

Apostolic Exhortation
of the Holy Father
FRANCIS

ON THE CALL
TO HOLINESS IN
TODAY'S WORLD

Gaudete et Exsultate



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1. “Rejoice and be glad” (Mt 5:12), Jesus tells those persecuted or humiliated for his sake. The Lord asks everything of us, and in return he offers us true life, the happiness for which we were created. He wants us to be saints and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence. The call to holiness is present in various ways from the very first pages of the Bible. We see it expressed in the Lord’s words to Abraham: “Walk before me, and be blameless” (Gen 17:1).

2. What follows is not meant to be a treatise on holiness, containing definitions and distinctions helpful for understanding this important subject, or a discussion of the various means of sanctification. My modest goal is to repropose the call to holiness in a practical way for our own time, with all its risks, challenges, and opportunities. For the Lord has chosen each one of us “to be holy and blameless before him in love” (Eph 1:4).

CHAPTER ONE

The Call to Holiness

The saints who encourage and accompany us

3. The Letter to the Hebrews presents a number of testimonies that encourage us to “run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (12:1). It speaks of Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Gideon, and others (cf. 11:1–12:3). Above all, it invites us to realize that “a great cloud of witnesses” (12:1) impels us to advance constantly toward the goal. These witnesses may include our own mothers, grandmothers, or other loved ones (cf. 2 Tim 1:5). Their lives may not always have been perfect, yet even amid their faults and failings they kept moving forward and proved pleasing to the Lord.

4. The saints now in God's presence preserve their bonds of love and communion with us. The Book of Revelation attests to this when it speaks of the intercession of the martyrs: "I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne; they cried out with a loud voice, 'O sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge?'" (6:9–10). Each of us can say: "Surrounded, led, and guided by the friends of God. . . . I do not have to carry alone what, in truth, I could never carry alone. All the saints of God are there to protect me, to sustain me, and to carry me."¹

5. The processes of beatification and canonization recognize the signs of heroic virtue, the sacrifice of one's life in martyrdom, and certain cases where a life is constantly offered for others, even until death. This shows an exemplary imitation of Christ, one worthy of the admiration of the faithful.² We can think, for example, of Blessed Maria Gabriella Sagheddu, who offered her life for the unity of Christians.

1. Benedict XVI, *Homily for the Solemn Inauguration of the Petrine Ministry* (April 24, 2005): *AAS* 97 (2005), 708.

2. This always presumes a reputation of holiness and the exercise, at least to an ordinary degree, of the Christian virtues: cf. *Motu Proprio Maiorem Hac Dilectionem* (July 11, 2017), Art. 2c: *L'Osservatore Romano*, July 12, 2017, p. 8.

The saints “next door”

6. Nor need we think only of those already beatified and canonized. The Holy Spirit bestows holiness in abundance among God’s holy and faithful people, for “it has pleased God to make men and women holy and to save them, not as individuals without any bond between them, but rather as a people who might acknowledge him in truth and serve him in holiness.”³ In salvation history, the Lord saved one people. We are never completely ourselves unless we belong to a people. That is why no one is saved alone, as an isolated individual. Rather, God draws us to himself, taking into account the complex fabric of interpersonal relationships present in a human community. God wanted to enter into the life and history of a people.

7. I like to contemplate the holiness present in the patience of God’s people: in those parents who raise their children with immense love, in those men and women who work hard to support their families, in the sick, in elderly religious who never lose their smile. In their daily perseverance I see the holiness of the Church militant. Very often it is a holiness found in our

3. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 9.

next-door neighbors, those who, living in our midst, reflect God's presence. We might call them "the middle class of holiness."⁴

8. Let us be spurred on by the signs of holiness that the Lord shows us through the humblest members of that people which "shares also in Christ's prophetic office, spreading abroad a living witness to him, especially by means of a life of faith and charity."⁵ We should consider the fact that, as Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross suggests, real history is made by so many of them. As she writes: "The greatest figures of prophecy and sanctity step forth out of the darkest night. But for the most part, the formative stream of the mystical life remains invisible. Certainly the most decisive turning points in world history are substantially co-determined by souls whom no history book ever mentions. And we will only find out about those souls to whom we owe the decisive turning points in our personal lives on the day when all that is hidden is revealed."⁶

9. Holiness is the most attractive face of the Church. But even outside the Catholic Church and in very

4. Cf. Joseph Malegue, *Pierres noires. Les classes moyennes du Salut*, Paris, 1958.

5. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 12.

