

Walking the Path into Holiness
taken from *Gaudete et Exsultate*
bulletin blurbs for St. Catherine of Siena Parish

1.

Pope Francis wrote an exhortation whose title in English is *Rejoice and Exult*, quoting Jesus. (Matthew 5:12) The Pope acknowledges that "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 document is not intended to be a treatise, he says. His intention is "to re-propose 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.'" (Ephesians 1:4). (para. 1, 2) Notice that the call to holiness is extended to everyone, and not just a select few, which includes you and me, your kids and your parents and your neighbors and your coworkers and your classmates. He wants to discuss how it can be lived in our day, not just the way others were holy in the past. In the coming weeks, we'll look at short selections from the document, and ask some reflective questions that you might use for a conversation with a friend or at the supper table. [If you wish to read the whole document (33 pp.), you can find it on the parish website at _____]. All of these bulletin blurbs can also be found there.] *When have you thought or felt that God was calling you to be holy?*

2.

Pope Francis starts his discussion about holiness by writing about the saints. He reminds us that "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." So holiness is not about being perfect. (para. 3) Nor is holiness only recognizable in the people that the Church has named "blessed" or "saint." He refers to the "saints next door," where holiness exists "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." He makes the point that while holiness itself might stick out the people themselves might not, referring to "the middle class of holiness" He also points out that holiness is not usually done on our own and apart from others, but most often is lived out in relationships. (para. 6, 7 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *Who are some people in your life you would call holy?*

3.

Pope Francis repeats that the Lord directs the call to holiness personally to each of us: "Be holy, for I am holy." (Leviticus 11:44; cf. 1 Peter 1:16) A document from Vatican Council II stated this clearly: "... 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" He underlines that we each do it in our own way, and do not simply copy someone else's behavior. He doesn't want us to become discouraged that we're unable to do what someone else did; in fact that could be a mistake and we would miss out on what "the Lord has in mind for us." We have to figure out our own path, using the very best of ourselves, and the particular gifts God has given to us personally. (1 Corinthians 12:7) (para. 6, 7 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *What are some ways of holiness that are particularly your own.? Don't be shy!*

4.

Pope Francis also underlines that some styles of holiness are essentially feminine. He applauds saints including St. Catherine of Siena, Saint Hildegard of Bingen, Saint Bridget, Saint Teresa of Avila, and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. He suggests that "at 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." But he wants us also to remember not just the famous saints, but "all those unknown or forgotten women who, each in her own way, sustained and transformed families and communities by the power of their witness." (para. 12 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *Who are some holy women who have helped you by their word and example?*

5.

Pope Francis doesn't think that the call to holiness should be a burden; rather, it "should excite and encourage us to give our all and to embrace that unique plan that God willed for each of us from eternity." Just as it was for Jeremiah, so it is true for us: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you." (Jeremiah 1:5) To be holy mean we have to be a priest or sister. He warns of the false idea that holiness means we have to go away and pray a lot – that's not true! "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. (para. 13, 14 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *What are the situations in your life where God is calling you to be holy?*

6.

Pope Francis reminds us that the capacity to be holy comes from our baptism, not from ourselves. He explains: "Let everything be open to God; turn to him in every situation. Do not be dismayed, for the power of the Holy Spirit enables you to do this, and holiness, in the end, is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in your life. (Galatians 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 towards 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) (para. 15 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *Do you believe that the Holy Spirit can help you become holy, and beautiful in God's eyes? What shall you pray for?*

7.

Pope Francis says that holiness grows through small steps, and he gives 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. (para. 16 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *What did you do today that was a step toward greater holiness? What is one small step you could take tomorrow?*

8.

Our holiness is not just something extra, something nice to do, but rather it is our mission given to us by God, to be lived at a specific moment in history. Your holiness is your mission and no one else's. Our mission is lived out in union with Christ, never on our own. "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 community, his closeness to the outcast, his poverty, and other ways in which he showed his self-sacrificing love. Therefore, each of us is " a message which the Holy Spirit takes from the riches of Jesus Christ and gives to his people." (para. 19, 20, 22 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *What is one concrete way that your own life reflects the life that Jesus lived on this earth?*

9.

To be "a message of the Holy Spirit" is a big responsibility, part of our entire life's mission. Again Pope Francis provides some practical advice about how to do this: "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. . . . May you come to realize what that word is, the message of Jesus that God wants to speak to the world 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" and always remain open to God's grace that will both purify and enlighten you. (para. 23, 24 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *What assistance do you want to ask from the Holy Spirit to clarify or live out your mission in life?*

10.

Pope Francis tells us that "anything done out of anxiety, pride, or the need to impress others will not lead to holiness. We are challenged to show our commitment in such a way that everything we do has evangelical meaning and identifies us all the more with Jesus Christ." "This does not mean ignoring the need for moments of quiet, solitude and silence before God. Quite the contrary. The presence of constantly new gadgets, the excitement of travel and an endless array of consumer goods at times leave no room for God's voice to be heard. We are overwhelmed by words, by superficial pleasures and by an increasing din." "How can we fail to realize the need to stop this rat race and to recover the personal space needed to carry on a heartfelt dialogue with God? Finding that space may prove painful but it is always fruitful. Sooner or later, we have to face our true selves and let the Lord enter." (para. 28, 29 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *Yes, it can be painful to slow down, be quiet, and listen – can you make a real attempt to do it anyway?*

11.

Pope Francis points out the dangers of not finding time to be quiet with God. We spend more and more time with our phones and computers, so that we start "to resent our mission, our commitment grows slack, and our generous and ready spirit of service begins to flag." We need a spirit of holiness capable of filling both our solitude and our service, our personal life and our evangelizing efforts, so that every moment can be an expression of self-sacrificing love in the Lord's eyes. In this way, every minute of our lives can be a step along the path to growth in holiness. (para. 30, 31 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *Holiness, therefore, is not something that we do off and on, but becomes that constant pattern of our daily living. What gets in the way or causes you to resent your mission and call to holiness?*

12.

