

How Can Lay People Grow in Holiness?

St. Paul tells the Thessalonians, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification” (1 Thess. 4:3). Such a stark and simple response to the most important question any person of faith can ask, “What is God’s will for my life?” “Well, it’s simple,” St. Paul says, “be a saint!”

The rest is detail.

So what is a saint? The word “holy” often gets a bad rap in popular usage. “Holier than thou” seems to sum up our more negative take on holiness. “Holy” also might conjure the image of a super-religious person out of touch with the real world, or even of a judgy kill-joy who never has fun. In such portraits, holiness implies being not normal or inhuman.

But how far this is from our Catholic truth! For us, saints are the most human of humans out there if, to quote the musician Sia, we affirm that “to be human is to love.” Holiness is about loving and sacrificing for others, about bringing God’s peace and justice into the world. Saints are about living life to the full, and God has given us the Commandments only to lead us to the fullness of life.

Empowered by divine grace, the holy bring heaven down to earth and earth up to heaven. They are impassioned with a sense of mission and purpose in this life, propelled by the love of Christ to bring His Kingdom of hope to pass in every nook and cranny of the world they inhabit.

Yet we also affirm that only those who *know they’re loved* can be saints. You can’t give what you don’t have. 1 John 4:10 says, “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he has loved us.” Holiness is not primarily about our do-gooding, being flawless or impressing God by our good behavior. It’s about allowing ourselves to be loved by God, surrendering to the Only Friend of Man who alone can heal our brokenness and empower us to “love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

Author Léon Bloy famously said, “There is only one tragedy in the end, not to have been a saint.” Becoming a saint is why God created you. It is your core purpose in life. At the Last Judgment, what will matter is that you strive to live as a witness to His love, an instrument of His peace, a servant of His reconciliation, a troubadour of His truth, a missionary of His mercy. When you must choose your life-path, career or state in life, your prayer must be, “May my life grant God unfettered access into the world.”

Pope Benedict XVI once said of a life lived in this way, “It is beautiful and wonderful, because it is truly a service to joy, to God’s joy which longs to break into the world.”

Maybe that is the most profound description of holiness there is, God’s joy unleashed in the world through me.

Will you?



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