

## **Gaudete et Exultate – The Call to Holiness in Today's World**

### **Introduction**

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. (GetE §19)

I wonder if you recognise yourself in that quotation? Do you readily think of yourself as a saint? Perhaps not, and yet it is a very ancient idea in our Christian Tradition. At the opening of his letters to the Romans and the Corinthians St Paul calls them “saints in the making”. In his greeting to the Philippians and to the Colossians he simply calls them “saints”. Every Sunday at Mass in the Creed we profess our faith in “The Communion of Saints”. We believe that we are part of an intimate network of relationships with all other believers from past and present. Some we refer to as saints – in heaven or “the Church Triumphant” as it is called. Others are in the final stages of being prepared for entry fully into the Kingdom of Heaven – these are usually referred to as “the Church Suffering”, or those undergoing the final ‘purging’ before being able to rest fully in God. But then we also are “saints in the making” as “The Church Militant” as it is called – those journeying together in this life on the road to eternal life. We are then, truly, saints and this letter is addressed to all of us.

Notice in the rest of that opening quotation other key words like “mission”, being part of God’s plan, finding ourselves living in a particular moment, in other words ‘incarnated’, and whereas Jesus embodied in his Incarnation the whole of the Gospel, we are called simply to embody ‘a certain aspect’. So, we are ‘work in progress’ and called to something that, in God’s grace, is achievable, as we shall see as we look further into the Pope’s letter.

Once again Pope Francis has produced a document that is accessible to many people in the pews, and one that is shorter than his previous works, and thus more likely to be read. The Latin title comes from the ending to Jesus’ delivery of the Beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in St Matthew’s Gospel (5:12). In a later chapter the Pope gives an extended meditation on the meaning of these beatitudes in the modern context. This brings us to the subtitle of the Letter, “The Call to Holiness in the Today’s World”. Rooting his ideas firmly in Scripture and the full panoply of the Tradition of spirituality in the Church his aim is to translate that message into the reality of today’s world. I am fairly sure, for example, that this is the first papal document to refer to “zapping”.

In the first half of the Twentieth Century the great Protestant theologian Karl Barth remarked that he preached the Gospel with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. In other words he wanted to make a direct connection between the Scriptures and the lived experience of the people to whom he was preaching. With Pope Francis it seems he has replaced the newspaper with his iphone and Twitter account. He writes, “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.” (GetE §2)

This call to holiness for all people was a central plank of the *Lumen Gentium*. This was the great Dogmatic Constitution on the Church promulgated at Vatican II. The first chapter is dedicated to the Mystery of the Church, after which comes a chapter on The People Of God – all of us clergy and lay people alike – and all called to holiness, which is the subject of the final chapter of the document as well. Pope Francis quotes from this text in the early part of this letter.

Francis often condemns what he calls a church that is always “self-referential”, always centred solely on itself and its concerns, self-absorbed. The Pope might be accused of being this himself when he refers to his earlier writings,

We often speak... of the spirituality of the catechist, the spirituality of the diocesan priesthood, the spirituality of work. For the same reason in *Evangelii Gaudium* I concluded by speaking of the spirituality of mission, in *Laudato Si'* of an ecological spirituality, and in *Amoris Laetitia* of a spirituality of family life. (§28)

In fact what the Pope is doing is simply emphasising the point that spirituality knows no boundaries, rather it is for all people no matter what their background, or the context in which they live. Here Francis is showing that he stands firmly in the Ignatian tradition of his own order, the Jesuits, one of whose central tenets is ‘finding God in all things’.