Pope Francis believes that some people may be afraid of holiness. He responds that holiness "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. To depend on God sets us free from every form of enslavement and leads us to recognize our great dignity." "Do not be afraid to set your sights higher, to allow yourself to be loved and liberated by God. Do not be afraid to let yourself be guided by the Holy Spirit. Holiness does not make you less human, since it is an encounter between your weakness and the power of God's grace. (para. 32, 34 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *Are you afraid of becoming holy? What do you think will happen? Does it seem that way in the holy people you know?*

13.

Pope Francis then explains two dangerous trends that exist in today's Church. His concern is that such people think they are getting holier, and in fact what they are thinking and doing actually interferes with true holiness.

The first is called "gnosticism." He reminds us that our holiness is not determined by how much we know (whether we can explain theological concepts, for example) but by how deeply we love. So-called gnostics are "incapable of touching Christ's suffering flesh in others, locked up as they are in an encyclopedia of abstractions." Gnosticism is sinister, he says, because it considers its own vision of reality to be perfect. It tries to make the mystery of God and God's grace perfectly explicable. "When somebody has an answer for every question, it is a sign that they are not on the right road." "God infinitely transcends us; [God] is full of surprises. We are not the ones to determine when and how we will encounter [God]; the exact times and places of that encounter are not up to us". Gnostics who want everything to be crystal clear presume that they can control God's transcendence. . (para. 37, 40, 41) in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *What is that you try (in vain) to control, instead of allowing God to guide and act and surprise you?*

14.

Pope Francis says some more about gnosticism in today's world: "Nor can we claim to say where God is not, because God is mysteriously present in the life of every person, in a way that [God] chooses, and we cannot exclude this by our presumed certainties. Even when someone's life appears completely wrecked, even when we see it devastated by vices or addictions, God is present there. If we let ourselves be guided by the Spirit rather than our own preconceptions, we can and must try to find the Lord in every human life. This is part of the mystery that a gnostic

mentality cannot accept, since it is beyond its control. (para. 42 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *Are there places or people where you believe God is absent?*

15.

Pope Francis explains a second dangerous trend that exists in today's Church – a contemporary form of pelagianism. Such people may refer to God's grace, but they really trust their own powers, and they think they are better than others because they follow certain rules or remain intransigently faithful to a certain way of being Catholic. When we don't acknowledge our limitations, we hinder God's grace from working more effectively within us, which is part of a sincere and genuine journey of growth. We don't become holy all at once. He says, "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. "Only on the basis of God's gift, freely accepted and humbly received, can we cooperate by our own efforts in our 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 his free gift may grow and develop within us." (para. 49, 50, 52, 56 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *How do you try to balance your reliance on God's help with your own efforts to grow in holiness?*

16.

Pope Francis is concerned because some Christians are still trying to save themselves based on their own will and their own abilities. The results are self-centered, and he gives several examples of such behavior: an obsession with the law; an absorption with social and political advantages; a punctilious concern for the Church's liturgy, doctrine, and prestige; a vanity about their ability to manage practical matters; and an excessive concern with programs of self-help and personal fulfilment. He states that Christians should instead be led by the Spirit in the way of love, be passionate about communicating the Gospel, and seek out the lost among the immense crowds that thirst for Christ. (para. 57 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *Do you identify with any of these traits, which help us feel like we're more in control of our salvation? How easily do you follow the lead of the Holy Spirit in your everyday life?*

17.

Pope Francis says that in this time, when pelagians ignore "the promptings of the Spirit, the life of the Church can become a museum piece or the possession of a select few. This can occur when some groups of Christians give excessive importance to certain rules, customs, or ways of acting." So when "we believe that everything depends on human effort as channelled by ecclesial rules and structures, we unconsciously complicate the Gospel and become enslaved to a blueprint that leaves few openings for the working of grace." (para. 58, 59 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *How do you try to balance what the Church has to offer (e.g., sacraments, prayer, community) without placing overdue emphasis on your own efforts rather than God's grace?*

18.

Pope Francis says that to avoid pelagianism we need to focus on the center, which is always love. "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Galatians 5:14) Amid all the rules and guidelines, he says, "Jesus clears a way to seeing two faces, that of the Father and that of our brother [and sister]. He does not give us two more formulas or two more commands. He gives us two faces, or better yet, one alone: the face

of God reflected in so many other faces. For in every one of our brothers and sisters, especially the least, the most vulnerable, the defenseless, and those in need, God's very image is found. (para. 60, 61 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *Do you recognize the face of God in the face of other humans, for that is what God teaches us?*

19.

Jesus explained with great simplicity what it means to be holy when he gave us the Beatitudes. (cf. Mt 5:3-12; Lk 6:20-23) The Beatitudes are like a Christian's identity card. So if anyone asks: "What must one do to be a good Christian?", the answer is clear. We have to do, each in our own way, what Jesus told us in the Sermon on the Mount. In the Beatitudes, we find a portrait of the Master, which we are called to reflect in our daily lives. The word "happy" or "blessed" thus becomes a synonym for "holy." It expresses the fact that those faithful to God and his word, by their self-giving, gain true happiness. Let us listen once more to Jesus, with all the love and respect that the Master deserves. Let us allow his words to unsettle us, to challenge us and to demand a real change in the way we live. Otherwise, holiness will remain no more than an empty word. (para. 63-64, 66 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*)

20.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

The Gospel invites us to peer into the depths of our heart, to see where we find our security in life. Usually the rich feel secure in their wealth, and think that, if that wealth is threatened, the whole meaning of their earthly life can collapse. Jesus himself tells us this in the parable of the rich fool: he speaks of a man who was sure of himself, yet foolish, for it did not dawn on him that he might die that very day. (cf. Luke 2:16-21)

Wealth ensures nothing. Indeed, once we think we are rich, we can become so self-satisfied that we leave no room for God's word, for the love of our brothers and sisters, or for the enjoyment of the most important things in life. In this way, we miss out on the greatest treasure of all. That is why Jesus calls blessed those who are poor in spirit, those who have a poor heart, for there the Lord can enter with his perennial newness.

