

Called to Holiness: Holiness in Modern Church Teaching

by Arthur David Canales

Blessed Teresa of Calcutta (1910–1997), while speaking at Harvard University said something like this: Being holy is not something for the few or the privileged, but the responsibility of everyone. You are called to be holy in your life as I am called to be holy in mine.ⁱ Becoming holy or being holy is part and parcel of living as a Catholic. Mother Teresa is correct; holiness is a **right** and **responsibility** of every baptized Catholic. On the other hand, holiness does take desire and dedication. A Catholic must desire to be holy and dedicate time to the practices that nurture holiness.

Pope Saint John Paul II points out that we are all called to holiness. In his apostolic letter *Christifideles Laici*, the Pope states: “We come to a full sense of the *dignity* of the lay faithful if we consider the *prime and fundamental vocation* that [God] assigns to each of them in Jesus the Christ through the Holy Spirit: the vocation to *holiness*, that is, the perfection of charity. The Pope adds, “This charge is *not* a simple moral exhortation, but an *undeniable requirement arising from the mystery of the Church: she is the choice vine*, whose branches live and grow with the same holy and life-giving energies that come from Christ; she is the Mystical Body, whose members share in the same life of holiness of the Head who is Christ.”ⁱⁱ The Holy Father reminds us that we are called to not only follow in the footsteps of Jesus but also to follow the matchless path shown us by the Church, a path that is time-tested and proven worthy over the centuries.

What Is Holiness?

The root word of *holiness* stems from the Old English word *hālignes*, which means “without blemish” or “without injury”; therefore, the English word *holy* is an English equivalent for the Hebrew word *qds* and the Greek word *hagios*, with both Hebrew and Greek terms having added a sense of separation or consecration.ⁱⁱⁱ Holiness is not tantamount to spirituality. Spirituality is the methodology or approach or personal pastoral strategy that one uses to become holy. Think of spirituality as a path that one travels in pursuit of holiness; whereas holiness is the lived reality and byproduct of a life attuned to the Holy Spirit and spiritual living. Spirituality consists of prayer, community-life, the Sacraments, morality, religiosity, and Gospel values, and all are a means to an end—becoming holy as God is holy. God is pure, unadulterated holiness, and for Christians, Jesus the Christ is the personal fulfillment of God’s holiness on earth and the paradigmatic figure for Christian holiness.^{iv}

Holiness is the primary characteristic and fundamental quality of God. Holiness is God’s primordial essence and eternal being. Consequently, by extension, those people who earnestly search after God or seek God’s goodness are extended the quality of holiness by proxy from God.^v

Holiness **derives** solely from God because God is the author, creator, and disseminator of holiness. Holiness is a divine attribute that is bestowed upon God’s followers and those who desire to share in God’s gratuitous gift of holiness: “But as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in every aspect of your conduct, for it is written, ‘Be holy because I [am] holy’” (1 Peter 1:15–16). In other words, Christians are called to be holy.



The Call to Holiness

The call to holiness is not a new idea. The Book of Leviticus encourages the People of God to be holy: “Be holy, for I, the LORD, your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). In another ecclesial document—*Ecclesia in America*—Pope Saint John Paul II addresses the fundamental and universal call to holiness for every baptized Christian. The Pope notes: “To be holy is to be like God and to glorify his name in the works which we accomplish in our lives (cf. Matthew 5:16). On the path of holiness, Jesus Christ is the point of reference and the model to be imitated: he is ‘the Holy One of God,’ and was recognized as such (cf. Mark 1:24). It is [Jesus] who teaches us that the heart of holiness is love, which leads even to giving our lives for others (cf. John 15:13). Therefore, to imitate the holiness of God, as it was made manifest in Jesus Christ his Son, ‘is nothing other than to extend in history his love, especially towards the poor, the sick, and the needy (cf. Luke 10:25).’”^{vi} To become holy is to live as Jesus lived: for others, for the Church, and for God. It is Jesus the Christ who points the way to holiness.