This brings me to another point. The late Irish Carmelite theologian, Fr Jimmy McCaffrey, once remarked that the different Christian Spiritualities could be compared to the formation of the pins in tenpin bowling. All authentic spirituality consists of all ten pins, but each tradition proposes a different formation: one stressing the initial importance of one aspect (pin), while another puts forward a different combination of pins. One spirituality might put silence or penitence first, whilst another might put meditation on the Gospels first and penitence lower down the order. All, however, use all ten ‘pins’ one way or another. Pope Francis illustrates this point when he refers to a wide range of the great tradition of Christian Spirituality in this letter:- the *Confessions* of St Augustine, the *Rule of St Benedict*, the *Summa* of St Thomas, advice from St Francis and St Bonaventure, the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius Loyola, the writings of St John of the Cross and St Theresa of Lisieux, among others.

### **Mission and Holiness For All – Chapter 1**

In the opening chapter the Pope refers to the great tradition of the canonisation of saints in the Church, but once then he moves swiftly into the ordinary and everyday,

I like to contemplate the holiness present in the patience of God’s people: in those parents raising 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 next-door neighbours, those who, living in our midst, reflect God’s presence. (§7)<sup>i</sup>

He also makes a very important ecumenical point when he acknowledges, quoting Pope John Paul II, the holiness to be found in the lives of men and women in the

other Christian churches. This is all rooted in a central concept of *Lumen Gentium* of the 'Universal Call to Holiness', as we have already seen.

Francis urges people not to become discouraged as if the task seemed impossible and he especially points to the example of woman - saints (such as Hildegard of Bingen and Theresa of Lisieux, and "unknown and forgotten" women alike (§12). He emphasises this when he insists that holiness is "for you too",

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. (§14)

Here he lists the callings of religious, married couples, workers, parents and grandparents, and the fact that holiness is present in such mundane activities as listening to another with patience and love, refusing to engage in gossip about another, and offering a gesture of love to the poor – just one step at a time. He quotes here the example of the Vietnamese Bishop – Francois-Xavier Nguyen van Thuan – who was imprisoned and kept in solitary confinement for much of his ministry by the communist regime and who resolved, "I will seize the occasions that present themselves every day; I will accomplish ordinary actions in an extraordinary way."<sup>ii</sup>

In keeping with a constant theme of his own ministry the Pope places this call to holiness as an integral part of mission to which all disciples are called. Centred on the example of Christ we are very much, like all saints, 'work in progress', and not the finished article. In reflecting on the lives of the saints we see their shortcomings in some things as well as their virtue in others and it is the totality of their life that makes evident their holiness. The same holds true for us – our whole life is a mission, to which we need to commit to be our best. Quoting a Spanish writer, he notes, "life does not have a mission, but is a mission."<sup>iii</sup>

In true Ignatian tradition the Pope calls us 'contemplatives in action' (§26) which means that alongside action we need to create space for quiet time alone with God, and he is under no illusion as to how difficult that is to achieve with so many distractions around us today. In an explanatory footnote he distinguishes between empty distractions, mere entertainment – what the Roman Emperors used to refer to as 'bread and circuses' to keep the crowd docile – and the true meaning of recreation (or **Re-creation**),

We need to distinguish between this kind of superficial entertainment and a healthy culture of leisure, which opens us to others and to reality itself in a spirit of openness and contemplation. (footnote 29)

The latter empowers and re-energises our commitment to mission while the former leads us to inertia. He brings the chapter to a close using some words of the French writer Leon Bloy, "When all is said and done, 'the only great tragedy in life, is not to become a saint.'" (§34)

## Two Ancient Heresies as the Enemy of Holiness – Chapter 2

At the beginning of the Nineteenth Century Friedrich Schleiermacher, the Father of Liberal Protestantism, wrote that there were four ‘natural heresies’ to which people are prone. Two concerned the person of Christ and involved either the denial of his divinity or that of his humanity. The other two concerned the response of the human person – either denying any responsibility for material things in this life, or claiming personal achievement as the basis for development in spiritual matters. He called these ‘Manichaeism’ and ‘Pelagianism’. The Pope refers to the former as ‘Gnosticism’.<sup>iv</sup> Noting their ancient origins he writes about their contemporary manifestations and how they infect the call to holiness today.