This spiritual poverty is closely linked to what Saint Ignatius of Loyola calls "holy indifference," which brings us to a radiant interior freedom: "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 on our part, we do not set our hearts on good health rather than bad, riches rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, a long life rather than a short one, and so in all the rest."

Being poor of heart: that is holiness. (para. 67-69 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*)

21.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

These are strong words in a world that from the beginning has been a place of conflict, disputes and enmity on all sides, where we constantly pigeonhole others on the basis of their ideas, their customs and even their way of speaking or dressing. Ultimately, it is the reign of pride and vanity, where each person thinks he or she has the right to dominate others. Nonetheless, impossible as it may seem, Jesus proposes a different way of doing things: the way of meekness.

Christ says: "Learn from me; for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Mt 11:29) If we are constantly upset and impatient with others, we will end up drained and weary. But if we regard the faults and limitations of others with tenderness and meekness, without an air of superiority, we can actually help them and stop wasting our energy on useless complaining. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux tells us that "perfect charity consists in putting up with others' mistakes, and not being scandalized by their faults."

Meekness is yet another expression of the interior poverty of those who put their trust in God alone. Indeed, in the Bible the same word – *anawim* – usually refers both to the poor and to the meek. Someone might object: "If I am that meek, they will think that I am an idiot, a fool or a weakling." At times they may, but so be it. It is always better to be meek, for then our deepest desires will be fulfilled. The meek "shall inherit the earth," for they will see God's promises accomplished in their lives.

Reacting with meekness and humility: that is holiness. (para. 71-72, 74 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*)

22.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

The world tells us exactly the opposite: entertainment, pleasure, diversion, and escape make for the good life. The worldly person ignores problems of sickness or sorrow in the family or all around him; he averts his gaze. The world has no desire to mourn; it would rather disregard painful situations, cover them up or hide them. Much energy is expended on fleeing from situations of suffering in the belief that reality can be concealed. But the cross can never be absent.

A person who sees things as they truly are and sympathizes with pain and sorrow is capable of touching life's depths and finding authentic happiness. He or she is consoled, not by the world but by Jesus. Such persons are unafraid to share in the suffering of others; they do not flee from painful situations. They discover the meaning of life by coming to the aid of those who suffer, understanding their anguish and bringing relief. They sense that the other is flesh of our flesh, and are not afraid to draw near, even to touch their wounds. They feel compassion for others in such a way that all distance vanishes. In this way they can embrace Saint Paul's exhortation: "Weep with those who weep." (Rom 12:15)

Knowing how to mourn with others: that is holiness. (para. 75-76 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*)

23.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

Hunger and thirst are intense experiences, since they involve basic needs and our instinct for survival. There are those who desire justice and yearn for righteousness with similar intensity. Jesus says that they will be satisfied, for sooner or later justice will come. We can cooperate to make that possible, even if we may not always see the fruit of our efforts.

Jesus offers a justice other than that of the world, so often marred by petty interests and manipulated in various ways. Experience shows how easy it is to become mired in corruption, ensnared in the daily politics of quid pro quo, where everything becomes business. How many people suffer injustice, standing by powerlessly while others divvy up the good things of this life. Some give up fighting for real justice and opt to follow in the train of the winners. This has nothing to do with the hunger and thirst for justice that Jesus praises.

True justice comes about in people's lives when they themselves are just in their decisions; it is expressed in their pursuit of justice for the poor and the weak. While it is true that the word "justice" can be a synonym for faithfulness to God's will in every aspect of our life, if we give the word too general a meaning, we forget that it is shown especially in justice towards those who are most vulnerable: "Seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow" (Is 1:17).

Hungering and thirsting for righteousness: that is holiness. (para. 77-79 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*)

24.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."

Mercy has two aspects. It involves giving, helping, and serving others, but it also includes forgiveness and understanding. Matthew sums it up in one golden rule: "In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you." (7:12) The Catechism reminds us that this law is to be applied "in every case," especially when we are "confronted by situations that make moral judgments less assured and decision difficult."

Giving and forgiving means reproducing in our lives some small measure of God's perfection, which gives and forgives superabundantly. For this reason, in the Gospel of Luke we do not hear the words, "Be perfect," (Mt 5:48), but rather, "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you." (6:36-38) Luke then adds something not to be overlooked: "The measure you give will be the measure you get back" (6:38) The yardstick we use for understanding and forgiving others will measure the forgiveness we receive. The yardstick we use for giving will measure what we receive. We should never forget this.

Jesus does not say, "Blessed are those who plot revenge." He calls "blessed" those who forgive and do so "seventy times seven." (Mt 18:22) We need to think of ourselves as an army of the forgiven. All of us have been looked upon with divine compassion. If we approach the Lord with sincerity and listen carefully, there may well be times when we hear his reproach: "Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" (Mt 18:33)

Seeing and acting with mercy: that is holiness. (para. 80-82 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*)

25.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

This Beatitude speaks of those whose hearts are simple, pure and undefiled, for a heart capable of love admits nothing that might harm, weaken or endanger that love. The Bible uses the heart to describe our real intentions, the things we truly seek and desire, apart from all appearances. "Man sees the appearance, but the Lord looks into the heart." (1Sam 16:7) God wants to speak to our hearts (cf. Hos 2:16); there he desires to write his law. (cf. Jer 31:33) In a word, he wants to give us a new heart. (cf. Ezek 36:26)

Certainly there can be no love without works of love, but this Beatitude reminds us that the Lord expects a commitment to our brothers and sisters that comes from the heart. For "if I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have no love, I gain nothing." (1 Cor 13:3) In Matthew's Gospel too, we see that what proceeds from the heart is what defiles a person (cf. 15:18), for from the heart come murder, theft, false witness, and other evil deeds. (cf.

