

Antoni Gaudí, a Saint?

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There are some who are surprised on hearing about the idea that Antoni Gaudí may one day be proclaimed a 'saint' by the Church. The man in the street, interviewed by a journalist, at first seems surprised when asked this question. He/she cannot imagine that the architect of the Sagrada Família, of the Pedrera and the Parc Güell may be venerated on the altars.

Gaudí is famous as an artist. People know he has been an innovative architect, a genial man, but 'a saint'?

Another question that is raised is whether it is worthwhile 'to make him a saint'. What will we gain from it? And some even say: 'The Catholic Church by doing so, will frame him in its world, and he will lose universality. This will shrink the figure of Gaudí'.

More objections: The process of beatification-canonisation is very complicated. Much money is needed. Miracles must be proved. If people are holy, they are holy; there is no need for so much investigation and so many proofs.

What is a saint? A saint is that person whom the Church recognises as fully participating in God's life, so that he/she has the capacity to intercede for us (before God Himself), and to grant us favours. His/her behaviour in this world has been a model to follow in love towards God and towards everyone. As Jesus says in the parable of the talents: 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have shown you are trustworthy in small things; I will trust you with greater; come and join in your master's happiness.' (Mt 25,23).

Christians venerate the saints because they see in them a model to follow and know they are bearers of favours. Indeed, history and facts have given them this reputation. People pray to them because they have been told that they will help them in their lives in the face of illness or whatever difficulty. The saint will intercede for them before God Almighty; they pray to them to be able to follow their good example.

Gaudí, one of these saints? At the moment, for some he has yet to gain this fame. His fame now is that of an architect, of a genius of art. Still, there is the opinion of him that he had a frivolous youth, that he was bad-tempered, that he mixed with people who were not too Catholic, like the Masons... Certainly, this would imply that he could not be much of a model for Catholics. How could this sinner intercede for us?

However, we must not think that this is the only current of opinion concerning Gaudí and the saints. It is nothing new that now, in our day, this proposal for the beatification-canonisation of Gaudí has been made. What is new is that the process has started. The Church, in the person of the Cardinal-Archbishop of Barcelona has opened the way by appointing a vice-postulator and two historical and theological commissions, and that things are moving forward. This is new, and as a result it has been, and is news in the mass media.

The initiative has come from the Association for the Beatification of Antoni Gaudí, founded in 1992 by a group of persons, some of whom are architects. Given that Pope John Paul II wants to offer Christians models of Christian life, these people who knew Gaudí's life in more depth, thought that our architect could be a good candidate. Gaudí can be a model for us, because of 'his work well done and his admiration for God's creating work and for the mysteries of the infancy and the passion of Jesus Christ.'

But this admiration for Gaudí's 'sainthood', although out of proportion to the admiration for his genius as an artist, goes back even to the time of his life. At the time of his death - knocked over by a tram - the press, in the reports and articles written by respected citizens (intellectuals, artists and ecclesiastics), outlined that he who had died was 'a genius and a saint'. The burial - they say - was a popular manifestation of homage to the man who lived the poverty of the Gospel, who was in love with God, and who had expressed, in stone, the mysteries of God's salvation.

What follows is a series of praises from that time which demonstrate the above:

'The great architect did nothing without God'. (Fr. Manuel Trens)

'He who had lived poor and humble, poor and humble had to die, and poor and humble has died'. (Oleguer de Montserrat)

'We will not see it, but it will not be strange that others, younger than us, venerate the venerable and blessed Antoni Gaudí'. (Vèrax, 1926)

'Antoni Gaudí, builder of aristocratic palaces and parks, domestic architect of millionaire patricians, has chosen to live with, and has had the fortune to die married to lady poverty. He was a lover well trained to please such a demanding spouse'. (Ramon Rucabado)

'As the little, poor one of Assisi, threw his father the sumptuous garments of the worldly young man, Gaudí *took off* his garments and became naked and free. Such was the offering he had made to God of everything God gives to men'. (Joaquim Folch i Torras)