“Gnosticism” simply translates as “knowledge” and relates to feelings of superiority over others coming from a sense that we have a special access to information not available to others. “(Gnostics) absolutise their own theories and force others to submit to their way of thinking.” (§39),

When somebody has an answer for every question, it is a sign that they are not on the right road... God infinitely transcends us; he is full of surprises... Someone who wants everything to be clear and sure presumes to control God’s transcendence. (§42)

What is needed is a true sense of humility and mystery. God is present even in abject failure in life which is always redeemable. Holiness needs to be rooted in the reality of people’s life, not some idealised version of life available only to an elite. Here the Pope quotes his patron, Francis of Assisi, writing to Saint Anthony of Padua, “I am pleased that you teach sacred theology to the brothers, provided that... you do not extinguish the spirit of prayer and devotion during study of this kind.”<sup>v</sup>

The other heresy – Pelagianism – is named after a Fourth Century British monk whose ideas exercised the mind of St Augustine a great deal. No one doubts that Pelagius was a sincere and good-living person, nor do we know for sure that he was in fact “Pelagian” as such, what concerned Augustine was the impression reported to him that Pelagius was saying that we were saved by our own efforts. It is sometimes referred to as “Muscular Christianity” – the idea that we can overcome all things if we just try hard enough. Referring to many examples from the Christian Tradition Pope Francis asserts that this is far from being the case.

For Augustine, and for all orthodox spirituality, we are absolutely dependent on God’s grace. In the words of contemporary spiritual writer Richard Rohr, “It is not that God loves us because **we** are good, rather we are loved because **God is good.**” This fundamental idea of salvation not by our efforts, our own works, is so central that it has been re-visited by every major theologian since the time of Augustine. In this section of the chapter Francis refers to writings of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Bonaventure, and especially the decrees of the Council of Trent. Why refer to this Council in particular?

At the time of the Reformation, when Luther was crying that only by faith was someone saved, and not by good works, the Catholic doctrine of Merit looked on the surface as though it were claiming that we could **earn** salvation by our good deeds.

Indeed some of the preachers whose words had come to the attention of Luther were stepping over the mark in this regard. So, in setting out the Catholic opposition to Luther, the Bishops at the Council had to prove that whilst they were not Lutheran, they were most certainly not Pelagian either. Pope Francis reiterates this point,

The Church has repeatedly taught that we are justified not by our own works or efforts, but by the grace of the Lord, who always takes the initiative. (§52)<sup>vi</sup>

This is further explained and emphasised when he writes,

Only on the basis of God's gift, freely accepted and humbly received, can we cooperate by our own efforts in progressive transformation. We must first belong to God, offering ourselves to him who was there first, and entrusting to him our abilities, our efforts, our struggle against evil and our creativity, so that this free gift may grow and develop within us... (§56)

In a footnote (f.62) Francis explains that this is what is meant by the Catholic doctrine of Merit.

Pope Francis' list of modern manifestations of Pelagianism will raise a few eyebrows in a number of different (and opposing) quarters in the Church, and is a familiar theme in his writings,

... a punctilious concern for the Church's liturgy, doctrine and prestige, a vanity about the ability to manage practical matters, and an excessive concern with programmes of self-help and personal fulfilment. Some Christians spend their time and energy on these things, rather than letting themselves be led by the Spirit in the way of love, rather than being passionate about communicating the beauty and joy of the Gospel and seeking out the lost among the immense crowds that thirst for Christ. (§57)

Such ways of acting make the Church look like a "museum piece". The way forward is putting the double commandment of love of God and neighbour front and centre of our life. This will help us avoid the two perennial heresies that plague the call to holiness.