15:19) From the heart's intentions come the desires and the deepest decisions that determine our actions.

A heart that loves God and neighbor (cf. Mt 22:36-40), genuinely and not merely in words, is a pure heart; it can see God.

Keeping a heart free of all that tarnishes love: that is holiness. (para. 83, 85-86 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*)

26.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

This Beatitude makes us think of the many endless situations of war in our world. Yet we ourselves are often a cause of conflict or at least of misunderstanding. For example, I may hear something about someone and I go off and repeat it. I may even embellish it the second time around and keep spreading it... And the more harm it does, the more satisfaction I seem to derive from it. The world of gossip, inhabited by negative and destructive people, does not bring peace. Such people are really the enemies of peace; in no way are they "blessed."

Peacemakers truly "make" peace; they build peace and friendship in society. It is not easy to "make" this evangelical peace, which excludes no one but embraces even those who are a bit odd, troublesome or difficult, demanding, different, beaten down by life, or simply uninterested. It is hard work; it calls for great openness of mind and heart, since it is not about creating "a consensus on paper or a transient peace for a contented minority," or a project "by a few for the few." Nor can it attempt to ignore or disregard conflict; instead, it must "face conflict head on, resolve it, and make it a link in the chain of a new process." We need to be artisans of peace, for building peace is a craft that demands serenity, creativity, sensitivity, and skill.

Sowing peace all around us: that is holiness. (para. 87-89 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*)

27.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus himself warns us that the path he proposes goes against the flow, even making us challenge society by the way we live and, as a result, becoming a nuisance. He reminds us how many people have been, and still are, persecuted simply because they struggle for justice, because they take seriously their commitment to God and to others. Unless we wish to sink into an obscure mediocrity, let us not long for an easy life, for "whoever would save his life will lose it." (Mt 16:25)

In living the Gospel, we cannot expect that everything will be easy, for the thirst for power and worldly interests often stands in our way. . . . In such a society, politics, mass communications and economic, cultural, and even religious institutions become so entangled as to become an obstacle to authentic human and social development. As a result, the Beatitudes are not easy to live out; any attempt to do so will be viewed negatively, regarded with suspicion, and met with ridicule.

Persecutions are not a reality of the past, for today too we experience them, whether by the shedding of blood, as is the case with so many contemporary martyrs, or by more subtle means, by slander and lies. Jesus calls us blessed when people "utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." (Mt 5:11) At other times, persecution can take the form of gibes that try to caricature our faith and make us seem ridiculous.

Accepting daily the path of the gospel, even though it may cause us problems: that is holiness. (para. 90-91, 94 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*)

28.

After reflecting on the various beatitudes spoken by Jesus, Pope Francis moves on to what he calls "the great criterion" – **the one thing on which we all will be judged**: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." (Matt 25: 35-36)

Holiness, then, is not about swooning in mystic rapture. As Saint John Paul II said: "If we truly start out anew from the contemplation of Christ, we must learn to see him especially in the faces of those with whom he himself wished to be identified." . . . 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.

Given these uncompromising demands of Jesus, it is my duty to ask Christians to acknowledge and accept them in a spirit of genuine openness . . . without any "ifs or buts" that could lessen their force. Our Lord made it very clear that holiness cannot be understood or lived apart from these demands, for mercy is "the beating heart of the Gospel." (para. 95-97 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *What does my holiness look like in my daily behavior?*

29.

If I encounter a person sleeping outdoors on a cold night, I can view him or her as an annoyance, an idler, an obstacle in my path, a troubling sight, a problem for politicians to sort out, or even a piece of refuse cluttering a public space. Or I can respond with faith and charity, and see in this person a human being with a dignity identical to my own, a creature infinitely loved by the Father, an image of God, a brother or sister redeemed by Jesus Christ. That is what it is to be a Christian! Can holiness somehow be understood apart from this lively recognition of the dignity of each human being?

For Christians, this involves a constant and healthy unease. Even if helping one person alone could justify all our efforts, it would not be enough. It also mean[s] seeking social change: "For later generations to also be released, clearly the goal had to be the restoration of just social and economic systems, so there could no longer be exclusion." (para. 98-99 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *What do I see when I encounter someone who is homeless?*

30.

I regret that ideologies lead us at times to two harmful errors. On the one hand, there is the error of those Christians who separate these Gospel demands from their personal relationship with the Lord, from their interior union with him, from openness to his grace. Christianity thus becomes a sort of NGO stripped of the luminous mysticism so evident in the lives of Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Teresa of Calcutta, and many others. For these great saints, mental prayer, the love of God and the reading of the Gospel in no way detracted from their passionate and effective commitment to their neighbors; quite the opposite. (para. 100 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *How would I explain the link between the demands of the Gospel and my personal relationship with Jesus?*

31.

Pope Francis finds another error in those who "find suspect the social engagement of others, seeing it as superficial, worldly, secular, materialist, communist or populist. Or they relativize it, as if there are other more important matters, or the only thing that counts is one particular ethical issue or cause that they themselves defend. Our defense of the innocent unborn, for example, needs to be clear, firm and passionate, for at stake is the dignity of a human life, which is always sacred and demands love for each person, regardless of his or her stage of development. Equally sacred, however, are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every form of rejection. We cannot uphold an ideal of holiness that would ignore injustice in a world where some revel, spend with abandon and live only for the latest consumer goods, even as others look on from afar, living their entire lives in abject poverty." (para. 101 *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *How would I explain the link between the demands of social justice and my personal holiness?*

32.

