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Face of Holiness Today

Desiring to build upon the “means of sanctification already known to us” (110) — for example, the various methods of prayer, the inestimable Sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, the offering of personal sacrifices, different forms of devotion, spiritual direction — Pope Francis wishes to highlight “five great expressions of love for God and neighbor” (111) that he considers particularly important to achieving sanctity in today’s society. They are: perseverance, patience and meekness; joy and a sense of humor; boldness and passion; communal living; and constant prayer.

Spiritual Combat

As we seek to live holy lives, the pope reminds us that “the Christian life is a constant battle” (158). He reiterates that the devil is no myth or fantasy, but instead that he is real and is on the prowl to ruin souls.

When Jesus teaches us to pray “deliver us from evil” in the Our Father, he “indicates a personal being who assails us. Jesus taught us to ask daily for deliverance from him, lest his power prevail over us” (160).

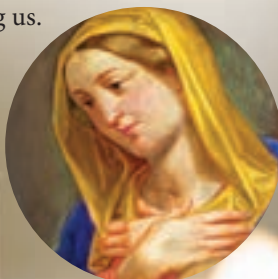
We need to remain alert and trust that God will aid us in our spiritual battle. In doing so, the pope reiterates the importance to “count on the powerful weapons that the Lord has given us: faith-filled prayer, meditation on the word of God, the celebration of Mass, Eucharistic adoration, sacramental Reconciliation, works of charity, community life, missionary outreach” (162).

If we ignore the reality of Satan and are not prepared to “stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph 6:11), the pope warns we will “be prey to failure or mediocrity” (162).

“The path of holiness is a source of peace and joy, given to us by the Spirit. At the same time, it demands that we keep ‘our lamps lit’ (Lk 12:35) and be attentive. ‘Abstain from every form of evil’ (1 Thess 5:22). ‘Keep awake’ (Mt 24:42; Mk 13:35). ‘Let us not fall asleep’ (1 Thess 5:6)” (164).

Turn to Mary

In our quest to be holy, the pope encourages us to turn to the Blessed Virgin Mary. She “is the saint among the saints, blessed above all others. She teaches us the way of holiness and she walks ever at our side. She does not let us remain fallen, and at times she takes us into her arms without judging us. Our converse with her consoles, frees and sanctifies us” (176).



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Pope Francis offers a lengthy chapter in which he seeks to guide the faithful through an examination of modern-day versions of the ancient heresies of Gnosticism and Pelagianism, which he sees as potential pitfalls on the path to holiness. He sees in these heresies today “forms of doctrinal or disciplinary security that give rise to a narcissistic and authoritarian elitism, whereby instead of evangelizing, one analyzes and classifies others, and instead of opening the door to grace, one exhausts his or her energies in inspecting and verifying. In neither case is one really concerned about Jesus Christ or others” (35).

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Rejoice and Be Glad

Gaudete et Exsultate



04/18

Restored Traditions

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Have you ever thought of yourself as a saint-in-training? Whether you have or not, Pope Francis' document on holiness, *Gaudete et Exsultate* ("Rejoice and Be Glad") reminds us that should be our goal. He echoes French novelist and poet Léon Bloy who wrote, "The only great tragedy in life is not to become a saint." But how do we do this? In his apostolic exhortation, the pope presents some ideas.



Made to Be Saints

We are all familiar with certain saints, such as those in the Bible or those whose likenesses often are found in our churches. Or perhaps we chose a patron saint for our confirmation. Whatever we know about the saints, their stories might be intimidating when we compare them to our own. Pope Francis encourages us, however, to take heart and to work toward holiness, most especially in ordinary, everyday ways. Because, in reality, that is how most of us will answer our call to holiness.

"Very often it is a holiness found in our next-door neighbors, those who, living in our midst, reflect God's presence" (7), the pope says.

While it might seem like a daunting and overwhelming task to many, the message is clear — there is nothing to fear. "Do not be afraid of holiness," Pope Francis tells us. "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" (32).

Universal Call to Holiness

In calling each one of us to holiness in the ordinariness of life, Pope Francis' intention is to build upon a teaching of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) which is summed up as "the universal call to holiness." Vatican II's dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* states, "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" (11).

In *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Pope Francis asks us to ponder our own unique ways to becoming saints. Rather than potential discouragement from thinking that we can't attain the greatness of the saints with whom we are familiar, the pope wants us to know that the only way to holiness is to take conscious, active steps in all the ordinary, daily activities of our lives.

The pope draws attention to what he calls "the middle class of holiness," where he finds "daily perseverance" and "patience" as manifestations of the one call to be holy.

"The important thing," he says, "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" (11). The pope also quotes St. Francis de Sales: "There are inspirations that tend solely to perfect in an extraordinary way the ordinary things we do in life" (17).

Our call to holiness is ultimately a mission, the pope says. In order to see our life in this way, he asks us "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" (23).



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Living Holiness

The call to holiness is a call to love, both God and neighbor (see Mt 22:36–40). "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" (14), the pope says. Or as Pope Benedict XVI said (as quoted by Pope Francis), "Holiness is nothing other than charity lived to the full."

While the pope acknowledges that holiness comes in all shapes and sizes, he proposes some basic characteristics of love that form its foundation: growth in holiness through consistency and dedication in small gestures of love in daily human life and relations (see 16) and imitating the self-sacrificial love of Christ (20).

One of the document's hallmarks — indeed, even the source of its title — is found in its lengthy discourse on the Beatitudes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (see Mt 5:3–12), which the pope calls "a Christian's identity card." They present us with a portrait of Jesus, he says, "which we are called to reflect in our daily lives" (63).



We are called to always seek to find God in our neighbor, as we will be judged according to the criteria in Matthew 25, wherein Jesus tells us to serve him by serving those in need. According to Pope Francis, "Holiness cannot be understood or lived apart from these demands" (97). "In this call to recognize him in the poor and the suffering, we see revealed the very heart of Christ, his deepest feelings and choices, which every saint seeks to imitate" (96).

"I recommend rereading these great biblical texts frequently, referring back to them, praying with them, trying to embody them," the pope says. "They will benefit us; they will make us genuinely happy" (109).

Pope Francis repeatedly warns against the dangers of consumerism and technology. He challenges us to "cultivate a certain simplicity of life" because "amid (today's) whirlwind of activity, the Gospel continues to resound, offering us the promise of a different life, a healthier and happier life" (108).

In answering our own call to be holy, the pope explains the importance of discernment, "a gift which we must implore," and points to "prayer, reflection, reading and good counsel" as its necessary tools (166).

He adds that discernment especially is needed today more than ever because "contemporary life offers immense possibilities for action and distraction, and the world presents all of them as valid and good" (167).



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