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The World's Largest Religious Organization
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It is fairly straightforward to list the world's largest religions. In order, they are Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism. But when we shift the question from "What are the world's largest religions?" to "What are the world's largest religious organizations?" the answer is revealing. According to Adherents.com, the Web site that keeps track of members of the world's religions, the top two organizations are the Catholic Church, with more than one billion members, and Sunni Islam, which has about 900 million members.

Despite their high ranking, these two religious organizations could not be more different. The Catholic Church has long been known for its hierarchical organization. The pope is at the top, followed by cardinals, archbishops and bishops, then the parish priests and the congregations. Despite its size, this organization is fairly simple-what international mega-business could have such a simple structure even with only 100,000 employees? But Sunni Islam, by contrast, has no overarching structure at all. It consists of many national groups of followers who focus on a centuries-old common tradition of practice and belief, rather than on a centralized organizational structure.

So how do these gigantic organizations bring renewal and relevance to their adherents? Sunni Islam accomplishes this through its teachers and through its ability to adapt to local traditions, for the core of common tradition is flexible enough to take in shifts in practice and other adaptations that arise in local communities.

While the Catholic Church has been flexible enough to take in local practices and observances, its centralized structure also has had the ability to bring in new models of practice

and belief. I refer to the canonization of saints. Saints, by definition, are individuals who are outside the hierarchy and in many ways outside the church's control. It is believed that every saint has a special relationship with God, and to be guided by him. By recognizing such people, the Catholic Church brings them official recognition and raises them up as models of behavior and belief for all members of the church.

The present pope, John Paul II, has appointed more saints during his time in office than were appointed in the previous 500 years. With the four canonized just this week, he has now elevated 456 people to sainthood. He is using these saints, most of whom lived relatively recently, to provide new role models which Catholics can imitate, bringing new life and meaning to the church. To further support this renewal, the pope has beatified 1,282 people, placing them at a level just below sainthood.

While it remains to be seen whether this intense activity will accomplish the pope's hope of church renewal, it clearly serves as a way by which a billion-strong organization can recognize the contributions of individuals.

This emphasis on more recent elevations reminds Catholics that God is still working in the world and has not left it. Doing the Lord's work, however defined, is not just something that was done in the past and is now old-fashioned, but something that continues to have meaning even in modern times.