We often hear it said that ... the situation of migrants, for example, is a lesser issue. Some Catholics consider it a secondary issue compared to the "grave" bioethical questions. That a politician looking for votes might say such a thing is understandable, but not a Christian, for whom the only proper attitude is to stand in the shoes of those brothers and sisters of ours who risk their lives to offer a future to their children. Can we not realize that this is exactly what Jesus demands of us, when he tells us that in welcoming the stranger we welcome him? (cf. Mt 25:35)

A similar approach is found in the Old Testament: "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you yourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Ex 22:21) "When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Lev 19:33-34) This is not a notion invented by some Pope, or a momentary fad. In today's world too, we are called to follow the path of spiritual wisdom proposed by the prophet Isaiah to show what is pleasing to God. "Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn." (58:7-8) (para. 102, 103 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *How does the Gospel of Jesus affect your response to immigrants and refugees coming to our country?*

33.

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. For "mercy is not only an action of the Father; it becomes a criterion for ascertaining who his true children are." Mercy "is the very foundation of the Church's life."

Those who really wish to give glory to God by their lives, who truly long to grow in holiness, are called to be single-minded and tenacious in their practice of the works of mercy. Saint Teresa of Calcutta clearly realized this: "Yes, I have many human faults and failures... But God bends down and uses us, you and me, to be his love and his compassion in the world; he bears our sins, our troubles and our faults. He depends on us to love the world and to show how much he loves it. If we are too concerned with ourselves, we will have no time left for others." (para. 105, 107 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *What does this suggest about the authenticity of your prayer?*

34.

Hedonism and consumerism can prove our downfall, for when we are obsessed with our own pleasure, we end up being all too concerned about ourselves and our rights, and we feel a desperate need for free time to enjoy ourselves. We will find it hard to feel and show any real concern for those in need, unless we are able to cultivate a certain simplicity of life, resisting the feverish demands of a consumer society, which leave us impoverished and unsatisfied, anxious to have it all now. Similarly, when we allow ourselves to be caught up in superficial information, instant communication and virtual reality, we can waste precious time and become indifferent to the suffering flesh of our brothers and sisters. Yet even amid this whirlwind of activity, the Gospel continues to resound, offering us the promise of a different life, a healthier and happier life. (para. 108 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *Can you describe how self-centeredness interferes with your growth in personal holiness?*

35.

The first of these great signs [of holiness in the world today] is solid grounding in the God who loves and sustains us. This source of inner strength enables us to persevere amid life's ups and downs, but also to endure hostility, betrayal and failings on the part of others.

We need to recognize and combat our aggressive and selfish inclinations, and not let them take root. " Christians too can be caught up in networks of verbal violence through the internet and the various forums of digital communication. Even in Catholic media, limits can be overstepped, defamation and slander can become commonplace, and all ethical standards and respect for the good name of others can be abandoned. . . . It is striking that at times, in claiming to uphold the other commandments, they completely ignore the eighth, which forbids bearing false witness or lying, and ruthlessly vilify others.

It is not good when we look down on others like heartless judges, lording it over them and always trying to teach them lessons. That is itself a subtle form of violence. (para. 112, 114-15, 117 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*)

36.

Humility can only take root in the heart through humiliations. Without them, there is no humility or holiness. If you are unable to suffer and offer up a few humiliations, you are not humble and you are not on the path to holiness. The holiness that God bestows on his Church comes through the humiliation of his Son. He is the way. Humiliation makes you resemble Jesus; it is an unavoidable aspect of the imitation of Christ.

Here I am not speaking only about stark situations of martyrdom, but about the daily humiliations of those who keep silent to save their families, who prefer to praise others rather than boast about themselves, or who choose the less welcome tasks, at times even choosing to bear an injustice so as to offer it to the Lord. This does not mean walking around with eyes lowered, not saying a word and fleeing the company of others. At times, precisely because someone is free of selfishness, he or she can dare to disagree gently, to demand justice or to defend the weak before the powerful, even if it may harm his or her reputation.

I am not saying that such humiliation is pleasant, for that would be masochism, but that it is a way of imitating Jesus and growing in union with him. This is incomprehensible on a purely natural level, and the world mocks any such notion. Instead, it is a grace to be sought in prayer:

"Lord, when humiliations come, help me to know that I am following in your footsteps" (para. 118-120 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *Do you agree with what Pope Francis says?*

37.

Far from being timid, morose, acerbic or melancholy, or putting on a dreary face, the saints are joyful and full of good humor. Though completely realistic, they radiate a positive and hopeful spirit. The Christian life is "joy in the Holy Spirit." (Rom 14:17)

Hard times may come, when the cross casts its shadow, yet nothing can destroy the supernatural joy that "adapts and changes, but always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved." That joy brings deep security, serene hope and a spiritual fulfilment that the world cannot understand or appreciate. Christian joy is usually accompanied by a sense of humor.

This is not the joy held out by today's individualistic and consumerist culture. Consumerism only bloats the heart. It can offer occasional and passing pleasures, but not joy. . . . When we "focus primarily on our own needs, we condemn ourselves to a joyless existence." (para. 122, 125-126, 128 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *Are you joyful because you're a Christian?*

38.

Holiness is also *parrhesía*: it is boldness, an impulse to evangelize and to leave a mark in this world. To allow us to do this, Jesus himself comes and tells us once more, serenely yet firmly: "Do not be afraid." (Mk 6:50) Boldness, enthusiasm, the freedom to speak out, apostolic fervor, all these are included in the word *parrhesía*.

