

Pope canonizes six, calls them 'shining examples' of holiness

VATICAN CITY – Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed six new saints, including an Australian nun and a Canadian brother, calling them “shining examples” of holiness and the power of prayer.

Thousands of pilgrims from Australia applauded and waved their national flags after the pope pronounced the formula of canonization Oct. 17 in St. Peter’s Square for Blessed Mother Mary MacKillop, who educated poor children in the Australian outback in the late 19th century. She became the country’s first saint.

In his homily, Pope Benedict said St. MacKillop, 1842-1909, was a model of “zeal, perseverance and prayer” as she dedicated herself to the education of the poor in the difficult territory of rural Australia, inspiring other women to join her in the country’s first community of religious women.

“She attended to the needs of each young person entrusted to her, without regard for station or wealth, providing both intellectual and spiritual formation,” he said. Her feast day is celebrated Aug. 8.

Canadians cheered the canonization of Blessed Andre Bessette, 1845-1937, a doorman known for his devotional practices and his healing touch. He became known as the “Miracle Man of Montreal.”

The pope said St. Bessette “showed boundless charity and did everything to soothe the despair of those who confided in him.” Although he had little instruction, he “understood what was essential to the faith” and had an intense prayer life, the pope said.

“For him, everything spoke of God and his presence,” the pope said. Thanks to this simplicity, St. Bessette led many people to God, he added.

St. Bessette “lived the beatitude of the pure of heart,” the pope said. “May the example of Brother Andre inspire Canadian Christian life!”

Relics of the six saints were brought to the altar during the two-hour liturgy. Tapestry portraits of the newly canonized hung from the facade of St. Peter's Basilica behind the papal altar, and many pilgrims carried their own personal pictures of the saints.

The others canonized were:

- St. Camilla Battista Varano, 1458-1524, the illegitimate daughter of an Italian nobleman, had to overcome her father's initial objections to enter the convent of the Poor Clares. Known for her mystical experiences during prayer, she died in an outbreak of the plague.
- St. Stanislaw Soltys, 1433-1489, who devoted his life to caring for the poor in his native Krakow, Poland. Famed as a preacher and confessor, he was known as the "Apostle of the Eucharist" for his taking Communion to the sick and lonely.
- St. Giulia Salzano, 1846-1929, taught catechism to schoolchildren near Naples, Italy, and later founded the Catechetical Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to continue her work, which offered religious education to children of all ages, to their mothers and to regular laborers.
- St. Juana Cipitria Barriola, 1845-1912, was a champion of education for girls and young women in her native Spain. Known in some countries as Mother Candida Maria de Jesus, she founded the Daughters of Jesus with five other young women. She ran a special school on Sundays for girls who were employed as domestics, because Sunday was their only day off.

In his homily, the pope said the new saints exemplified the effectiveness of prayer as an expression of faith.

"Sometimes we get tired of praying, we have the impression that prayer is not very useful in life, that it is not terribly effective. So we are tempted to dedicate ourselves to activity, to using all human means to achieve our aims, and without turning to God," he said.

The canonization brought some 8,000 Australian pilgrims to Rome, where Australian flags waved in abundance during the papal liturgy.

Peter Haynes, a 26-year-old Australian living in England, came to Rome for the Mass. He studied St. MacKillop in primary school and was impressed by the fact that “she started from nothing and made something out of it. And her legacy continues today. That’s something.”

St. MacKillop, the oldest of eight children of Scottish immigrants to Australia, began at the age of 24 to work with a priest to provide free education to the rural poor of the country. Three years later, there were 60 sisters working in schools, orphanages and women’s shelters.

The nuns were also committed to following poor farmworkers, miners and other laborers into remote areas of the country to educate their children.

Local church officials, however, disapproved of the sisters living in tiny, isolated communities – sometimes only two to a hut – frequently cut off from the sacraments in the remote Australian outback. She was even briefly excommunicated by the local bishops, who disbanded her order, the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart. But within a few months, the bishop lifted his censure, and a church commission cleared the sisters of all wrongdoing.

In 1901, she suffered a stroke during a trip to New Zealand, and her health declined until her death in 1909.

Canadians in the square spoke warmly of St. Bessette; some of the pilgrims even had personal connections to him.

Diane Guillemette of Montreal said that when her mother was 16 years old “she had a problem with her ear and she went to Brother Andre and he healed her.” Guillemette called St. Bessette “an example of patience, humility and love of work.”

One of 12 children, St. Bessette suffered from a chronic stomach ailment that kept him out of school. His father and mother died when he was young.

When he entered the Congregation of Holy Cross in 1870, his childhood parish priest, Father Andre Provencal, sent a letter to the novice master saying, “I am sending a saint to your congregation.”

St. Bessette served as the doorman of Notre Dame College, the community's school in Montreal, for 40 years. His devotion to St. Joseph and his reputation for healing attracted thousands of people, and he began to be known as a miracle worker. When he died at the age of 91, a million people came to pay homage to him, and many remain dedicated to his memory today. His feast day is Jan. 6.