

## ***The Universal Call to Holiness***

**By Robert Barry, Ph.D.**

September 26, 2021 — Twenty-Sixth Sunday Ordinary Time

Readings: Numbers 11.25-29; James 5.1-6; Mark 9.38-43, 45, 47-48

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On more than one occasion I have heard preached a sermon where we were told that Christ's command to cut off our hand or gouge out our eye rather than sin is only exaggeration and hyperbole, obviously not to be taken literally.

This is not at all obvious.

Given the content and tenor of Christ's teaching about the Kingdom of God, the most obvious interpretation is the direct and literal one: there are good things in this world, even our bodily limbs, which will cause us to sin. It is better for us to reject and lose those good things of this world, than to cling to them and thereby separate ourselves and others from the Kingdom of God that Christ has made available to us.

***"Would that all the people of the LORD were prophets!"***

This exhortation by Moses echoes today in the Universal Call to Holiness that is part and parcel of the renewal of moral theology and moral teaching inspired by the Second Vatican Council. Jesus' call for us to be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect is not hyperbole or mere pious exhortation. This is the true heart of the Gospel, that we might love one another, in word but more importantly in deed, just as Christ himself has shown us how to do.

What is put in the subjunctive in the mouth of Moses is now in the imperative in the teaching of the Church: the Spirit shared with the Seventy in the Sinai desert is the very Holy Spirit called down when a baby is baptized and later confirmed a child of age. This Holy Spirit is the principle of the new life that God infuses in our souls, in fulfillment of Christ's promises to be with us always. This new life does not reside only and entirely in the content of our thoughts, however. This new life breaks forth in actions that are unlike those regularly perpetrated in and by the world around us. What we do externally with our eyes and our mouths, our feet and our hands, and all other bodily parts we might employ, must be directly animated at all times by that Holy Spirit within us. Even actions that, in the abstract, are thoroughly mundane and ordinary, must be transformed and sanctified in the concrete actions of a Christian animated by that Holy Spirit.

This fundamental element of the Christian life is regularly obscured and overlooked in every age and nation. The pursuit of a holy life that constitutes membership in the Kingdom of God regularly tends to devolve to the pursuit of a merely "good life" in conformity to the ordinary expectations of this world.

We need constant reminders of this high calling, which are found in the saints living right before us in every age. Some of these saints are widely heralded as examples to be followed. Thus, in this past century, Thérèse of Lisieux, "The Little Flower of Jesus", has been set before us and recognized as a Doctor of the Church. Her words and example teach how even the lowliest and simplest of acts, unheralded and unrecognized, are transformed by the Holy Spirit at work in all who are baptized. We are never to be complacent in the sufficiency of the mere goodness of our acts. Instead, we are always called to grow in holiness, and seek ever more fully to make visible in our actions the power of the love of God.

***“Whoever is not against us is for us.”***

Other saints are more local and unobserved, serving like Eldad and Medad in the reading from *Numbers*. These prophets are on the list and given a share in the Spirit, but happen not to be in the tent with the others. This is no obstacle to their prophesying, and fruitfully so; therefore, Moses refuses to stop them. Likewise, Jesus commands his disciples not to prevent or obstruct those who drive out demons in Jesus’ name. Both Moses and Jesus are responding to a very understandable concern: spiritual powers and actions can be employed by worldly-minded for ulterior purposes. Those who were already with Moses and Jesus were in visible union with them, not only “on the list” but also “in the tent.”

The elders or disciples in those positions of recognized authority are presumed to be putting their spiritual gifts to legitimate use, and ought to be doing so every day, in all their words and actions, inspiring the people around them with their example. Their failure to do so is the cause of grave scandal. The danger is that those seeking to be taught what is holy and how the Holy Spirit ought to move them might actually take the scandalous lives and actions of their priest or bishop as an example to be imitated:

- Their followers will bind their hearts to the enjoyment of things that will rot away; they will regard this as a rightly-earned blessing from God.
- Their followers will defraud others and withhold wages their workers need to live a life of dignity, so that they themselves might amass things that will corrode and become moth-eaten; they will regard themselves as prudent stewards and effective leaders.
- Their followers will sin, because they will imitate their pastors and take the enjoyment of these temporary, worldly goods as properly an example of holiness, when in fact it is not.

When these followers die, their souls will continue to desire the enjoyment of those treasures they have stored up, but in vain. And then, when that pastor dies, his soul will join them in this vain pursuit, and together they will eternally seek what they had enjoyed in their lives, but now have lost and can never grasp again. Then he will truly wish a great millstone had been put around his neck while he was alive, and he had been thrown into the sea, so that he might not have persuaded those others that a merely good life, by conventional standards, is a genuinely holy life.