### **The Master's Preaching and Teaching – Chapter 3**

It will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Pope Francis' writings that meditation on the Scriptures lies at the heart of this whole document. We need only be reminded of the meditation in Chapter 4 of *Amoris Laetitia* on St Paul's 'Hymn to Love' in I Corinthians 13. In this letter, it is the Beatitudes (Mt. 5) and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Mt. 25) that he uses to illustrate his ideas. These passages are like book-ends to Matthew's account of Jesus' Public Ministry. He opens the account with the Sermon on the Mount, which itself begins with the Beatitudes, and ends with three "Parables of the Kingdom" – the Talents, the Wise and Foolish Virgins and the Sheep and the Goats.

As he begins his meditation on the Beatitudes he points out how Jesus' message is what often refer to as 'counter-cultural', or as he says 'going against the flow'. These reflections need to be read rather than further reflected on here. Here we will simply point out three elements of particular interest.

Firstly, as we might expect of a Jesuit, he places everything within the context of Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises which open with what is called "The First Principle and Foundation",

We need to train ourselves to be indifferent in our attitude to all created things, in all that is permitted to our free will and not forbidden; so that for our part we do not set our hearts on good health rather than bad, riches rather than poverty, honour rather than dishonour, a long life rather than a short one, and so in all the rest. (§69)

This is 'holy indifference' as Francis points out, and the basis of true poverty of spirit.

The second theme to note is another familiar one in Francis' writings: the modern dangers of denial, of avoidance of pain, of reality. The whole business of 'escapism'. True holiness is firmly rooted in reality, in the here and now.<sup>vii</sup> Finally, he writes once more about his constant theme of God's mercy available to all. All of this, he notes, goes so much against the modern flow that it will likely lead to persecution (§93 & 94). This, he writes, accepting the daily the path of the Gospel is holiness.

Moving on to the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Mt.25), Pope Francis notes that here we are given the 'Great Criterion' for judging holiness which is not "about swooning in mystic rapture" (§96). Referring to Pope John Paul II's letter to mark the new millennium he notes that this is not just a call to action it is actually a Christology. In other words it teaches us something about who Christ is in himself: the one always reaching out to others in their need. Pulling no punches and using very basic examples he affirms Jesus' command to holiness in acts of mercy, without exception. He writes about two opposing ideologies that threaten this.

The one is to separate action from our personal relationship with God in prayer – becoming merely like a charitable NGO (non-government organisation) and nothing else. There are many secular NGO's doing great work: Medecins Sans Frontieres, the Red Cross, Water Aid, and so on, but their work is not rooted in the Gospel as such. The other is, "found in those who suspect the social engagement of others, seeing it as superficial, worldly, secular, materialist, communist or populist." (§101) This can involve splitting off certain doctrines as more essential than others. He refers specifically to the defence of the unborn but then the abandonment of those born to lives of poverty, slavery, trafficking, destitution and so on. Life is all of one piece. It cannot be compartmentalised in any way. Francis concludes, "... the best way to discern if our prayer is authentic is to judge to what extent our life is being transformed in the light of mercy." (§105)

#### **Dangers to and Opportunities for Holiness Today – Chapter 4**

The Pope now moves on not so much to talk about the various methods, routes, to sanctification that he notes are already well known, rather, he lists five signs or spiritual attitudes that are necessary to combat the various dangers present in the culture of today's world.

The five dangers he points out are:

1. A sense of anxiety sometimes violent, that distracts and debilitates

2. Negativity and sullenness.
3. The self-content bred by consumerism.
4. Individualism
5. All forms of ersatz spirituality, not having anything to do with God, but which dominate the current religious marketplace. (§111)

The five 'signs or spiritual attitudes' he deals with are:

1. Perseverance, patience and meekness
2. Joy and a sense of humour
3. Boldness and passion
4. Being part of community
5. Being rooted in constant prayer

Once again these deserve to be studied in their own right, but it might be helpful to flag up certain issues that point to the Pope's rootedness in the realities of life today.

