



HOLINESS: IS IT FOR YOU?

*by a Visitation Sister
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Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ,

The month of November is a time for remembering: All Saints Day recalls those individual holy persons down through the ages, All Souls Day reminds us to pray for the souls of the faithful departed and Thanksgiving Day is a time to remember God's goodness to each one of us. The Gospel on the feast of All Saints is the familiar text of the Beatitudes. Of the eight Beatitudes, one among the others seems to sum up the rest: "Blest are they who hunger and thirst for holiness; they shall have their fill." (Mt. 5: 6.) In our time together this afternoon, let us consider the attribute the Heart of Jesus praises as blessed in us: holiness.

When we hear the word holiness, images of great saints no doubt spring to mind: Our Lady, St. Joseph, St. Peter, St. Paul, or the great convert St. Augustine. Popular saints like the beloved St. Francis of Assisi, St. Patrick or St. Jude may fulfill our ideas of holiness. Perhaps persons closer to home embody sanctity for us: saints like John Neumann, Katherine Drexel, Elizabeth Ann Seton, Frances Xavier Cabrini or the North American Martyrs, all of whom lived in the United States. But when we think about holiness, do our thoughts go to our pastor, or our neighbor, or our spouse? Do we consider the persons in our daily lives as holy? For that matter, do we aspire to holiness ourselves? Holiness can be an elusive concept. In order to get a grasp on it let's consider what it is, who is called to it, what it looks like and how we can attain it.

In the letter to the Hebrews, the author encourages his readers to: "Strive for that holiness without which no one can see the Lord". (Heb. 12: 14) From this we can conclude that holiness brings us face to face with the Lord. It puts us in contact with the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It is therefore, a preparation for eternity, which is nothing other than a sharing in the life of the Lord. We make our entrance into the Heart of Christ through the Sacraments especially Baptism, Holy Eucharist and Confirmation. Our love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus deepens in us through our manner of living a good, moral and ethical life.

In St. Francis de Sales' terms holiness is synonymous with the life of devotion. He tells us in his book *The Introduction to the Devout Life*, a book written particularly for the laity, that: "Genuine, living devotion presupposes love of God, and hence it is simply true love of God." The concept of holiness in the writings of St. Francis de Sales made him a precursor of the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. An echo of his teaching can be heard in that document. "God has willed to make us holy and save us, to make us into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness." (LG #9) "Therefore all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God, should present themselves as a sacrifice, living, holy and pleasing to God." (LG #10) Holiness emanates from the depths of the heart and is manifested in our everyday actions. Simply put, it is the fulfillment of Jesus' two-fold command: "You shall



love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Mt. 22: 37 – 39.)

The call to holiness is universal. The Church teaches this in her magisterium and in her use of sacred scripture: “The Lord Jesus, divine teacher and model of all perfection, preached holiness of life to each and every one of his disciples without distinction.” (LG #40) God gave us Jesus “so that we might become the very holiness of God.” (2 Cor 5: 21) No one is excluded and no one is excused. The life of holiness is for everyone. *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, goes so far as to make holiness an obligation of life. “Therefore all the faithful are invited and obliged to holiness and the perfection of their own state of life.” (LG #42) Three hundred and fifty years previous to the Second Vatican Council, St. Francis de Sales entitled one of his chapters in *The Introduction to the Devout Life*: Devotion is possible in every vocation and profession. In 1609 when the book was first published, this was revolutionary thinking. The expectation of holiness in the seventeenth century was limited to monks and nuns, possibly bishops and maybe priests; it certainly did not extend to all the Faithful.

St. Francis de Sales stressed the universality of the call to holiness, “Every vocation becomes more agreeable when united with devotion (holiness). Care of one’s family is rendered more peaceable, love of husband and wife more sincere, service of one’s prince (government authority) more faithful, and every type of employment more pleasant and agreeable.” St. Francis de Sales also recognized that a person’s state in life would effect the manner in which they practice holiness. If holiness is lived out in the daily ordinary routine of life, as St. Francis de Sales stresses, then it will appear in different forms in the nun and married woman, in the single man and the father of a family. Holiness has many faces. Can we find them around us?