'Gaudí's works are the result of the vibration of his own spirit in the rhythm of the Biblical force, savoured every morning during Mass, which gave breath during many years and at every moment, to his work as an apostle and as an artist'. (J. F. Ràfols)

'Gaudí, seen from outside the faith, will remain incomprehensible. The non-believer will probably love an aspect of his work, but not its synthesis'. (J. F. Ràfols)

'After some very strong replies, shifting the conversation, he would sweeten the sourness his words might have caused'. (Domènec Sugranyes)

'He was a man with a lively faith, a most lively faith; with a hope in God which knew no limits. The life of faith is the practice of virtue. This is why he strove for it with great effort. The day before the accident, he said to a priest friend of his: "I am a fighter by nature; I have always fought, and I have always had my way, except in one thing: in the fight against my bad-temper; I have not been able to master it"'. (Fr. Gil Parés)

'The lesson Gaudí gives us, impregnated with the Gospel, is the lesson of modesty, chastity and poverty'. (Fr. Carles Cardó)

'He has been a genius in his work, a saint in his conduct, a martyr in his death'. (Eduard Toda)

'In a conversation, going to or coming from the Corpus Christi procession, he talked to us with the love he put into the things of God, of what the procession was or represented. He explained it with faith, with love, as if he was seeing it, as if he felt it, and his eyes became moist from the joy and consolation he felt'. (Lluís Serrahima)

'Gaudí's outstanding characteristic is his profound Christianity. A humble man, devout, lover of the poor, unpreoccupied with himself to the extreme; we could say he was the model of what all Christians should be. If his works had to be the expression of his loves, the love of God could not be an exception'. (Alexandre Tintoré Oller)

In conclusion, why Gaudí a 'saint'?

Because he was:

1. A man in love with God who proclaimed to others the marvels of God. This is demonstrated by his work, mainly in the expiatory church of the Sagrada Família. The Christian message is expressed in it. His desire was that the Church would 'provoke' in the people the admiration for the saving work of Christ. He was in love with God and sought to get others to also fall in love with God. In fact, as he was 'creating' the church, Gaudí got deeper and deeper into the mystery of God.
2. He was in love with God and this led him to imitate Christ, humble and poor. We appreciate in him the man of prayer, the Christian who lives and participates in the liturgy of the church: the daily Mass and the periodicity of the sacrament of reconciliation. The man who renounces the riches of this world and gives them to the poor and to the church which he builds to the glory of God.

Gaudí's conversion

When Gaudí comes to work at Sagrada Família he is 31, and up to that age apparently not at all religious. But we can't say, as some pretend, that he had been anti-clerical because, among other things, he wouldn't have been accepted by Josep Maria Bocabella, a devout Catholic.

What is certain, is that at that age Gaudí experiences a conversion of heart through the remarkable influence of Bishop Grau from Reus, a friend of the family and bishop of Astorga, and also through the great impact of his friendship with Enric d'Ossó (later canonised). A niece of Gaudí, who recently declared for his beatification, said that Bishop Grau caused Gaudí and his father to '*fall down*', expressing this conversion of heart that he helped to bring about in them.

As a result of this conversion, Gaudí starts attending daily Mass; he begins to read the Bible every day. He also has a spiritual director, a priest from the Saint Philip Neri Oratory in Gracia, who leads him, via a profound grasp of the liturgy, into the depths of the Christian faith. Gaudí's bedside reading is Beranger's *Anné Liturgique* which centres on the liturgy of the Easter mystery.

He also chooses to adopt the lifestyle of a very poor man; becoming almost like a monk in Barcelona. He was one of the most famous architects in the city and could, therefore, have lived as a rich man. He worked on many other assignments simultaneously with Sagrada Família, but this became his great personal project, with a clear objective: for the visitor to come away impressed by God's saving work. Deeply impressed himself, Gaudí often explained his work with tears in his eyes.