At one point he writes about the "noise and aggression" around in society today (§114ff.) and pointing the finger firmly at the way the Media and the Internet (and Social Media) are complicit in this using "verbal violence" that can lead to acting out. The Christian is to respond in meekness, firmness and humility that are not signs of weakness but rather the embodiment of the true peace lived by Christ himself, and offering true joy. Of particular note in this regard is a footnote reference by the Pope to a prayer of St Thomas More,

I recommend praying the prayer attributed to St Thomas More, "Grant me, O Lord, good digestion and something to digest. Grant me a healthy body, and the necessary good humour to maintain it. Grant me a simple soul that knows to treasure all that is good and that doesn't frighten easily at the sight of evil, but rather finds the means to put things back in their place. Give me a soul that knows not boredom, grumbling, sighs and laments, nor excess of stress because of that obstructing thing called 'I'. Grant me, O Lord a sense of good humour. Allow me the grace to be able to take a joke and to discover in life a bit of joy, and to be able to share it with others." (§126, f.101)

Another essential element is journeying with others beside us, "Growth in holiness is a journey in community, side by side with others." (§141) Referring both to the example of saints and their companions and to basic details of everyday life Pope Francis refers to the 'Little Way' of St Theresa of Lisieux when he writes about paying attention to little details in life, as did Jesus himself,

The little detail that wine was running out at a party.

The little detail that one sheep was missing.

The little detail of noticing the widow who offered two small coins.

The little detail of having spare oil for the lamps, should the bridegroom delay.

The little detail of asking the disciples how many loaves of bread they had.

The little detail of having a fire burning and fish cooking as he waited for the disciples at daybreak. (§144)

The Pope champions "a community that cherishes the little details of love." (§145)

Finally, Francis roots everything in full range of “Constant Prayer” individual and communal: contemplation, remembrance, petition, meditation on the Scripture and the Eucharist.

### **Discernment and the ‘Examen’ – Chapter 5**

This final chapter is firmly rooted in the Ignatian tradition of *The Spiritual Exercises* especially in what are known as the Meditation on the Two Standards and The Rules for Discernment. As the person engages in the second of the four weeks of the Exercises Ignatius presents a meditation in which s/he is invited to make a choice: for Christ’s banner/standard or that of Satan. The picture painted by Ignatius of Satan is particularly vivid and not one that sits easily with modern ways of thinking, but Pope Francis affirms very strongly the reality of the Devil’s presence in the world. He writes,

... we should not think of the devil as a myth, a representation, a symbol, a figure of speech or an idea. This mistake would lead us to let down our guard, to grow careless and end up more vulnerable. The devil does not need to possess us. He poisons us with the venom of hatred, desolation, envy, and vice. When we let down our guard, he takes advantage of it to destroy our lives, our families, our communities... (§161)

This does not sit easily with modern, Western, ‘liberal’ minds. For sure we can see the absolute reality of evil around in the world today in so many different ways. Such evil is an incredibly powerful force that can only be combatted with the help of God’s grace, but does it need to be personified with all the old images of horns and forked tails that almost inevitably accompany talk of Satan? The Pope obviously thinks that it does.

To combat this, and to realise the presence of God in the midst of all life, Francis recommends the usual ‘weapons’: “faith-filled prayer, meditation on the word of God, the celebration of Mass, Eucharistic adoration, sacramental Reconciliation, works of charity, community life, and missionary outreach.” (§163) All of which help vigilance and avoidance of lethargy and complacency.

Essential to all of this, for Pope Francis, is the ‘urgent need’ for Discernment,

The gift of discernment has become all the more necessary today, since contemporary life offers immense possibilities for action and distraction, and the world presents all of them as valid and good. All of us, but especially the young, are immersed in a culture of zapping. We can navigate simultaneously on two or more screens and interact at the same time with two or three virtual scenarios. Without the wisdom of discernment, we can easily become prey to every passing trend. (§167)

What follows cannot be précised and at the same time remain faithful both to its roots in the writings of Ignatius nor to Francis’ own words. It is crucial to Francis’ whole understanding of movement in the spiritual life. A grasp of it is also essential in understanding the thorniest of issues causing much debate from *Amoris Laetitia* on the potential admission of the divorced-remarried to the Sacraments.

