

# THE CALL TO HOLINESS IN TODAY'S WORLD

Excerpts from the Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* by Pope Francis

## CHAPTER ONE - THE CALL TO HOLINESS

With this Exhortation I would like to insist primarily on the call to holiness that the Lord addresses to each of us, the call that he also addresses, personally, to you: “Be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:44; cf. 1 Pet 1:16). The Second Vatican Council stated this clearly: “Strengthened by so many and such great means of salvation, all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord – each in his or her own way – to that perfect holiness by which the Father himself is perfect”. (n.10)

Are you married? Be holy by loving and caring for your husband or wife, as Christ does for the Church. Do you work for a living? Be holy by labouring with integrity and skill in the service of your brothers and sisters. Are you a parent or grandparent? Be holy by patiently teaching the little ones how to follow Jesus. Are you in a position of authority? Be holy by working for the common good and renouncing personal gain. (n.14)

The Father's plan is Christ, and ourselves in him. In the end, it is Christ who loves in us, for “holiness is nothing other than charity lived to the full. (n.21)

Just as you cannot understand Christ apart from the kingdom he came to bring, so too your personal mission is inseparable from the building of that kingdom: “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Mt 6:33). Your identification with Christ and his will involves a commitment to build with him that kingdom of love, justice and universal peace. Christ himself wants to experience this with you, in all the efforts and sacrifices that it entails, but also in all the joy and enrichment it brings. You cannot grow in holiness without committing yourself, body and soul, to giving your best to this endeavour. (n.25)

Do not be afraid of holiness. It will take away none of your energy, vitality or joy. On the contrary, you will become what the Father had in mind when he created you, and you will be faithful to your deepest self. (n.32)

## CHAPTER TWO – TWO SUBTLE ENEMIES OF HOLINESS

Gnosticism and pelagianism. They are two heresies from early Christian times. (*Gnosticism stresses the need for a special knowledge and so becomes restricted to an elect few. Pelagianism stresses human effort for salvation and reduces the place of God's grace.*)

Throughout the history of the Church it has always been clear that a person's perfection is measured not by the information or knowledge they possess, but by the depth of their charity. (n.37)

The same power that the gnostics attributed to the intellect, others now began to attribute to the human will, to personal effort. (n.48)

God's friendship infinitely transcends us; we cannot buy it with our works, it can only be a gift born of his loving initiative. This invites us to live in joyful gratitude for this completely unmerited gift, since “after one has grace, the grace already possessed cannot come under merit”. St Thomas Aquinas. (n.54)

## CHAPTER THREE – IN THE LIGHT OF THE MASTER

Jesus explained with great simplicity what it means to be holy when he gave us the Beatitudes (cf. Mt 5:3-12; Lk 6:20-23). The Beatitudes are like a Christian's identity card. So if anyone asks: "What must one do to be a good Christian?", the answer is clear. We have to do, each in our own way, what Jesus told us in the Sermon on the Mount.[66] In the Beatitudes, we find a portrait of the Master, which we are called to reflect in our daily lives. (N.63)

**"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."**

The Gospel invites us to peer into the depths of our heart to see where we find security in life.

**Being poor of heart: that is holiness.**

**"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."**

Meekness is another expression of the interior poverty of those who put their trust in God alone.

**Reacting with meekness and humility: that is holiness.**

**"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."**

A person who sees things as they truly are and sympathizes with pain and sorrow is capable of touching life's depths and finding authentic happiness.

**Knowing how to mourn with others: that is holiness.**

**"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled"**

Hunger and thirst are intense experiences. True justice comes about in people's lives when they themselves are just in their decisions; it is expressed in their pursuit of justice for the poor and the weak.

**Hungering and thirsting for righteousness: that is holiness.**

**"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."**

Mercy involves giving, helping and serving others, but it also includes forgiveness and understanding.

**Seeing and acting with mercy: that is holiness.**

**"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."**

This speaks of those whose hearts are simple, pure and undefiled, for a heart capable of love admits nothing that might harm, weaken or endanger that love.

**Keeping a heart free of all that tarnishes love: that is holiness.**

**"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God."**

Peacemakers truly "make" peace; they build peace and friendship in society. We need to be artisans of peace, for building peace is a craft that demands serenity, creativity, sensitivity and skill.

**Sowing peace all around us: that is holiness.**

**"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."**

Jesus himself warns us that the path he proposes goes against the flow, even making us challenge society by the way we live and, as a result, becoming a nuisance.