6. *Verborgenes Leben und Epiphanie*: GW XI, 145.

different contexts, the Holy Spirit raises up “signs of his presence which help Christ’s followers.”⁷ Saint John Paul II reminded us that “the witness to Christ borne even to the shedding of blood has become a common inheritance of Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, and Protestants.”⁸ In the moving ecumenical commemoration held in the Colosseum during the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, he stated that the martyrs are “a heritage which speaks more powerfully than all the causes of division.”⁹

The Lord calls

10. All this is important. Yet 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

7. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (January 6, 2001), 56: *AAS* 93 (2001), 307.

8. Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (November 10, 1994), 37: *AAS* 87 (1995), 29.

9. *Homily for the Ecumenical Commemoration of Witnesses to the Faith in the Twentieth Century* (May 7, 2000), 5: *AAS* 92 (2000), 680–681.

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.”¹⁰

11. “Each in his or her own way” the Council says. We should not grow discouraged before examples of holiness that appear unattainable. There are some testimonies that may prove helpful and inspiring, but that we are not meant to copy, for that could even lead us astray from the one specific path that the Lord has in mind for us. The important thing is that each believer discern his or her own path, that they bring out the very best of themselves, the most personal gifts that God has placed in their hearts (cf. 1 Cor 12:7), rather than hopelessly trying to imitate something not meant for them. We are all called to be witnesses, but there are many actual ways of bearing witness.¹¹ Indeed, when the great mystic, Saint John of the Cross, wrote his *Spiritual Canticle*, he preferred to avoid hard and fast rules for all. He explained that his verses were composed so that everyone could benefit from them “in his or her own way.”¹² For

10. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 11.

11. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Theology and Holiness,” in *Communio* 14/4 (1987), 345.

12. *Spiritual Canticle*, Red. B, Prologue, 2.

God's life is communicated "to some in one way and to others in another."¹³

12. Within these various forms, I would stress too that the "genius of woman" is seen in feminine styles of holiness, which are an essential means of reflecting God's holiness in this world. Indeed, in times when women tended to be most ignored or overlooked, the Holy Spirit raised up saints whose attractiveness produced new spiritual vigor and important reforms in the Church. We can mention Saint Hildegard of Bingen, Saint Bridget, Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Teresa of Avila, and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. But I think too of all those unknown or forgotten women who, each in her own way, sustained and transformed families and communities by the power of their witness.

13. This should excite and encourage us to give our all and to embrace that unique plan that God willed for each of us from eternity: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you" (Jer 1:5).

13. Cf. *ibid.*, 14–15, 2.

For you too

14. To be holy does not require being a bishop, a priest, or a religious. We are frequently tempted to think that holiness is only for those who can withdraw from ordinary affairs to spend much time in prayer. That is not the case. We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves. Are you called to the consecrated life? Be holy by living out your commitment with joy. 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 laboring 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.¹⁴

15. Let the grace of your baptism bear fruit in a path of holiness. Let everything be open to God; turn to him in every situation. Do not be dismayed, for you can do this in the power of the Holy Spirit, and holiness, in the end, is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in your life (cf.

14. Cf. *Catechesis*, General Audience of November 19, 2014: *Insegnamenti* II/2 (2014), 555.

Gal 5:22–23). When you feel the temptation to dwell on your own weakness, raise your eyes to Christ crucified and say: “Lord, I am a poor sinner, but you can work the miracle of making me a little bit better.” In the Church, holy yet made up of sinners, you will find everything you need to grow toward holiness. The Lord has bestowed on the Church the gifts of Scripture, the Sacraments, holy places, living communities, the witness of the saints, and a multifaceted beauty that proceeds from God’s love, “like a bride bedecked with jewels” (Is 61:10).

16. This holiness to which the Lord calls you will grow through small gestures. Here is an example: a woman goes shopping, she meets a neighbor and they begin to speak, and the gossip starts. But she says in her heart: “No, I will not speak badly of anyone.” This is a step forward in holiness. Later, at home, one of her children wants to talk to her about his hopes and dreams, and even though she is tired, she sits down and listens with patience and love. That is another sacrifice that brings holiness. Later she experiences some anxiety, but recalling the love of the Virgin Mary, she takes her rosary and prays with faith. Yet another path of holiness. Later still, she goes out onto the street, encounters a poor person, and stops to say a kind word to him. One more step.