How often we are tempted to keep close to the shore! Yet the Lord calls us to put out into the deep and let down our nets (cf. Lk 5:4). He bids us spend our lives in his service. Clinging to him, we are inspired to put all our charisms at the service of others. May we always feel compelled by his love. (2 Cor 5:14)

Parrhesía is a seal of the Spirit. . . . We need the Spirit's prompting, lest we be paralyzed by fear and excessive caution, lest we grow used to keeping within safe bounds. Let us remember that closed spaces grow musty and unhealthy. (para. 129-130, 132-133 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*)

39.

Like the prophet Jonah, we are constantly tempted to flee to a safe haven. It can have many names: individualism, spiritualism, living in a little world, addiction, intransigence, the rejection of new ideas and approaches, dogmatism, nostalgia, pessimism, hiding behind rules and regulations. We can resist leaving behind a familiar and easy way of doing things. Yet the challenges involved can be like the storm, the whale, the worm that dried the gourd plant, or the wind and sun that burned Jonah's head. For us, as for him, they can serve to bring us back to the God of tenderness, who invites us to set out ever anew on our journey.

God is eternal newness. He impels us constantly to set out anew, to pass beyond what is familiar, to the fringes and beyond. He takes us to where humanity is most wounded, where men and women, beneath the appearance of a shallow conformity, continue to seek an answer to the question of life's meaning. God is not afraid! He is fearless! He is always greater than our plans and schemes. Unafraid of the fringes, he himself became a fringe (cf. Phil 2:6-8; Jn 1:14). So if we dare to go to the fringes, we will find him there; indeed, he is already there. Jesus is already there, in the hearts of our brothers and sisters, in their wounded flesh, in their troubles and in

their profound desolation. He is already there. (para. 134-135 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *When you tend to play it safe and when do you move out to the margins?*

40.

True enough, we need to open the door of our hearts to Jesus, who stands and knocks (cf. Rev 3:20). Sometimes I wonder, though, if perhaps Jesus is already inside us and knocking on the door for us to let him escape from our stale self-centeredness.

Complacency is seductive; it tells us that there is no point in trying to change things, that there is nothing we can do, because this is the way things have always been and yet we always manage to survive. By force of habit we no longer stand up to evil. We "let things be", or as others have decided they ought to be. Yet let us allow the Lord to rouse us from our torpor, to free us from our inertia. Let us rethink our usual way of doing things; let us open our eyes and ears, and above all our hearts, so as not to be complacent about things as they are, but unsettled by the living and effective word of the risen Lord.

Let us ask the Lord for the grace not to hesitate when the Spirit calls us to take a step forward. Let us ask for the apostolic courage to share the Gospel with others and to stop trying to make our Christian life a museum of memories. (para. 136-137, 139 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *When you tend to open the doors and when do you stay complacent?*

41.

When we live apart from others, it is very difficult to fight against concupiscence, the snares and temptations of the devil and the selfishness of the world. Bombarded as we are by so many enticements, we can grow too isolated, lose our sense of reality and inner clarity, and easily succumb.

Growth in holiness is a journey in community, side by side with others. . . . In many holy marriages too, each spouse becomes a means used by Christ for the sanctification of the other. Living or working alongside others is surely a path of spiritual growth.

Sharing the word and celebrating the Eucharist together fosters fraternity and makes us a holy and missionary community. It also gives rise to authentic and shared mystical experiences.

Such experiences, however, are neither the most frequent nor the most important. The common life, whether in the family, the parish, the religious community or any other, is made up of small everyday things. This was true of the holy community formed by Jesus, Mary and Joseph, which reflected in an exemplary way the beauty of the Trinitarian communion. It was also true of the life that Jesus shared with his disciples and with ordinary people. (para. 140-135 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *Who do you hang around with that help you grow in holiness?*

42.

Let us not forget that Jesus asked his disciples to pay attention to details.

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 her 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 a fish cooking as he waited for the disciples at daybreak.

A community that cherishes the little details of love, whose members care for one another and create an open and evangelizing environment, is a place where the risen Lord is present, sanctifying it in accordance with the Father's plan. There are times when, by a gift of the Lord's love, we are granted, amid these little details, consoling experiences of God. . (para. 144-145 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *What are some details that deserve more of your attention?*

43.

Finally, though it may seem obvious, we should remember that holiness consists in a habitual openness to the transcendent, expressed in prayer and adoration. The saints are distinguished by a spirit of prayer and a need for communion with God. They find an exclusive concern with this world to be narrow and stifling, and, amid their own concerns and commitments, they long for God, losing themselves in praise and contemplation of the Lord. I do not believe in holiness without prayer, even though that prayer need not be lengthy or involve intense emotions.

Saint John of the Cross tells us: "Endeavour to remain always in the presence of God, either real, imaginative, or unitive, insofar as is permitted by your works". In the end, our desire for God will surely find expression in our daily lives.

For this to happen, however, some moments spent alone with God are also necessary. . (para. 147-149 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*)

44.

For Saint Teresa of Avila, prayer "is nothing but friendly intercourse, and frequent solitary converse, with him who we know loves us." I would insist that this is true not only for a privileged few, but for all of us, for "we all have need of this silence, filled with the presence of him who is adored." Trust-filled prayer is a response of a heart open to encountering God face to face, where all is peaceful and the quiet voice of the Lord can be heard in the midst of silence.

In that silence, we can discern, in the light of the Spirit, the paths of holiness to which the Lord is calling us. Otherwise, any decisions we make may only be window-dressing that, rather than exalting the Gospel in our lives, will mask or submerge it. For each disciple, it is essential to spend time with the Master, to listen to his words, and to learn from him always. Unless we listen, all our words will be nothing but useless chatter. . (para. 149-150 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*)

45.

