The Canonization of Saint Thomas Aquinas

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The early Christian Church did not have any set views about the subject of the veneration of the saints. Some historians view the passage in the Acts: “And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentations over him”¹, as an indication of the veneration of the early martyrs. But already by 156 A.D., at the time of the martyrdom of St. Polycarp, there is definitive proof that the Jews were aware that the relics of executed Christians were likely to become centers of religious devotions².

In the age of the martyrs, canonization was a spontaneous act of the local community. Even in disputed cases the judgement of the community appears to have operated automatically³.

Even by the third century we cannot find any evidence for a formal process of canonization at Rome, but in Africa the Church was compelled in face of heresy (especially Donatism) and persecution to legislate on the matter of the veneration of martyrs⁴. It was first discussed at the First Council of Carthage in 348⁵. Optatus, in 370, in a work against the Donatists, maintained that there can be no martyrdom apart from the confession of the name of Christ, and that without charity martyrdom cannot have any existence⁶.

The Fifth Council of Carthage in 401 placed the responsibility to determine the sanctity of a martyr on the diocesan bishop⁷.

The earliest saints were martyrs who suffered death for their faith but already by the second century a new class of saints appears. They are those who suffered for their faith but were not actually put to death. To them the title ‘confessor’ is applied, which was later extended to all saints who were not martyrs⁸.

In the fifth and sixth centuries attempts were made to organize the Church canonical laws. Two collections of canons were compiled in this time, the *Codex canonum Ecclesiae Africanae*, made by Dionysius Exiguus and afterward better known as the *Dionysian*, and a Spanish collection,

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¹ Acts, viii, 2.
³ ibid., p. 7.
⁴ ibid., p. 11.
⁵ ibid., p. 14.
⁷ ibid., p. 15.
⁸ ibid., p. 17.
known as Hispana. These collections remained the most authoritative sources all through the Dark Ages.

At this time the cult of the saints was limited to veneration of relics, usually pieces of cloth or other objects which had been in contact with the body of the saint or his tomb. There is no evidence, at this time, of dismembering of corpses or the distribution of bones. But from the middle of the sixth century the constant ravaging of Italy by barbarous invaders often necessitated the removal of the saints' bodies to Rome or some other safe place. This established the practice of translation as the formal act of canonization by the eighth century. It came to be considered improper that the body of a saint should remain underground, and so it was removed and placed in a spot more accessible to the veneration of the faithful. In general, ecclesiastical authority intervened only seldom. Canon law ordered the bishops to make sure that the martyrs being venerated were true martyrs, but no one deemed it necessary to refer every case to the authorities in order to ask permission to establish a cultus. When bishops had to intervene, they usually dealt with the matter synodically.

From the eighth century on the tendency was to appeal to more and more authoritative bodies, such as referring cases to the metropolitan and provincial synods. With passing time and the growth of papal authority in general, it was inevitable that the papacy should oust the lesser authorities.

The earliest reference to a canonization of a saint on papal authority is from the year 849, but no great weight can be attached to this isolated reference.

It is not until the pontificate of John XV (985-996) that one may begin to speak about this matter with any certainty. In 993 Liutolf, Bishop of Augsburg, petitioned John XV and the assembled cardinals at the Lateran Council to place Udalric, his predecessor, in the catalogue of the saints, i.e. to canonize him. After considering the case, which probably consisted of a recitation of his deeds and miracles by the petitioning party, the request was granted.

1 For a detailed study viz.: F. Maasen, Geschichte der Quellen und der Literatur des Canonischen Rechts in Abendlande. Gratz, 1870, II part, 181.
3 ibid., p. 27.
4 ibid., p. 29.
5 ibid., p. 35.
6 ibid., p. 35.
7 ibid., pp. 56-57.