**Accepting daily the path of the Gospel, even though it may cause us problems: that is holiness.**

## THE GREAT CRITERION

In the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel (vv. 31-46), Jesus expands on the Beatitude that calls the merciful blessed. If we seek the holiness pleasing to God's eyes, this text offers us one clear criterion on which we will be judged. "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (vv. 35-36). (n.95)

Given these uncompromising demands of Jesus, it is my duty to ask Christians to acknowledge and accept them in a spirit of genuine openness, *sine glossa*. In other words, without any "ifs or buts" that could lessen their force. Our Lord made it very clear that holiness cannot be understood or lived apart from these demands, for mercy is "the beating heart of the Gospel". (n.97)

Those who really wish to give glory to God by their lives, who truly long to grow in holiness, are called to be single-minded and tenacious in their practice of the works of mercy. Saint Teresa of Calcutta clearly realized this: "Yes, I have many human faults and failures... But God bends down and uses us, you and me, to be his love and his compassion in the world; he bears our sins, our troubles and our faults. He depends on us to love the world and to show how much he loves it. If we are too concerned with ourselves, we will have no time left for others". (n.107)

Jesus' words are few and straightforward, yet practical and valid for everyone, for Christianity is meant above all to be put into practice. I recommend rereading these great biblical texts frequently, referring back to them, praying with them, trying to embody them. They will benefit us; they will make us genuinely happy. (n.109)

## CHAPTER FOUR – SIGNS OF HOLINESS IN TODAY'S WORLD

I would like to mention a few signs or spiritual attitudes that, in my opinion, are necessary if we are to understand the way of life to which the Lord calls us.

### PERSEVERANCE, PATIENCE AND MEEKNESS

The first of these great signs is solid grounding in the God who loves and sustains us. This source of inner strength enables us to persevere amid life's ups and downs, but also to endure hostility, betrayal and failings on the part of others. "If God is for us, who is against us?" (Rom 8:31): this is the source of the peace found in the saints. (n.112)

### JOY AND A SENSE OF HUMOUR

Far from being timid, morose, acerbic or melancholy, or putting on a dreary face, the saints are joyful and full of good humour. Though completely realistic, they radiate a positive and hopeful spirit. The Christian life is "joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17) (n.122)

### BOLDNESS AND PASSION

Holiness is also *parrhesía*: it is boldness, an impulse to evangelize and to leave a mark in this world. To allow us to do this, Jesus himself comes and tells us once more, serenely yet firmly: "Do not be afraid" (Mk 6:50). "I am with you always, to the end of the world" (Mt 28:20). These words enable us to go forth and serve with the same courage that the Holy Spirit stirred up in the Apostles, impelling them to proclaim Jesus Christ. Boldness, enthusiasm, the freedom to speak out, apostolic fervour, all these are included in the word *parrhesía*. (N.129)

## **IN COMMUNITY**

Growth in holiness is a journey in community, side by side with others. (n.141)

A community that cherishes the little details of love, whose members care for one another and create an open and evangelizing environment, is a place where the risen Lord is present, sanctifying it in accordance with the Father's plan. (n.145)

## **IN CONSTANT PRAYER**

Finally, though it may seem obvious, we should remember that holiness consists in a habitual openness to the transcendent, expressed in prayer and adoration. (n.147)

For each disciple, it is essential to spend time with the Master, to listen to his words, and to learn from him always. Unless we listen, all our words will be nothing but useless chatter. (n.150)

# **CHAPTER FIVE – SPIRITUAL COMBAT, VIGILANCE & DISCERNMENT**

## **COMBAT AND VIGILANCE**

We are not dealing merely with a battle against the world and a worldly mentality that would deceive us and leave us dull and mediocre, lacking in enthusiasm and joy. Nor can this battle be reduced to the struggle against our human weaknesses and proclivities (be they laziness, lust, envy, jealousy or any others). It is also a constant struggle against the devil, the prince of evil. (n.159)

Along this journey, the cultivation of all that is good, progress in the spiritual life and growth in love are the best counterbalance to evil. (n.163)

## **DISCERNMENT**

How can we know if something comes from the Holy Spirit or if it stems from the spirit of the world or the spirit of the devil? The only way is through discernment, which calls for something more than intelligence or common sense. It is a gift which we must implore. (n.166)

Certainly, spiritual discernment does not exclude existential, psychological, sociological or moral insights drawn from the human sciences. At the same time, it transcends them. Nor are the Church's sound norms sufficient. We should always remember that discernment is a grace. Even though it includes reason and prudence, it goes beyond them, for it seeks a glimpse of that unique and mysterious plan that God has for each of us, which takes shape amid so many varied situations and limitations. (n.170)

It is not a matter of applying rules or repeating what was done in the past, since the same solutions are not valid in all circumstances and what was useful in one context may not prove so in another. The discernment of spirits liberates us from rigidity, which has no place before the perennial "today" of the risen Lord. The Spirit alone can penetrate what is obscure and hidden in every situation, and grasp its every nuance, so that the newness of the Gospel can emerge in another light. (n.173)

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It is my hope that these pages will prove helpful by enabling the whole Church to devote herself anew to promoting the desire for holiness. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to pour out upon us a fervent longing to be saints for God's greater glory, and let us encourage one another in this effort. In this way, we will share a happiness that the world will not be able to take from us.

**Francis**

*The full text is on the website of the Holy See: [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)*