[Pope Francis asks us:] Are there moments when you place yourself quietly in the Lord's presence, when you calmly spend time with him, when you bask in his gaze? Do you let his fire inflame your heart? Unless you let him warm you more and more with his love and tenderness, you will not catch fire. How will you then be able to set the hearts of others on fire by your words and witness? If, gazing on the face of Christ, you feel unable to let yourself be healed and transformed, then enter into the Lord's heart, into his wounds, for that is the abode of divine mercy.

46.

I ask that we never regard prayerful silence as a form of escape and rejection of the world around us.

Prayer, because it is nourished by the gift of God present and at work in our lives, must always be marked by remembrance. The memory of God's works is central to the experience of the covenant between God and his people. God wished to enter history, and so our prayer is interwoven with memories. We think back not only on his revealed Word, but also on our own lives, the lives of others, and all that the Lord has done in his Church. . . . Think of your own history when you pray, and there you will find much mercy. This will also increase your awareness that the Lord is ever mindful of you; he never forgets you. So it makes sense to ask him to shed light on the smallest details of your life, for he sees them all. . (para. 152-153 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *In your memory can you recall moments of God's grace?*

47.

Prayer of supplication is an expression of a heart that trusts in God and realizes that of itself it can do nothing. The life of God's faithful people is marked by constant supplication born of faith-filled love and great confidence. Let us not downplay prayer of petition, which so often calms our hearts and helps us persevere in hope. Prayer of intercession has particular value, for it is an act of trust in God and, at the same time, an expression of love for our neighbor. There are those who think, based on a one-sided spirituality, that prayer should be unalloyed contemplation of God, free of all distraction, as if the names and faces of others were somehow an intrusion to be avoided. Yet in reality, our prayer will be all the more pleasing to God and more effective for our growth in holiness if, through intercession, we attempt to practice the twofold commandment that Jesus left us [to love God and love your neighbor as yourself]. Intercessory prayer is an expression of our fraternal concern for others, since we are able to embrace their lives, their deepest troubles and their loftiest dreams. . (para. 154 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *Do you take time each day to pray for your neighbor?*

48.

The prayerful reading of God's word, which is "sweeter than honey" (Ps 119:103) yet a "two-edged sword" (Heb 4:12), enables us to pause and listen to the voice of the Master. It becomes a lamp for our steps and a light for our path (cf. Ps 119:105).

Meeting Jesus in the Scriptures leads us to the Eucharist, where the written word attains its greatest efficacy, for there the living Word is truly present. In the Eucharist, the one true God receives the greatest worship the world can give him, for it is Christ himself who is offered. When we receive him in Holy Communion, we renew our covenant with him and allow him to carry out ever more fully his work of transforming our lives. . (para. 156-157 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *How do you experience the presence of God in the Word as well as Holy Communion?*

49.

The Christian life is a constant battle. We need strength and courage to withstand the temptations of the devil and to proclaim the Gospel. This battle is sweet, for it allows us to rejoice each time the Lord triumphs in our lives.

We are not dealing merely with a battle against the world and a worldly mentality that would deceive us and leave us dull and mediocre, lacking in enthusiasm and joy. Nor can this battle be reduced to the struggle against our human weaknesses and proclivities (be they laziness, lust, envy, jealousy or any others). It is also a constant struggle against the devil, the prince of evil. Jesus himself celebrates our victories. He rejoiced when his disciples made progress in

preaching the Gospel and overcoming the opposition of the evil one: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." (Lk 10:18) . (para. 158-159 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *Do you believe that Jesus rejoices with you in your victories over evil?*

50.

We will not admit the existence of the devil if we insist on regarding life by empirical standards alone, without a supernatural understanding. It is precisely the conviction that this malign power is present in our midst that enables us to understand how evil can at times have so much destructive force. True enough, the biblical authors had limited conceptual resources for expressing certain realities, and in Jesus' time epilepsy, for example, could easily be confused with demonic possession. Yet this should not lead us to an oversimplification that would conclude that all the cases related in the Gospel had to do with psychological disorders and hence that the devil does not exist or is not at work. He is present in the very first pages of the Scriptures, which end with God's victory over the devil. Indeed, in leaving us the Our Father, Jesus wanted us to conclude by asking the Father to "deliver us from evil". That final word does not refer to evil in the abstract; a more exact translation would be "the evil one." It indicates a personal being who assails us. Jesus taught us to ask daily for deliverance from him, lest his power prevail over us.

Hence, 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 and our communities. (para. 160-161 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *How do you experience the personal presence of "the evil one?"*

51.

God's word invites us clearly to "stand against the wiles of the devil" (Eph 6:11) and to "quench all the flaming darts of the evil one" (Eph 6:16). These expressions are not melodramatic, precisely because our path towards holiness is a constant battle. Those who do not realize this will be prey to failure or mediocrity. For this spiritual combat, we can 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. If we become careless, the false promises of evil will easily seduce us.

Along this journey, the cultivation of all that is good, progress in the spiritual life and growth in love are the best counterbalance to evil. Those who choose to remain neutral, who are satisfied with little, who renounce the ideal of giving themselves generously to the Lord, will never hold out. Even less if they fall into defeatism, for "if we start without confidence, we have already lost half the battle and we bury our talents... Christian triumph is always a cross, yet a cross which is at the same time a victorious banner, borne with aggressive tenderness against the assaults of evil." (para. 162-163 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *What gives you confidence in your battle against evil?*

52.

164. 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. Those who think they

commit no grievous sins against God's law can fall into a state of dull lethargy. Since they see nothing serious to reproach themselves with, they fail to realize that their spiritual life has gradually turned lukewarm. They end up weakened and corrupted.

