



"REJOICE AND BE GLAD"

The Call of Pope Francis to Holiness

BY FRED KAMMER, SJ

On March 19th, the feast of Saint Joseph, Pope Francis issued an Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (Rejoice and Be Glad) which he described as, not a treatise on holiness, but "a call to holiness in a practical way for our own time, with all its risks, challenges, and opportunities" [1].¹ There is much to savor in this letter, and I would like to highlight certain key points under three headings.

First, the LORD calls all of us to active holiness.

Francis is writing about "saints" without a capital letter. He sees holiness in the daily perseverance of parents and children, workers, elders, and the sick. They are, he writes, "the middle class of holiness" [7]. This holiness is the most attractive face of the Church, but also can be found among people of many faiths. God calls each of us uniquely, summoning us to discern our own path in order to bring out the best of ourselves and our most personal gifts from God.

Holiness can be found in the family, the workplace, and in seeking the common good of all. It takes form in small gestures and, at times, in great challenges in which "the Lord calls us anew to a conversion that can make his grace more evident in our lives..." [17]. Ultimately the power of the risen Lord makes us "capable of loving with the Lord's unconditional love..." [18]. However, just as we cannot understand Christ apart from the kingdom he came to bring, so, Francis writes, our own personal mission "involves a commitment to build with him that kingdom of love, justice, and universal peace" [25].

Second, the one great criterion for our action can be found in *Matthew 25*.

The great judgment scene in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus identifies himself with the least among us, Francis says, "is a page of Christology which sheds a ray of light on the mystery of Christ. In this call to recognize him in the poor and suffering, we see revealed the very heart of Christ, his

deepest feelings and choices, which every saint seeks to imitate" [96]. Pope Francis calls Christians to accept these "uncompromising demands of Jesus" with no "ifs or buts..." He markedly underscores that helping one person in need "would not be enough." The biblical jubilee year tradition also means "seeking social change" [99].²

In contrast to this call to charity and justice, the Pope cites two ideologies "striking at the heart of Christ." The first is the error of those Christians who accept the demands for justice but separate it from their personal relationship to Christ, losing the inspiration of the "luminous mysticism" of the great Saints of charity and justice [100]. The second "harmful ideological error is found in those who find suspect the social engagement of others, seeing it as superficial, worldly, secular, materialist, communist, or populist" [101]. It is in this section that Francis affirms the defense of the innocent unborn, but calls the lives of the poor, the abandoned, victims of trafficking, and the vulnerable infirm or elderly "equally sacred."

Francis then specifically devotes two sections to the situation of migrants and the call of the Christian and Jewish Scriptures to serve and protect them—"not a momentary fad." For the Christian, he writes, "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" [102-103].

In keeping the close connection between holiness and action, Francis turns to a favorite theme: *mercy*.³ For Pope Francis, mercy is the highest form of worship, the ultimate criterion on which our lives will be judged [104]. Rather than being divorced from prayer, "the best way to discern if our prayer is authentic is to judge to what extent our life is being transformed in the light of mercy" [105]. It is also through living merciful lives that we can escape the empty self-obsession created by the "feverish demands of a consumer society" or the time-wasting trap of "superficial information, instant communication, and virtual reality..." which can make us "indifferent to the suffering flesh of our brothers and sisters" [108]. Repeatedly, the pope invokes the witness of the saints and the words of Jesus in connecting holiness and action "for Christianity is meant above all to be put into practice" [109].

Third, holiness has characteristics and signs. In two different parts of the exhortation, Pope Francis deals with characteristics of holiness. In the first, he frames his remarks within the Beatitudes of Christ which he describes as "a Christian's identity card." Enumerating

these, he highlights the sanctity of those who are poor of heart, who refuse to dominate others, who understand and mourn the anguish of others ("even to touch their wounds"), who pursue justice for the poor and the weak, whose commitments come from the heart, who are artisans of peace, and who challenge society by the way they live [63-94].

In the other part, the Pope names "five great expressions of love for God and neighbor that I consider of particular importance in the light of certain dangers and limitations present in today's culture." The five particular "signs of holiness in today's world" which Francis sees as critical for our time are: (1) perseverance, patience, and meekness grounded in the God who loves and sustains us; (2) joy and a sense of humor that always endures, even in hard times; (3) boldness and a passion, rooted in the Spirit, to change the world; (4) commitment to communities where the risen Lord is present; and (5) an habitual openness to the transcendent in prayer, silence, and adoration, especially contemplation of the face of Jesus to let his fire inflame our hearts and enable us to set the hearts of others on fire [110-157]. It is especially compelling that the man who is Pope Francis seems to manifest these same signs in his leadership of the Church.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Numbers in brackets correspond to the numbered sections of the Exhortation.
- ² In making this point, Pope Francis cites the Canadian bishops' Open Letter to the Members of Parliament, *The Common Good or Exclusion: A Choice for Canadians* (1 February 2001), 9.
- ³ Pope Francis. (2015). *Misericordiae Vultus, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*.



**NOW
HIRING!**

JSRI is hiring an
**ECONOMIC
POLICY SPECIALIST.**
Apply at www.loyno.edu/jsri