17. At times, life presents great challenges. Through them, the Lord calls us anew to a conversion that can make his grace more evident in our lives, “in order that we may share his holiness” (Heb 12:10). At other times, we need only find a more perfect way of doing what we are already doing: “There are inspirations that tend solely to perfect in an extraordinary way the ordinary things we do in life.”¹⁵ When Cardinal François Xavier Nguyễn van Thuân was imprisoned, he refused to waste time waiting for the day he would be set free. Instead, he chose “to live the present moment, filling it to the brim with love.” He decided: “I will seize the occasions that present themselves every day; I will accomplish ordinary actions in an extraordinary way.”¹⁶

18. In this way, led by God’s grace, we shape by many small gestures the holiness God has willed for us, not as men and women sufficient unto ourselves but rather “as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Pet 4:10). The New Zealand bishops rightly teach us that we are capable of loving with the Lord’s unconditional love, because the risen Lord shares his powerful life with our fragile lives: “His love set no limits and, once given, was

15. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, VIII, 11.

16. *Five Loaves and Two Fish*, Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2003, pp. 9, 13.

never taken back. It was unconditional and remained faithful. To love like that is not easy because we are often so weak. But just to try to love as Christ loved us shows that Christ shares his own risen life with us. In this way, our lives demonstrate his power at work—even in the midst of human weakness.”¹⁷

Your mission in Christ

19. A Christian cannot think of his or her mission on earth without seeing it as a path of holiness, for “this is the will of God, your sanctification” (1 Thes 4:3). Each saint is a mission, planned by the Father to reflect and embody, at a specific moment in history, a certain aspect of the Gospel.

20. That mission has its fullest meaning in Christ, and can only be understood through him. At its core, holiness is experiencing, in union with Christ, the mysteries of his life. It consists in uniting ourselves to the Lord’s death and resurrection in a unique and personal way, constantly dying and rising anew with him. But it can also entail reproducing in our own lives various aspects of Jesus’ earthly life: his hidden life, his life in

17. New Zealand Catholic Bishops’ Conference, *Healing Love*, January 1, 1988.

community, his closeness to the outcast, his poverty and other ways in which he showed his self-sacrificing love. The contemplation of these mysteries, as Saint Ignatius of Loyola pointed out, leads us to incarnate them in our choices and attitudes.¹⁸ Because “everything in Jesus’ life was a sign of his mystery,”¹⁹ “Christ’s whole life is a revelation of the Father,”²⁰ “Christ’s whole life is a mystery of redemption,”²¹ “Christ’s whole life is a mystery of recapitulation.”²² “Christ enables us to live in him all that he himself lived, and he lives it in us.”²³

21. 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.”²⁴ As a result, “the measure of our holiness stems from the stature that Christ achieves in us, to the extent that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we model our whole life on his.”²⁵ Every saint is a message which the Holy Spirit

18. *Spiritual Exercises*, 102–312.

19. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 515.

20. *Ibid.*, 516.

21. *Ibid.*, 517.

22. *Ibid.*, 518.

23. *Ibid.*, 521.

24. Benedict XVI, *Catechesis*, General Audience of April 13, 2011: *Insegnamenti VII* (2011), 451.

25. *Ibid.*, 450.

takes from the riches of Jesus Christ and gives to his people.

22. To recognize the word that the Lord wishes to speak to us through one of his saints, we do not need to get caught up in details, for there we might also encounter mistakes and failures. Not everything a saint says is completely faithful to the Gospel; not everything he or she does is authentic or perfect. What we need to contemplate is the totality of their life, their entire journey of growth in holiness, the reflection of Jesus Christ that emerges when we grasp their overall meaning as a person.²⁶

23. This is a powerful summons to all of us. You too need to see the entirety of your life as a mission. Try to do so by listening to God in prayer and recognizing the signs that he gives you. Always ask the Spirit what Jesus expects from you at every moment of your life and in every decision you must make so as to discern its place in the mission you have received. Allow the Spirit to forge in you the personal mystery that can reflect Jesus Christ in today's world.

24. May you come to realize what that word is, the message of Jesus that God wants to speak to the world

26. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Theology and Holiness," in *Communio* 14/4 (1987), 341–350.

by your life. Let yourself be transformed. Let yourself be renewed by the Spirit, so that this can happen, lest you fail in your precious mission.

The Lord will bring it to fulfillment despite your mistakes and missteps, provided that you do not abandon the path of love but remain ever open to his supernatural grace, which purifies and enlightens.

Activity that sanctifies

25. 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 its 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 endeavor.

26. It is not healthy to love silence while fleeing interaction with others, to want peace and quiet while avoiding activity, to seek prayer while disdaining service. Everything can be accepted and integrated into our life