, almost without exception, representatives of religious orders or ecclesiastical groupings. It is the proposer that must bear the bulk of the costs of the canonization process and it is only well-resourced organisations that are able to do so. The pool from which candidates with strategic potential can be drawn is thus limited by these constraints. Indeed, many of the candidates that are proposed, and who are ultimately successful, are relatively obscure figures that have little strategic significance outside the cloistered environment from which they have emerged.

Thirdly, just because strategic canonizations can convey powerful messages to a wide audience, this does not mean that those messages are necessarily read in the way intended; or, indeed, if they are, that they are acted upon. To give an obvious example: Italy is a country with one of the highest Catholic populations in the world and also with one of the highest Catholic percentages of population; yet at the same time it continues to have one of the lowest birth rates in the world. The message of *Humanae Vitae*, reinforced so strongly by John Paul’s ‘celebrity saints’, has clearly not been heeded.

Kenneth Woodward has written that the saint is one of the primary figures of Western culture (1996, 4). At the same time, he has observed that ‘it is a commonplace amongst religious scholars and cultural historians that the saint as a social ideal has

become vestigial in modern Western societies' (1996, 404). What we saw during the pontificate of John Paul II was an attempt to restore the cult of saints to its place in popular culture and an extension of strategic canonization to a much wider range of problematics. This may not have achieved all that was intended, and, indeed, it is noticeable that John Paul's successor, Pope Benedict XVI, has slowed down the canonization programme significantly. In the long history of the Roman Catholic Church, John Paul's experiment may well stand out as one that was not repeated. Nevertheless, it was both a novel move in the 'constant battlefield' that is popular culture and a clear illustration of the Catholic Church's unique capacity to reinvent very old forms of cultural policy for changing times.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following for their helpful suggestions and thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this paper: Jeremy Ahearne, Eleonora Belfiore, Kate Brennan, Raj Isar, Kevin Mulcahy, Anna Roh, David Thomas and two anonymous reviewers. I would also like to thank all those who commented on earlier drafts of the paper that I presented at the 'Policy and the Popular Workshop' (University of Leeds, June 2009), at the 'Popular Culture and World Politics Workshop' (University of Bristol, July 2009), at the Centre for Cultural Policy Studies (University of Warwick, February 2010) and at the Sixth International Conference on Cultural Policy Research (University of Jyväskylä, August 2010). Special thanks to David Looseley for offering the resulting article a 'home'.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Although the Roman Catholic Church is the only religious institution to have a formal procedure for the recognition of saints, the saint is a familiar figure in all religions. For example, Buddhism has its arahants, bodhisattvas and lamas; Islam its *awliyā' Allāh* (close friends of God) and its Sufi masters; Hinduism its gurus (Woodward, 1996, 15-16)

<sup>2</sup> I use 'modern' here to denote the period from the 1960s to the present day.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in recently published introductions to Cultural Studies (Walton, 2008), Popular Culture (Guins & Cruz, 2005) and Cultural Policy Studies (Lewis & Miller, 2003), references to religion or religious institutions are almost completely absent. A notable exception is the web-based *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*. However, even here, the great majority of published articles focus on the reading of religious themes in secular forms of popular culture rather than the promotion of popular culture by religious institutions.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, McGuigan, J. (2004) and Lewis, J. & Miller, T. (2003)

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Ahearne, J. & Bennett, O. (2009 & 2011)

<sup>6</sup> The first recorded papal authorisation of a saint took place in 993, when Pope John XV canonised Bishop Udalricus of Augsburg, at the request of the Bishop's successor.

<sup>7</sup> These reforms were enshrined in the apostolic constitution, *Divinus Perfectionis Magister*, promulgated by John Paul II on January 25<sup>th</sup> 1983 (Holy See, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> For example, Kateri Tekakwitha, the seventeenth-century daughter of a Mohawk warrior and Algonquin woman, was beatified without proof or miracles on June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1980.

<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that John Paul II himself became a celebrity icon. During his pontificate, he was frequently 'on tour', making 104 overseas trips and visiting 129 different countries. This exceeded the number of overseas visits made by all previous popes put together. His 1999 CD, *Abba Pater*, which included prayers and meditations set to a rock backing, became a best-seller in many Catholic countries.

<sup>10</sup> For example, a variety of Padre Pio medallions can be purchased from CHAINZonline, a mail order company specialising in 'fine religious jewelry' (see <http://www.chainzonline.com/>).

<sup>11</sup> Another mail order company, Soft Saints Inc., specialises in the supply of ‘Soft and Huggable Dolls of Catholic Saints’ (see <http://www.softsaints.com/> ).

<sup>12</sup> Now *Tele Padre Pio*, the station broadcasts TV as well as radio programmes, and is available world wide via the internet (see <http://www.catholic.org/adv/globecastwvtv/> )

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, [www.youtube.com/user/vatican#p/search/17/32y6LTMevbo](http://www.youtube.com/user/vatican#p/search/17/32y6LTMevbo)

<sup>14</sup> The Catholic Encyclopaedia notes that there is general agreement amongst theologians that the Pope is ‘infallible’ when issuing a decree of canonization (Beccari, 1907).

<sup>15</sup> Goretti was the subject of an inflammatory critique, which was widely publicised, in Giordano Bruno Guerri’s 1985 book, *Poor Assassin, Poor Saint: The True Story of Maria Goretti*. The publication of the book coincided with intense public debate that was taking place in Italy at the time over the legalisation of abortion.

<sup>16</sup> St Lorenzo Ruiz (1600-1637).

<sup>17</sup> The term ‘sanctification’ is used in this article to denote either beatification or canonization.

<sup>18</sup> Woodward refers to the ‘traditional Catholic view that a sexless marriage is superior to a normal one because it represents more perfectly the chaste and wholly spiritual union between Jesus Christ and His Church’ (1996, 349). Support for the superiority of celibacy can be found in St Paul, 1 Corinthians 7:1-8.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Dalin (2005) and Doyno (2003).

<sup>20</sup> For a particularly thoughtful analysis of this, see Rhonheimer (2003). Rhonheimer is himself a Catholic priest and professor of ethics and political philosophy at Rome's Pontifical University of the Holy Cross.

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