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) also exhorts Catholics to pursue the universal call to holiness. The fifth chapter of *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium, 1964)* is entitled “The Call to Holiness.” The call to holiness as described in *Church* is not a simple suggestion nor is it merely ornamental, but it is in fact a constitutive element of living an authentic Catholic life. The document states, “Holiness of the Church is constantly shown forth in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the [lay] faithful. . . it is quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love, and by this holiness a more human manner of life is fostered also in earthly society.”^{vii} The document equates perfection with holiness, hence, Catholics are called to the way of perfection, which is modeled by Jesus of Nazareth who preached and practiced holiness. Whatever state of life or vocation a person is called to—married, chaste single, ordained, or religious life—the call to holiness is not an abstract “pie in the sky” mandate, but a reality that Catholics are called to strive toward, and when we stumble and fall, we are called to get up, dust ourselves off, and continue to embark upon our lifelong pilgrimage to perfection. Everyone, every day, is called to vigorously and righteously pursue holiness, as it is not the domain of an elect or cultic group but is required of every person.

Everyday Holiness

The reality is that holiness must be lived daily through a variety of activities: nurtured by prayer, reflection, and Scripture reading, holiness is lived out in works of mercy, works of charity, and in simply being Christ-like to others throughout the day. Holiness is as much a daily attitude as it is a pursuit of perfection. Through our daily lives, all Catholics are called to live out holiness in the world.

The U.S. Catholic Bishops’ document, *Economic Justice for All* challenges Catholics to lead a life of holiness that not only is private but also reaches out and serves society. The document reads: “Holiness is not limited to the sanctuary or to moments of private prayer; it is a call to direct our whole heart and life toward God and according to God’s plan for this world. For the laity, holiness is achieved in the midst of the world, in family, in community, in friendships, in work, in leisure, in citizenship. Through their competency and by their activity, lay men and women have the vocation to bring the light of the Gospel to economic affairs, ‘so that the world may be filled with the Spirit of Christ and may more effectively attain its destiny in justice, in love, and in peace.’”^{viii} Living everyday holiness takes on many forms: prophetic witness, giving to charities, serving at a soup kitchen, tutoring children, celebrating Sunday Eucharist, praying for others, even curbing waste and living frugally.



The call to bringing holiness into the world daily is an arduous, ongoing task, but one that must be carried out with steadfast faith—and if not by you and me—then by whom? Holiness cannot be manifested in the world unless it is manifested in us first. All Christians, from every walk of life, are called to do their part to bring holiness to our society and the world: women and men, Catholics and non-Catholics, lawyers and judges, nurses and physicians, teachers and coaches, theologians and bishops, financial planners and economists, engineers and astronauts, steel workers and day laborers, single or married, and plumbers and priests. The point is clear: by sharing the perspectives of those who suffer, and by living as spirit-filled persons, we can come to understand economic, political, racial, and social problems in a deeper way, thus leading lives that are more attuned to holiness by service and outreach to others.^{ix}

Living a life of holiness in today's contemporary, fast-paced world can be distracting and daunting, but certainly not impossible. For most people, living a life of holiness every day will be a struggle. The U.S. Catholic Bishops' note: "Holiness for the laity will involve all the sacrifices needed to lead such a life of prayer and reflection within a worshipping and supporting faith community. In this way the laity will bridge the gap that so easily arises between the moral principles that guide the personal life of the Christian and the consideration that governs decisions in society in the political forum and in the marketplace."^x Therefore Catholics are called to integrate their spirituality with their daily lives in order to bring God's holiness to society and the world. There is a close symbiotic associate between God's holiness and our common holiness that derives directly from living according to God's plan for the world.^{xi}

The Church Is Holy

The Catholic Church has always considered itself to be "one, holy catholic and apostolic church" (Nicene Creed). These characteristics are commonly known as the four marks of the Church. Holiness is a gift from God extended to the Church. Vatican II described the Church as "marked with a genuine though imperfect holiness."^{xii} On the one hand, the Catholic Church is *perfectly imperfect* because it relies on frail and flawed human beings to exercise the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, the Church is perfect in terms of the genuine holiness it receives and is endowed with from God; it is "indefectibly holy."^{xiii} Ultimately, though, the Church is **without failure** because its holiness originates from the essence of God is rooted in the unfailing grace, mercy, and love of God.

