Overview

- Dictionary search on “saint”
  - The etymology (origin) of “saint” comes from the Anglo-French seint, or saint, and from the Latin sanctus (sacred), and also from the past participle sancire which means “to make sacred.” It dates from the thirteenth century.
  - A saint is one who is officially recognized for his or her holiness through an official process of canonization.
  - And a saint is one of the spirits of the deceased in heaven as well as one of God’s chosen, usually Christian people, and one who is known for piety and virtue.

- Other understandings re: saints
  - “Cult” refers to a system of beliefs and rituals practices. The “cult of saints” refers to beliefs and ritual practices associated with the veneration (NOT worship) of saints in the Catholic Church.
  - In the Catholic Church, “saint” can refer to a person whom the Church has been officially recognized through a process of canonization. A canonized saint indeed lived an exemplary, holy life and now is believed to enjoy the presence and vision of God in heaven.
  - A “saint” can also be anyone who lived a holy life and now enjoys the presence of God in heaven, regardless of formal recognition or not.
  - When Catholics honor, venerate, or offer devotion to the saints, they ask the saint or saints to intercede for them.
  - Catholics worship only God. Blessings received such as grace, strength, healing and forgiveness come only from God, not from any perceived power of the saints. When we offer veneration to a saint we are not simply focusing our attention on that particular saint; our veneration is ultimately an act of worship of God.
    - Veneration is not worship. Veneration simply means to give special honor or devotion. When people mistakenly say that Catholics worship Mary or the saints, it comes from a mistaken understanding of the word “venerate.”
    - The Church distinguishes three types of devotion and honor given to the saints, to Mary, and to God. The Greek word dulia is the honor/respect/veneration given to saints. Hyper-dulia, which means “more than veneration,” is the honor given to Mary. Both words are distinguished again from the adoration and worship that we give to God.
  - When we honor the saints, our unity with those in heaven is strengthened.
  - We celebrate our participation in the communion of saints, the saints on earth joined to the saints in heaven.
  - Through the intercession and the holiness of the saints who are now more closely united to Christ in heaven, the holiness of the Church on earth is strengthened (CCC, #956).
o Saints always point us and lead us to God.

o A saint can only be a saint through the power of God’s grace.

o The grace of holiness comes from God alone. We are given a share in that grace. However, we either cooperate with the grace and virtue of holiness or allow it to grow in us or we ignore it and it stagnates.

o St. Paul called all faithful Christian believers saints (2 Cor. 13:12; Eph. 1:1).

An historical perspective on saints

- At the time of Jesus’ death, Israel was governed by Rome. Even though Rome exercised absolute control over the people, there existed a symbiotic relationship between the Roman officials and Jewish religious authorities. Jewish leadership helped keep order, and in return Jews were allowed to practice their religion without much interference.

- The first Christians were Jews. They still participated in Jewish rituals and attended the synagogues and Temple. However, as Christianity developed, tension arose between Christians and Jews. Christians were eventually expelled from the synagogue (circa 100). The implications of this action were devastating. Christianity no longer operated under the safety net of Judaism.

- For the next three hundred years Christianity would become an illegal religion, and faithful Christians would endure severe persecution and martyrdom. Such would be the case until Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the land with the Edict of Milan in the year 313 A.D.

- Cult of martyrs

  o In response to this severe persecution, special honor was given to martyrs who had suffered torture and death for the sake of the gospel.

  o A cult of martyrs emerged and evolved. Believers remembered the life and death of the martyrs and called upon them to intercede for them.

  o People gathered at the gravesites and tombs of the slain martyrs for prayer and devotion.

  o The word “martyr” comes from the Greek martryrion, which means “witness.”

  o Christianity appropriated the word to “mean one who gave witness of his or faith by giving his or her life for it.”

  o Martyrs pattern their lives after the ultimate martyr and Savior, Jesus Christ.

  o One such martyr of the 20th century is Maximilian Kolbe. Kolbe was a Franciscan friar who was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp. He offered comfort, hope, and consolation to the prisoners in the midst of the most inhumane conditions, assuring them they had nothing to fear as they would one day be with Mary and the saints in heaven with God. He witnessed to his faith to the very end. One day a man escaped from the camp. The camp commandant chose ten men and condemned them to be starved to death in order to discourage further escape attempts. One man lamented that he had a family and children. Maximilian Kolbe offered to take
the man’s place among the ten so the man could live. (As it turned out, the “escaped” man was later found drowned in the latrine—he had not escaped after all.) Pope John Paul II canonized Kolbe in 1982.

• Cult of the saints
  o The cult of saints evolved from the devotion shown to martyrs.
  o Saints were people who lived lives of holiness, piety, faithfulness to God, and exemplary discipleship. They too, it is believed, enjoy the Beatific Vision (being in the presence of God and seeing God as God is).
  o The Church believed (and still believes) that martyrs and saints went straight to God upon their death. Their lives were examples of virtue and holiness.
  o In addition to martyrs and saints, the cult of saints includes “confessors”. Confessors were people who suffered during the persecutions but whose lives were spared. (This is different from the meaning the word confessor has today where we refer to the priests who presides at the Sacrament of Reconciliation.) They too were honored and venerated. Those who set themselves apart to live lives of prayer, fasting, penance, and austerity were also included among those who were venerated. Later such dignitaries as bishops, virgins, missionaries, and Doctors of the Church were added to the number of saints worthy of our devotion.
  o People who give special devotion to a particular saint think of themselves as the saint’s brother or sister in Christ. There is a unity between the deceased martyr or saint and the saints on earth. We call this the communion of saints.
  o Rather than commemorate the birthday of a martyr or saint, the early Church commemorated the date of their death.
  o The Church eventually (around the 3rd century) honored the saints by creating a special calendar to remember them throughout the liturgical cycle.
  o Today we continue to honor the saints on weekdays and throughout the liturgical cycle. The Church document, General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar, reminds us: “As it celebrates the mystery of Christ in yearly cycle, the Church also venerates with a particular love Mary, the Mother of God, and sets before the devotion of the faithful the memory of the martyrs and other saints” (GNLYC, #8).

• Saints and the Eucharist
  o In the earliest days the Church gathered at the place of burial to celebrate the Eucharist.
  o Eucharist was and is understood as the grace to endure martyrdom. If ever we are called upon to endure persecution for the sake of the gospel, we are to draw strength from our participation in the Eucharist.
  o In the Eucharist we remember and make present Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. We join our lives to his suffering, death, and resurrection.
Thus we share in the martyrdom of Christ when we suffer for doing right and when we are persecuted for living and preaching the gospel of Christ.

When Christian persecution ended with the Peace of Constantine, two types of martyrs were recognized.

- “Red martyrs” were those who shed their blood.
- “White martyrs” were those who suffered imprisonment, torture, or pain of any kind for the sake of the gospel or those who separated themselves from society in order to live a life of spiritual asceticism, such as the desert monks.