Perhaps we might make two observations on this topic based on quotations from Pope Francis himself,

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. (§170)

Discernment is not about discovering what more we can get out of this life, but about recognising how we can better accomplish the mission entrusted to us at our baptism. This entails a readiness to make sacrifices, even to sacrificing everything. For happiness is a paradox. (§174) (cf. the Cross)

Francis roots our ability to engage in this process in that most basic of Ignatian exercises – ‘The Examen’ (unfortunately translated here by the term ‘examination of conscience’ that is hopelessly loaded with too many preconceptions of a previous spirituality). “Examination of Conscience” for older generations of Catholics immediately brings to mind preparation for Sacramental Confession. It was a process of going through the Commandments and thinking how you might have broken them in various ways since your last Confession. In other words it dwelled wholly on the negative – our sinfulness. It was a rather watered-down version of what the original idea of “The Examen” in the Spiritual Exercises..

The Examen is a daily – of all Jesuits- and consists in setting aside a time to place oneself in the presence of the Lord and to discern where he has been present in life in the previous few hours, to review how I have responded to that presence, to ask forgiveness for failure, to give thanks for success in following the promptings of God, and in this way to be constantly aware of that presence so essential to the holiness the Pope is proposing in this letter.

The American Jesuit Writer James Martin suggests a five-point process for this exercise. I think that this might be a fitting conclusion to this introduction to the Pope’s Letter and a starting point for our own personal development and further discovery of the riches of Gaudete et Exultate. Martin places his version of the Examen at the end of the day, but it can be done at any time suitable to your own rhythm of life.

Before you begin, as in all prayer, remind yourself that you’re in God’s presence, and ask God to help you with your prayer.

1. Gratitude: recall anything from the day for which you are especially grateful and give thanks.
2. Review: Recall the events of the day, from start to finish, noticing where you felt God’s presence, and where you accepted or turned away from any invitations to grow in love.
3. Sorrow: Recall any actions for which you are sorry.
4. Forgiveness: Ask for God’s forgiveness.
5. Grace: Ask God for the grace you need for the next day and an ability to see God’s presence more clearly.<sup>viii</sup>

There we have it, then, an ‘introduction’, a beginning. There is so much to this letter that we can reflect on as we go about the business – and the busy-ness – of life that is designed to help us grow in holiness. So, take, read reflect and remember,

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. (GetE§19)

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<sup>i</sup> “Church Militant” is the earthly part of the Communion of Saints along with the Church Suffering (in Purgatory) and the church Triumphant (the saints in Heaven).

<sup>ii</sup> Francis is quoting from the Bishop’s book, *Five Loaves and Two Fish*, Pauline Books and Media, 2003, p.13.

<sup>iii</sup> §27 and from From Xavier Zubiri, *Naturaleza, Historia, Dios*, Madrid, 1993, p.427. A Spanish philosopher who died in 1983.

<sup>iv</sup> F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 1830, English Trans. Edinburgh, 1928, §22,1.

<sup>v</sup> Footnote § 43, *Letter to Brother Anthony*, 2:FF 251.

<sup>vi</sup> <sup>vi</sup> The Doctrine of Justification, as it is called, has been the subject of ecumenical study and general agreement for the last few decades. Hans Kung can be credited with pioneering work in this regard in his early doctoral study of justification in the writings of Karl Barth “cf. *Justification*, 1957, English translation London 1964, and 1981.

<sup>vii</sup> Pope Francis is known to be a great admirer of a very Argentinian form of Liberation Theology called “Teologia del Pueblo” (theology of the People). This method always begins with the Gospel and relates it to “La Realidad” – the Reality of people’s lives and not some fantasy world rooted in denial.

<sup>viii</sup> James Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to Almost Everything*, Harper Collins, NY, 2010, p.97.