The last ten years of his life he worked exclusively on Sagrada Família, for which he received no payment; instead he actually begged for money for the project, trusting in God's providence. One day, a wealthy woman gave him an inheritance and then took it back again! Gaudí said to her: 'Madam, with your money or without your money, we will build this because Saint Joseph is a saint with many resources.' Often, when he was questioned as to the expected completion of the work, he would point to the sky and say: 'My client is not in a hurry'. When asked if he thought his successors would finish his project, his answer was: 'My only concern is to do it so well now, that my successors will have no other choice than to complete it.'

Gaudí lived for many years in Park Güell, where he took care of his aged father and a sick niece of his, until their respective deaths. When Count Güell also died, he felt very lonely up there by himself, so he came to live in a corner of his workshop next to the Crypt. He dressed so shabbily, that when he was run down by the tram on June 10, 1926, at the intersection of Gran Via and Bailen, - on his way back from his daily prayers at the Cathedral - the person who picked him up from the ground thought that the tram had run over a beggar. He took him to the city's hospital for the poor in Carrer Hospital (Hospital Street) close to the *Ramblas*, and left him among the indigent sick. The following day, he was found there by the priest who lived with him. Two days later, he died from his injuries, and his last words were: 'Amen, my God, my God'. He had

often expressed his desire to live as a poor man and die among the poor, and this became a reality.

The Chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary

In this chapel, Gaudí leaves us a profound spiritual testament, that of his own experience. We have told about his conversion at the age of 31. But conversion is a life-long process, and one is never as good a Christian as one would want to be. We have shortcomings and faults which we never quite overcome. Gaudí, for instance, had a bad temper and towards the end of his life he says: 'I have been a fighter, and have got my way in many aspects, but I have not been able to overcome my bad temper'. In this chapel, Gaudí represents the constant struggle that is Christian life and the fact that holiness and imperfection may very well be fellow travellers.

On the right spire Gaudí represents the temptation to violence. A man is being tempted with a bomb by the devil in the guise of a horrible fish. This is a reference to the infamous bombing of Barcelona's *Liceo* theatre, in which many people were killed. The temptations of money and vanity are represented on the left spire; a young girl is being tempted by the devil in the shape of another monstrous fish offering her a bag of money. The man is in contemplation and the girl is in prayer, both looking at Mary - the idea is that we are tempted in many ways throughout our lives, but can overcome or face it effectively through prayer and contemplation.

Remember, this is the chapel dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary; the Rosary which Gaudí prayed daily, is contemplation and prayer. Contemplation of what God has done for us (Incarnation; the joyful mysteries. Passion; the sorrowful mysteries. Resurrection and the hope of Eternal Life; the glorious mysteries). This cannot leave us the same, it has to change us inside, it has to make us want to respond with love to so much love! Also, the attitude of prayer is essential to Christian life, since in it we find the inner peace and strength to be faithful to God, and not to despair when we fail. Such are the saints whom Gaudí places in the chapel.

Here, Gaudí positions the statues of certain saints whose human failings the Bible doesn't attempt to hide; both saints and sinners at the same time. On the left are David and Solomon, and on the right, the scene where Jacob tricks his blind father, Isaac, into blessing him instead of his brother. David, Solomon and Jacob are sinners - and saints - simultaneously; a saint is not someone who never falls, but someone who gets up no matter how often he falls.

The struggle against sin lasts until the moment of death. On the left, a dying man who at the moment of his death, according to a deeply rooted Catalan tradition, puts his soul in the hands of Jesus, Joseph and Mary, 'Jesus, Joseph and Mary I give you my heart and soul' (*Jesús, Josep i Maria, us dono el cor i l'ànima meva*). In the chapel the Hail Mary is written: '... pray for us sinners: now, and at the hour of our death. Amen'.