Last month the Sisters had a visit from Father Joe Muth, the nephew of our Sister Mary Gabrielle. In Father Joe’s inner city Baltimore parish he has a veritable league of nations, including persons from Rwanda. This summer Father Joe traveled with a family back to their village in Rwanda. While there he saw the memorials the people have erected to those victims of the 1994 genocide. He met many people whose faith is their only anchor of hope for healing their society. A Catholic newspaper recently highlighted a young man who personifies the faith and hope of the nation. Lin Ingabire, a native of Rwanda, was three years old when he witnessed the brutal machete murders of his mother and eight-year old sister – victims of genocide in his homeland. Lin’s losses have been great but he has never lost his Catholic faith. “Everything happens for a reason,” he said. “It just makes me believe in God more. With every obstacle I face, He helps me overcome it. I just look at Jesus’ life, all the struggle that He had to go through. Every time I start to get sad, I think of Jesus.”

In recent years, Lin and his father have lived in New Orleans and when the levees broke during the hurricane, they fled to the Superdome. There Lin met a young man his own age whose family had to swim to safety. Only the young man survived, the rest of the family drowned in the floodwaters. Seeing his new friend in so much pain, Lin was able to reach into his own inner reserve and share his deep faith. Lin relies



on the compassionate Heart of Jesus to be his consolation. With great conviction Lin told his friend to “Trust in God and everything will be all right, eventually.” What incredible faith for such a young man. He has known pain beyond anything most of us can even imagine. Far from becoming bitter, Lin has become strong. Is this boy a saint? I don’t know that but he certainly seems to be well on the road to holiness. He is a young man who keeps his eyes of faith fixed on Jesus, his model of holiness.

Have you ever thought what it would be like to live with a saint, or to be married to a saint? Some of the Carmelites of the Lisieux Carmel who testified under oath during the process of St. Therese’s canonization declared that she was ordinary. They said she was a sweet sister but they did not detect anything more. St. Therese was holy in the simple, ordinary manner of living the Carmelite life. Hers was truly a little way. She lived the common life uncommonly well. This, too, is what Pietro Molla saw in his wife, Gianna. She was an attractive young woman, a medical doctor and a wife and mother. As a doctor she upheld the sanctity of all life; so when she developed a life-threatening tumor while carrying her fourth child, there was no question but that the child’s life must be preserved. Gianna made the difficult decision to continue her pregnancy regardless of the immanent dangers. As a person in the medical field, Gianna was fully aware of the risk to her life but she would not jeopardize the life of her child, even for her own life. Gianna died on April 28, 1962 a week after giving birth. She is now Saint Gianna Beretta Molla for her heroic choice for life. That event was dramatic but the rest of her life was the everyday grind of a working mother. Her faith sustained her in the daily life and enabled her to face a difficult decision. This is how she attained holiness.

What about you – Is holiness for you? In both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, we find the counsel: “Be holy for I am holy”. (Lev. 19:2. 1 Pt. 1:16.) This is an invitation to imitate the virtues of the Heart of Jesus. St. Francis de Sales assures us of this in his writings: “It is God’s will that we become perfect by uniting ourselves to him and imitating him as closely as possible.” To correspond to the grace of God in calling me to holiness, I need the two necessary ingredients that the saints all possessed: a determined will for holiness and a vigilant perseverance in applying myself to grace. I am not going to happen upon holiness at the end of my life nor is it accidentally achieved. The application of holiness is in the routine of every day living. Primarily, we must desire to be holy. We must choose the gift of holiness that God so wishes to give us. After setting our will on it, then we must watch for the little, everyday opportunities that the Lord holds out to us, these are his graces and inspirations. Holiness is found in the daily choices we make to be as loving as we can be to our God and our neighbor.

Each of us is called to holiness, we are obliged to holiness and we have the Sacred Heart of Jesus to show us the way. “It is God’s will that you grow in holiness.” (1 Thes. 4: 3)