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Why does the Church continue to canonize people?

An excerpt from an interview with Cardinal José Saraiva Martins, Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, published in Spain's ABC. Cardinal Saraiva took part in the symposium "Witnesses of the 20th Century, Teachers of the 21st Century," which took place in Seville on April 8th.

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From the establishment of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in 1588 until the election of John Paul II, there were 296 saints canonized and 808 declared blessed. The present Pope has canonized 459 saints and proclaimed 1,274 blessed during his pontificate.

Why does the Church continue to canonize people?

The public recognition of the holiness of the martyrs and of those who practiced the virtues to a heroic degree is a constant feature in the life of the Church, present from its very beginnings. In his letter on the new millennium, John Paul II speaks with an optimism deeply rooted in faith about the exciting pastoral task that awaits the Church in the present moment, and he does not hesitate to say that the perspective from which all pastoral work has to be planned is the calling of every person to

holiness. Within this framework, the Pope also wanted to give a strong push to the number of canonizations and beatifications during his pontificate. Through canonization, the Church gives thanks to God and at the same time honours those children of hers who have corresponded generously to divine grace. And she proposes them for all her children as intercessors and models of the holiness to which all are called.

The symposium in which you participated in Seville examined exemplary Christians of the 20th century as models for people of the 21st century. Do you have any hope that the life and work of such men and women can change this world in crisis?

Only God can preserve the world, and his will is that we all be saints and that all creation be directed

toward him. But he wants to count on us, on our free response. It falls to each person to fulfil the plan which God has made for him, which is holiness, in the concrete circumstances in which he finds himself. It would be too comfortable and besides unrealistic to sit back and wait passively for structures to change.

But at the same time, holiness is not a purely individual concern, since the Church is the family of God and we can reach the goal only as members of that family. Jesus Christ is the head of the Mystical Body, which is made up of those who have already reached heaven, those who are undergoing purification in order to enter into that glory, and those who still walk this earth. It is within this marvellous communion of saints and this sharing of goods that the holiness of each person becomes a reality. Within this framework we

can understand how the saints help us both as models and as intercessors.

You ask me if I have hope - of course, I do! We've just finished celebrating the Passion, death and resurrection of the Lord: there we have the answer to the discouragement that sometimes assails us when we experience the poor quality of our correspondence to God's will. We have to be convinced that the grace of God is superabundant, and that it overcomes – with strength to spare – all the difficulties.

Why has the process of canonization of Josemaria Escrivá been so fast?

The reform of the canonization process introduced in 1983 by John Paul II has greatly simplified the procedure for the causes of the saints. The facts themselves show that several causes have been

processed more quickly than that of the founder of Opus Dei. Josefina Bakhita, who was proclaimed blessed on the same day as Escrivá, was canonized two years ago. Besides, there are other persons beatified after Escrivá who have already been canonized, such as St. Maria Josefa of the Heart of Jesus. And the canonization of Blessed Padre Pio has already been scheduled for June 16th.

This reform of John Paul II came as a response to a desire expressed by the Second Vatican Council to see on the altars saints who are contemporaries - persons with whom every Christian can easily identify because they lived in the same cultural setting, with problems similar to those which all of us have to face every day.

This year is the centennial of Blessed Escrivá's birth. Do you think that his message – that the

laity, ordinary Christians, are called to be saints – will be the catalyst to ignite the great revolution that the Church has been waiting for?

Blessed Josemaria Escrivá devoted his life to spreading the message that every Christian has “to sanctify his professional work, to sanctify himself in his professional work, and to sanctify others through his professional work.” In other words, every Christian has to “sanctify ordinary life, to sanctify himself in ordinary life, and to sanctify others through ordinary life.” It’s evident that this message is right in tune with the program John Paul II had proposed for the entire Church at the beginning of the new millennium: “First of all, I have no hesitation in saying that all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to holiness.... The ways of holiness are many, according to the vocation of each

individual. I thank God that in these years he has enabled me to beatify and canonize a large number of Christians, and among them many lay people who attained holiness in the most ordinary circumstances of life. The time has come to re-propose wholeheartedly to everyone this high standard of ordinary Christian living: the whole life of the Christian community and of Christian families must lead in this direction"(Novo Millennio Ineunte, nos. 30 & 31)

Does this mean that the messages of saints who lived centuries ago are no longer relevant, since they often lived in circumstances very different from our own?

If you're asking whether the lives of the saints should be taken as a model for how we should live, I will say that Jesus Christ is the only model. The saints are not models in the strict sense, but rather copies or

reproductions, more or less good copies but always incomplete ones, of the model which is Jesus Christ. Holiness is meta-historical in the sense that it is the same yesterday, today and always, since it consists of fulfilling to the last detail the plan which God has for each of us. And, as the same time, holiness is deeply incarnated and rooted in history. The lives of the saints provide an example of how that identification with Jesus Christ became a reality in particular circumstances.

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