So, it is right and fitting that the Universal Call to Holiness must first, and most evidently, be observed by priests and bishops. But each of these passages instructs us that the work of the Holy Spirit is not restricted to those ordinarily and publicly recognized boundaries of spiritual leaders. In fact, the Universal Call to Holiness is grounded in one of the most basic of Christian claims: all who are baptized and confirmed have received the Holy Spirit. We ought not be surprised, then, to see it at work in the lives of *all* Christians, without exception. We ought to be attentive to the examples of that work in the lives and actions of those all around us, ready to give due honor to that work.

But how do we rightly honor that work, and how do we recognize it in the first place?

***“Come now, you rich, weep and wail over your impending miseries.”***

The *Letter of James* powerfully echoes and summarizes the consistent teaching of Jesus about the value of the goods of this world. They are temporary. They are passing. They indeed give a sense of satisfaction, but one that is partial and merely fleeting.

And we are called to something much greater.

This love of something greater than all the goods of this world is what we can recognize at work in the lives and actions of the ordinary uncanonized saints around us. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, and the fruit of the specific gift of Wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to judge rightly the true value of the genuinely good things of this world. And good they are: nations, cities, jobs, homes, family, friends, recreation, transportation, and many other worldly activities are integral components of the human good that we are obligated to pursue in this life.

Holiness is sometimes wrongly regarded as a wholesale rejection of such goods. That is not the mainstream Christian teaching. Holiness is attained through the right use and enjoyment of such goods of this world, to the extent they are compatible with and foster our love for our neighbor and our love for God. We see that gift of Wisdom at work vividly in instances where someone will clearly subordinate the enjoyment of some such good to the attainment of something higher: parents who forgo a vacation so they can afford to send their child to their parish school; the priest

who forgoes a family of his own so he might be Father for an entire parish; an employer who forgoes a profitable quarter so he can keep his employees on the payroll. The past century of Catholic Social Teaching has reflected deeply on the specific shape that lives directed by such Wisdom ought to take; Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'* is only the latest comprehensive consideration of what a life of holiness specifically entails in our external actions today.

We ought also to be attentive to the examples of those who exhibit this Wisdom more subtly, less dramatically, but perhaps more regularly, in their modesty of weekly budget, in their choice of home, in their offer of their time in service to others and their parish, and so on. When you look around, you might recognize multiple examples of people whose lives exhibit this ordinary holiness. Their hearts do not lead them to use their hands or feet or eyes in service to a life of luxury and pleasure. They do not avoid the life of luxury and pleasure merely out of fear; rather, they seek something higher because they have learned to love it more.

They have seen the example of the saints around them, their pastor and their fellow parishioners, as living testimonies of the greatness of the love that God has for them and has shared with them through Christ. They honor others living lives of holiness by imitating them, by encouraging them, and by taking part in that community of holy saints that ought to be recognizable in every parish. They need not worry about cutting off their hands or feet, or gouging out their eyes, because they already are preparing to, and have actually begun, living in the Kingdom of God that they love more than everything else, both in their internal thoughts and their external actions.

By these ordinary lives of holiness, performing all their deeds in Christ's name, all Christians ought to prophesy every day to one another, and to the world at large, so that all might recognize unmistakably that the Kingdom of God is at hand.

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### *For Further Reading*

- *Lumen Gentium*, [\*especially #40\*](#)
- Pope Francis, [\*Laudato Si'\*](#)
- Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, [\*Story of a Soul\*](#).
- Matthew Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit: Love and Gift in the Trinity and the Church* (Especially Ch. 7 "[\*The Holy Spirit and the Holiness of the Church\*](#)")

### *In Short...*

- *All who are baptized receive the Holy Spirit, who makes possible a new life of holiness in even our ordinary daily actions.*
- *The life of holiness ought to stand in contrast—sometimes in stark contrast— to the lives we ordinarily expect to see people leading.*
- *Priests and bishops have a special obligation to exhibit a life of ordinary holiness and must avoid the grave sin of scandal that would encourage their followers to pursue worldly goods and pleasures.*
- *We rightly regard canonized saints such as Thérèse of Lisieux as examples of lives of holiness to be extolled and imitated.*
- *Wisdom is a gift of the Holy Spirit by which we recognize how the ordinary elements of our daily lives ought to be rightly loved and used.*
- *Every parish ought to be permeated by an ordinary holiness exhibited by its members in their daily lives.*
- *These lives of ordinary holiness serve as a daily prophecy that the Kingdom of God is at hand.*