

Norms for saints' causes call for careful study

VATICAN CITY – In a new set of rules encouraged by Pope Benedict XVI, the Vatican is requiring dioceses to be more meticulous and objective when they prepare local sainthood causes.

The new norms do not introduce revolutionary changes in the existing process, but they tighten up the margin of error and require better documentation in order to avoid carelessness or even, in the Vatican's words, "fraud or deception."

The rules are contained in a 45-page instruction made public by the Congregation for Saints' Causes in February. The instruction revises the procedures used by dioceses to recognize and investigate potential saints before forwarding their causes to Rome.

The instruction covers everything from the medical investigation of miraculous cures to the interrogation of favorable and unfavorable witnesses.

Above all, it urges those investigating the life of a would-be saint to act with utmost impartiality and avoid whitewashing any personal faults or negative aspects that emerge.

The basis for opening a sainthood investigation is that the subject enjoys a "fame of holiness" – or "fame of martyrdom" if a martyr – among the faithful of the place where he or she lived. Investigators also must show a "fame of signs" or graces received through the person's intercession.

"The fame must be spontaneous and not artificially procured. It must be stable, continuous and widespread among people worthy of faith and present in a significant part of the people of God," the instruction says.

In other words, this cannot be merely a small group of people who decide their deceased friend was a good Christian. Nor can it be a religious order that pushes the cause of a founder or member who is not widely known or influential outside the

order.

That's a point Pope Benedict emphasized in a talk to the saints' congregation in 2006, when he said a sainthood cause cannot be initiated without proven fame of holiness, "even if these people distinguished themselves through consistency to the Gospel and through ecclesial and social merits."

The local bishop must appoint a postulator to investigate all of this, and he cannot hide any "contrary findings," the instruction says. All the faithful must be invited to give information about the cause.

Two basic types of evidence are gathered about a would-be saint: an examination of writings and oral testimony. Theological experts must examine published writings and are encouraged to look at unpublished writings, too, in order to make sure they conform to the faith.

Again, the experts are instructed not to leave out any negative aspects they may uncover.

When it comes to the interrogation of witnesses, the new rules are designed to exclude any risk of leading questions. Questions should be "brief, not tricky, not deceitful, not suggesting an answer," the instruction says.

At least for causes of those recently deceased, those testifying should be eyewitnesses, having had direct knowledge of the person. They should be asked to provide concrete facts and specific examples, not merely impressions or second-hand information.

For the cause of a religious congregation member, most witnesses should come from outside the order. A confessor or spiritual director should not be called to be a witness, the instruction states.

If the witness' testimony is tape-recorded, the witness must re-listen to the tape in order to make corrections or clarifications, then sign a transcript of the final version.

The new rules insist on careful investigation of presumed miraculous healings, with testimony from doctors involved. If the person cured is still alive, two experts must

personally check the health of the person and use “all clinical and technical means” to judge whether he or she truly and permanently was cured.

The instruction addresses old and new technology. On the one hand, it tells diocesan officials how to bind and fasten documents – with the seal of the local bishop – for security purposes before sending them to Rome.

On the other hand, it specifically states that a computer may be used in the interrogation of witnesses – a rare instance of the Vatican giving its official blessing to digital data.

The document repeatedly sounds a note of caution: At no time in this preliminary process should diocesan officials give Catholics the idea that the person under investigation is certain to be named a saint.

This don’t-jump-the-gun caveat doesn’t rule out private devotion as the sainthood cause takes its course, but there should be no public devotion carried out by the local church without prior authorization by the Vatican.

The instruction retains the five-year waiting period after a person’s death before the diocesan investigation can begin.

That’s a rule the pope can bend, however. In fact, just a few days before the new instruction was unveiled, Pope Benedict lifted the waiting period for Carmelite Sister Lucia dos Santos, one of the three Portuguese children who saw Our Lady of Fatima in 1917.