In his first papal encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI declares that the Church is holy because of its threefold mission: (1) proclaiming the Word of God (*kerygma*), (2) celebrating the sacraments (*leitourgia*), and (3) exercising the ministry of charity (*diakonia*). All three ministries represent the Catholic community (*koinonia*).^{xiv} The Church is holy because it follows Jesus, who is the heart and soul of the Church and the divine revelation and self-communication of God's holiness. It is holy because its members are called to live the truth of Christ in the secular world.^{xv}

Three characteristics constitute the holiness of the Church: (1) the objective holiness of its formal elements [Word, Sacraments, service, and community]; (2) its consecration as a prophetic, priestly, and princely people; and (3) the personal piety and purity of its members.^{xvi} Yet, as *Church* notes, "The Church, embracing sinners in her bosom, is at the same holy and always in need of being purified, and increasingly pursues the path of penance and renewal."^{xvii} In many ways the holiness of the Church can be called "radical holiness" as it is continuously purified by God; it is led by its Head Jesus the Christ; and it produces the gifts, fruits, and charisms of the Holy Spirit. The Church is the gift of Christ, which itself receives the great gift of holiness from God.



Personal Piety and Holiness

The Church empowers the *Christifideles laici*, the lay members of Christ's faithful people, on their journey of faith, it promotes individual and communal spirituality, and it provides companionship for Catholics. Piety, or spirituality, is the way individual Catholics heighten, enhance, and increase their holiness, but Catholic spirituality is relational and cannot be separated from the Catholic community. I often hear people say, "I am spiritual, but not religious." In other words, they do not want anything to do with organized religion or the Church and its hierarchy, dogmas, and doctrines. The question that I like to pose back is this: "How long can you keep up a genuine spirituality without the Christian community?" Yoga and transcendental meditation may increase self-awareness of one's interior life—which is all well and good—but the interior life must shape and reform the exterior life and move one into action, service, and outreach toward the poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised, and ultimately draw us back closer to the Divine.

The Catholic Church is a gift God to all of *Christifideles laici* and equips people to integrate faith and life as a Christian disciple. Theologian Thomas H. Groome maintains that the faith community is absolutely essential for individual holiness. Groome states: "A vibrant faith community gives us past saints as inspiring models and present companions—*companis*, 'to break bread with'—along the way. The [Church] can provide guidance and encouragement, challenge, and correction, and conversation to test discernment. A Christian faith community offers the resources of God's word through Scripture and Tradition, the sacraments as deepened experience of God's presence and grace, and rich legacy of spiritual wisdom. Why would anyone want to go it alone?"^{xviii} A truly Catholic spirituality is shaped by the Catholic Church and is nourished through prayer, liturgy, the Bible, service, charity, and connecting with other through meaningful relationships. Personal piety must be linked with the Church, which is holy, and follow its leader Jesus the Christ, the Divine Revelation of God's holiness. We can share in God's inaccessible holiness because humans are created in the image and likeness of God—*Imago Dei*—and participate in God's holy work on earth.^{xix}

Endnotes

ⁱ Ann and Jeanette Petrie, *Mother Teresa: A Documentary Film* (Burlingame, CA: Red Rose Gallerie Productions, 1988).

ⁱⁱ Pope Saint John Paul II, 1988, no. 16.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lawrence S. Cunningham, "Holiness," in Michael Downey, editor, *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), p. 479.

^{iv} Lawrence S. Cunningham, p. 484.

^v Cunningham, p. 480.

^{vi} Pope Saint John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America (The Church in America: On the Encounter with the Living Jesus Christ—The Way to Conversion, Communion, and Solidarity in America)*, A Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 1999), no. 30.

^{vii} *Lumen Gentium (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church)*, in Austin Flannery, editor, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, Study Edition, (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1992), no. 39–40.

^{viii} United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 1997), no. 332.

^{ix} *Economic Justice for All*, no. 334.

^x *Economic Justice for All*, no. 336.

^{xi} Cunningham, p. 487.

^{xii} *Lumen Gentium*, no. 48.

^{xiii} *Lumen Gentium*, no. 39.

^{xiv} Pope Benedict XVI, *God Is Love (Deus Caritas Est)* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2006), no. 25.



^{xv} Pope Benedict XVI, no. 31.

^{xvi} Richard P. McBrien, "Holiness of the Church," in Richard P. McBrien, editors, *Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 617.

^{xvii} *Lumen Gentium*, no. 8.

^{xviii} Thomas H. Groome, *What Makes Us Catholic: Eight Gifts for Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 289.

^{xix} *Interdicasterial Commission, Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Second Edition (Vatican City, Italy: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 2809.