Spiritual corruption is worse than the fall of a sinner, for it is a comfortable and self-satisfied form of blindness. Everything then appears acceptable: deception, slander, egotism and other subtle forms of self-centeredness, for "even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Cor 11:14). . . . Jesus warned us against this self-deception that easily leads to corruption. He spoke of a person freed from the devil who, convinced that his life was now in order, ended up being possessed by seven other evil spirits (cf. Lk 11:24-26). (para. 164-165 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *Where has lethargy and laziness crept in your life of holiness?*

53.

How can we know if something comes from the Holy Spirit or if it stems from the spirit of the world or the spirit of the devil? The only way is through discernment, which calls for something more than intelligence or common sense. It is a gift which we must implore. If we ask with confidence that the Holy Spirit grant us this gift, and then seek to develop it through prayer, reflection, reading and good counsel, then surely we will grow in this spiritual endowment.

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.

This is all the more important when some novelty presents itself in our lives. Then we have to decide whether it is new wine brought by God or an illusion created by the spirit of this world or the spirit of the devil. At other times, the opposite can happen, when the forces of evil induce us not to change, to leave things as they are, to opt for a rigid resistance to change. Yet that would be to block the working of the Spirit. We are free, with the freedom of Christ. Still, he asks us to examine what is within us – our desires, anxieties, fears and questions – and what takes place all around us – "the signs of the times" – and thus to recognize the paths that lead to complete freedom. ." (para. 166-168 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *What are situations in your life which require discernment?*

54.

Discernment is necessary not only at extraordinary times, when we need to resolve grave problems and make crucial decisions. It is a means of spiritual combat for helping us to follow the Lord more faithfully. We need it at all times, to help us recognize God's timetable, lest we fail to heed the promptings of his grace and disregard his invitation to grow. Often discernment is exercised in small and apparently irrelevant things, since greatness of spirit is manifested in simple everyday realities. It involves striving untrammelled for all that is great, better and more beautiful, while at the same time being concerned for the little things, for each day's responsibilities and commitments. For this reason, I ask all Christians not to omit, in dialogue with the Lord, a sincere daily "examination of conscience." Discernment also enables us to recognize the concrete means that the Lord provides in his mysterious and loving plan, to make us move beyond mere good intentions. ." (para. 169 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *How might your holiness grow if you were to review each day and recognize how God has been present, and when you missed God?*

55.

Certainly, spiritual discernment does not exclude existential, psychological, sociological or moral insights drawn from the human sciences. At the same time, it transcends them. Nor are the Church's sound norms sufficient. 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. It involves more than my temporal well-being, my satisfaction at having accomplished something useful, or even my desire for peace of mind. It has to do with the meaning of my life before the Father who knows and loves me, with the real purpose of my life, which nobody knows better than he. . . . It requires no special abilities, nor is it only for the more intelligent or better educated.

The Lord speaks to us in a variety of ways, at work, through others and at every moment. Yet we simply cannot do without the silence of prolonged prayer, which enables us better to perceive God's language, to interpret the real meaning of the inspirations we believe we have received, to calm our anxieties, and to see the whole of our existence afresh in his own light. In this way, we allow the birth of a new synthesis that springs from a life inspired by the Spirit. ." (para. 170-171 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *What are some times that God has helped you figure out things in your life?*

56.

Nonetheless, it is possible that, even in prayer itself, we could refuse to let ourselves be confronted by the freedom of the Spirit, who acts as he wills. We must remember that prayerful discernment must be born of a readiness to listen: to the Lord and to others, and to reality itself, which always challenges us in new ways. Only if we are prepared to listen, do we have the freedom to set aside our own partial or insufficient ideas, our usual habits and ways of seeing things. In this way, we become truly open to accepting a call that can shatter our security, but lead us to a better life. It is not enough that everything be calm and peaceful. God may be offering us something more, but in our comfortable inadvertence, we do not recognize it.

Naturally, this attitude of listening entails obedience to the Gospel as the ultimate standard, but also to the Magisterium that guards it It is not a matter of applying rules or repeating what was done in the past, since the same solutions are not valid in all circumstances and what was useful in one context may not prove so in another. The discernment of spirits liberates us from rigidity, which has no place before the perennial "today" of the risen Lord. The Spirit alone can penetrate what is obscure and hidden in every situation, and grasp its every nuance, so that the newness of the Gospel can emerge in another light." (para. 172-173 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *In what areas in your life do you block the Spirit, refusing to let God in?*

57.

An essential condition for progress in discernment is a growing understanding of God's patience and his timetable, which are never our own. Discernment is not about discovering what more we can get out of this life, but about recognizing 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. We experience it most when we accept the mysterious logic that is not of this world.

When, in God's presence, we examine our life's journey, no areas can be off limits. In all aspects of life we can continue to grow and offer something greater to God, even in those areas

we find most difficult. We need, though, to ask the Holy Spirit to liberate us and to expel the fear that makes us ban him from certain parts of our lives. God asks everything of us, yet he also gives everything to us. He does not want to enter our lives to cripple or diminish them, but to bring them to fulfilment. Discernment, then, is not a solipsistic self-analysis or a form of egotistical introspection, but an authentic process of leaving ourselves behind in order to approach the mystery of God, who helps us to carry out the mission to which he has called us, for the good of our brothers and sisters.

[Pope Francis concludes:] It is my hope that these pages will prove helpful by enabling the whole Church to devote herself anew to promoting the desire for holiness. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to pour out upon us a fervent longing to be saints for God's greater glory, and let us encourage one another in this effort. In this way, we will share a happiness that the world will not be able to take from us. (para. 174-175, 177 in *Gaudete et Exsultate*) *Do you dare to ask God for more: more self-knowledge, more wisdom, more holiness?*