

# What makes a saint?

Pope John Paul, on the way to Australia, stopped in Papua New Guinea to beatify lay catechist Peter To Rot. In Sydney he beatified Mary MacKillop, then flew to Sri Lanka where he beatified Fr Joseph Vaz.

So who, or what, are saints? Why saints?

The word *saint* is used in Scripture in different senses. In the Old Testament there is one reference: *Love the Lord, all you His saints . . .* (Ps 31:23).

In the New Testament there are 62 references, although the term is used only once in the Gospels, in Matthew 27:52: *The tombs also were opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.*

The word is most frequently used by Paul to describe members of the faith community; but, in the *Book of Revelation*, the term is more frequently applied to those who have been saved.

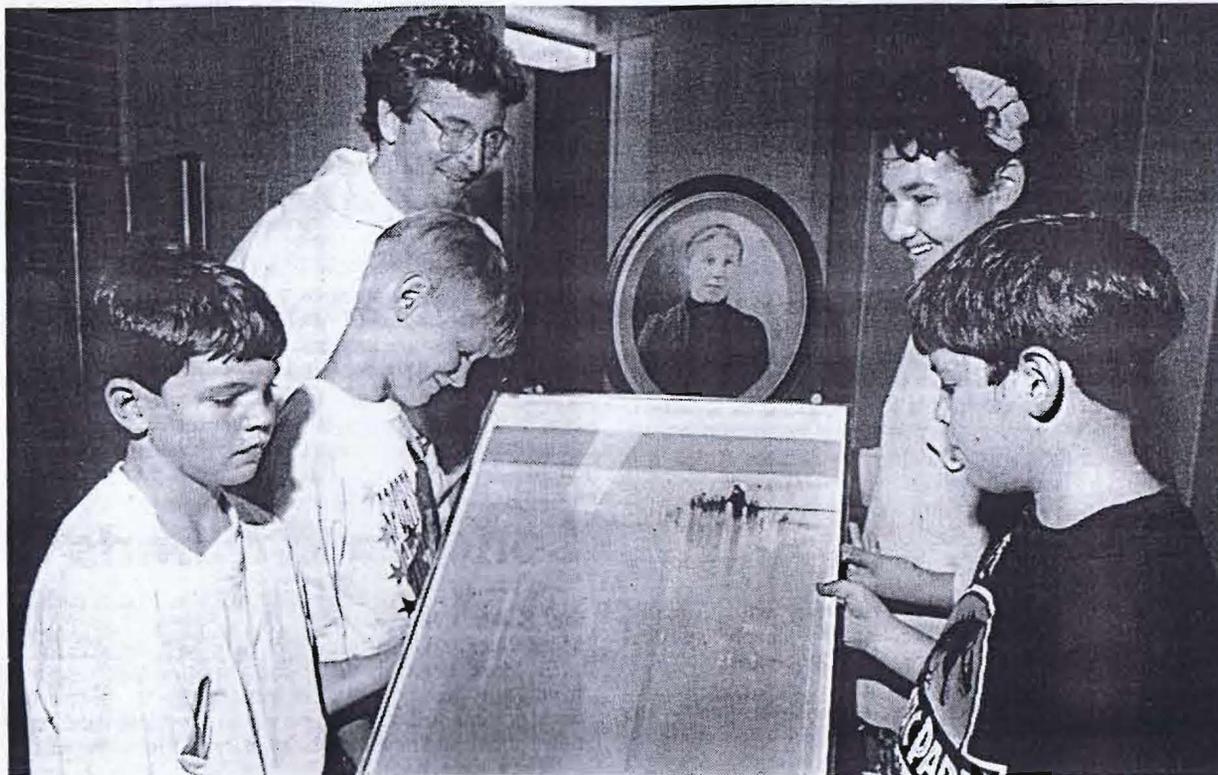
From time to time in different places, some of the saints used in the broad sense above, through following Christ more closely, give outstanding Christian witness, either by martyrdom for the sake of the Kingdom or by their heroic practice of the virtues.

From its beginning the Christian community gave special honour to Mary, the Apostles and martyrs and sought their intercession. Later, others were proclaimed as worthy of veneration and imitation. In Christian theology and literature, these heroes and heroines of the Christian story have been given the title *saint*. The word is now commonly used only in this narrower sense.

The norms for canonisation as revised by Pope John Paul in 1983 summarise the purpose of the process: *The Apostolic See, from time immemorial, in keeping with the serious task entrusted to it of teaching, sanctifying and governing the People of God, proposes to the faithful for their imitation, veneration and invocation men and women who are brilliant examples of charity and the other evangelical virtues and, after due investigations have been carried out, declares them in the solemn action of canonisation to be saints.*

The process of canonisation, then, is a means of specifying, in a systematic and official way, which of the heroines and heroes of the Church merit official public veneration. This shifts the decision about veneration — and people in all ages and cultures have venerated those they thought “holy” — from subjective and personal assessment to one that is objective and from the Church.

Canonisation, therefore, is the action of the whole Church for the sake of the whole Church. The procedures are lengthy and complex.



*Mary MacKillop parish, at bayside Birkdale in Brisbane archdiocese, has acquired a print of a painting done for the beatification art competition, which was processed into Mass last Sunday by children. From left, Buddy Healy, Liam Rafter, Parish Priest Fr Luke Reed, Melissa Swan, Tim Stone.*

The *Modern Catholic Encyclopaedia* says that “what the Church looks for in venerating a saint is not a faultless or sinless life, but a passionate and single-minded dedication to prayer and good works that makes this person an exemplary model of heroic virtue in some respect”.

The process, which in Mary MacKillop’s case began in 1926, 17 years after her death, begins with the Church’s bestowal of the title Servant of God after initial study of a person’s life.

They are then declared venerable or worthy of veneration because of exemplary character. The penultimate stage is beatification, which requires a rigorously tested miracle. The woman, who it was accepted had been cured miraculously by Mary’s intercession, was anonymously in the

crowd at the Randwick Mass. The document granting the introduction of Mary’s Cause for beatification was read publicly during the Eucharistic Congress in Melbourne in 1973.

Canonisation, which requires a further authenticated miracle, is a final step.

The story of Peter To Rot, martyred by the Japanese in 1945 because he refused to cease his pastoral activity, is by now well known. Fr Joseph Vaz’s story is not so well known.

He was born in India near the city of Goa in 1651. From his early years he felt called to the priesthood and after ordination in 1676 worked in South India until 1684.

When he heard of the persecution of Catholics by the Dutch in Sri Lanka, he decided to go there. He arrived disguised as a beggar in 1687. He overcame a serious illness and, living in poverty, slowly made contact with Catholic families.

After two years in Jaffna, he went to Kandy, the then capital, where the king imprisoned him for two years, accusing him of spying for the Dutch. He continued his pastoral work in prison and was released by the king to care for the spiritual needs of his Catholic subjects. Fr Vaz, who died in Kandy in 1711 as Vicar-General of Sri Lanka, is considered to have saved the Church there from extinction.