

A rush toward sainthood for John Paul II?

by [Francis X. Rocca](#)

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Pope Benedict XVI has recognized a miracle attributed to Pope John Paul II, bringing the late pontiff one step from sainthood a mere six years after his death, the Vatican announced on Friday (Jan. 14).

By signing a decree accepting the miracle, Benedict completed one of most rapid beatifications in the modern history of the Catholic Church. Another miracle attributed to John Paul's intercession will be required before he can be declared a saint.

The process leading to beatification and sainthood ordinarily does not begin until at least five years after death. But during John Paul's funeral in April 2005, crowds repeatedly called out "santo subito!" (Italian for "a saint at once!"). Benedict waived the required waiting period less than two months later.

"From a strictly PR point of view this is a big gamble for the Vatican," said John L. Allen, Jr., senior correspondent for the U.S.-based National Catholic Reporter. "John Paul was obviously a wildly popular pope and this could be a way to revive memories of his bold, self-confident style."

The beatification ceremony, to be held in St. Peter's Square on May 1 -- the Sunday after Easter -- is likely to attract vast numbers of

pilgrims from around the world, especially from John Paul's native Poland. John Paul's funeral drew an estimated 4 million mourners to Rome.

But Allen warned that honoring the late pontiff so soon after his death "could also invite debate over his legacy, particularly his record on the sexual abuse crisis."

Critics say that the Vatican under John Paul mishandled many pedophilia cases by failing to discipline guilty priests, who in some cases went on to molest other children. On Friday, an American advocate for sex abuse victims denounced the "unwise and frantic rush" of John Paul's beatification.

"There's a reason we usually move slowly in honoring public figures," said Barbara Dorris of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP). "Often, some of their unsavory actions and inactions surface years later."

Defenders of the late pope say that the abuse crisis is irrelevant to the question of John Paul's personal sanctity.

"This is a celebration of the man's heroic virtue," said Carl A. Anderson, supreme knight of the Knights of Columbus. "This doesn't mean that he did everything perfectly, but it means that the holiness of his life should be emulated."

The Vatican is clearly sensitive to the perception that it has rushed to honor John Paul. In an unusual move, it accompanied Friday's announcement with a detailed chronology of the steps leading to Benedict's decision, emphasizing that the requirements of church law,

aside from the waiting period, had been "observed in full."

One of the required steps was the October 2010 ruling by a panel of physicians that a French nun's recovery from Parkinson's disease after praying to John Paul -- who suffered from the same disease -- was "scientifically inexplicable."

John Paul set a precedent for his own expedited beatification when he waived the waiting period for Mother Teresa of Calcutta just 18 months after her death in 1997. She was beatified in 2003.

Observers agreed that the speed of the beatification process would not undermine its credibility in the eyes of John Paul's many devotees.

"The Catholic grassroots has no doubt that this man is a saint," Allen said.

"I don't think that the average person in the pews really cares that the five-year waiting period has been suspended for John Paul," said the Rev. Thomas J. Reese, Senior Fellow at Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University and author of "Inside the Vatican."

The danger of a sainthood fast-track, according to Reese, lies in the possibility of setting a precedent.

"If you suspend the waiting period for John Paul II and Mother Teresa, then who's next?" Reese said, noting that many Argentines called for the canonization of Eva Peron, their country's popular first lady, following her death in 1952.

"In that case it was very easy for the church to say, `Well, there's a five-year waiting period,'" Reese said. "It's good to have time for emotions to cool."

Benedict also signed eight other decrees on Friday recognizing the merits of potential saints. Among those honored was the Rev. Nelson Baker, an American priest who died in 1936, after founding several charitable institutions near Buffalo, N.Y. The pope recognized Baker's "heroic virtue," making him eligible for beatification.