

Gaudete et Exsultate (Rejoice and Be Glad)

The recent apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate (Rejoice and Be Glad)*, describes a spirituality of solidarity, a holiness that “cannot be lived apart” from the call to recognize Christ in the poor and the suffering (#96), a holiness that is lived out only in human community, “not as individuals without any bond between them” (#6). There is a “joy lived in communion” that moves us “beyond our own needs” (#128). The five chapters of this papal letter, with 177 sections, reflects the call in the Synod of Bishops 1971 *Justice in the World*, a call for a continual conversion of the heart, a joyful renewal that will “inculcate a truly and entirely human way of life in justice, love, and simplicity” (JW, #51). Francis discusses discernment in detail in this new text, echoing the comment in *Justice in the World* that conversion of the heart “will awaken a critical sense, which will lead us to reflect on the society in which we live and its values; it will make people renounce any values that cease to promote justice for all people” (JW, #51).

But Francis’s strategy is not to make this new exhortation a “social” document. He formally cites only one social encyclical but references Scripture, a wide range of church documents, the writings of many saints, and documents from bishops’ conferences from around the world, bringing in and building on writings of the historical church community and the present international church community. He locates social issues at the heart of the spiritual life of Christians, using the Beatitudes and other references to the Sermon on the Mount to help us understand what it means to live a fully human holy life in the world. The text of Matthew 25:35-36 (“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me”) is “not a simple invitation to charity:

it 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 the suffering, we see revealed the very heart of Christ, his deepest feelings and choices, which every saint seeks to imitate” (#96).

A Practical Holiness

Pope Francis directs *Rejoice and Be Glad* to all people of faith, calling all to a holiness “in a practical way for our own time, with all its risks, challenges and opportunities.” He begins by pointing to the witness of prophets and canonized saints and also to the “saints next door,” those living their daily lives with care and concern for others. Holiness, he reminds

us, is lived for everyone “in their own way,” responding with their own talents and experiences to be a part in the building of the Kingdom (#2).

The Pope takes special notice of the many women who have created their own paths to a holy life, giving as examples Saint Hildegard of Bingen,

Saint Bridget, Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Teresa of Avila, and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux; he notes that there are so many more women through the centuries who “sustained and transformed families and communities by the power of their witness” (#12). Indeed, God calls every person to an ongoing conversion so we can be open to grace continuously, in every aspect of our lives. We are called to “live Jesus” as we work to “reproduce in our own lives various aspects of Jesus’s 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” (#20). Prayer and prayerful discernment are necessary to see the path before us as we seek to embody Christ’s love for the world. “Our identification with Christ and his will involves a commitment to build with



Him that kingdom of love, justice, and universal peace. Christ himself wants to experience this with you, in all the efforts and sacrifices that it entails, but also in all the joy and enrichment it brings. You cannot grow in holiness without committing yourself, body and soul, to giving your best to this endeavor” (#25).

Pope Francis reminds us we must be whole to be holy: “It is not healthy to love silence while fleeing interaction with others, to want peace and quiet while avoiding activity, to seek prayer while disdaining service.” Everything can be “accepted and integrated into our life in this world, and become a part of our path to holiness. We are called to be contemplatives even in the midst of action, and to grow in holiness by responsibly and generously carrying out our proper mission” (#26). This kind of life will make us fully alive and bring a joy and fulfillment that we cannot glean from a material-oriented, self-involved lifestyle.

Contemporary Challenges

This exhortation notes that there are two significant challenges to contemporary holiness. The first is a form of Gnosticism that prioritizes theological concepts over incarnational love and charity. Pope Francis refers to St. Francis of Assisi who wisely recognized the temptation to turn the Christian experience into a set of “intellectual exercises” that distance us from the freshness of the Gospel. Saint Bonaventure is also referred to as one who “pointed out that true Christian wisdom can never be separated from mercy towards our neighbor” (#46). The second challenge is a Pelagian perspective on the human will, a perspective which lacks the humility necessary to authentic holiness: it is God’s grace that enables our efforts, imperfect as they may be, to be the seeds of creating the Kingdom. “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...” (#56).

Pope Francis is very frank about those who see the Church “as a museum piece or the possession of a select few,” those

who “give excessive importance to certain rules, customs or ways of acting. The Gospel then tends to be reduced and constricted, deprived of its simplicity, allure and savor.” He calls for an openness and freedom to be moved by the Spirit, echoing the invitation to the Second Vatican Council. Even those “who begin with an intense life in the Spirit” can “end up fossilized... or corrupt” (#58). He describes “self-centered and elitist complacency, bereft of true love,” seeing it in those with “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 the ability to manage practical matters, and an excessive concern with programs of self-help and personal fulfillment (#63).

Pope Francis reminds us that there is a “hierarchy of virtues,” the most important of which is charity, the love of God and the love of neighbor. While we can get lost “amid the thicket of precepts and prescriptions,” it is Jesus Christ, who

clears a way to seeing two faces, that of the Father and that of our brother. 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 (#61).

He makes it very clear that without the love of neighbor we cannot authentically say we love God, and that there is no authentic holiness without the encounter and concern for those who are suffering and at the margin. This is the central motif of the new exhortation, sounded throughout the entire text.

The Beatitudes: “Going Against the Flow”

Pope Francis spends an entire chapter on the Beatitudes, recognizing their wisdom as a guide to develop authentic holiness. Reflecting on “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” he calls us to the interior freedom and spaciousness available when we are not filled with ego and individual concerns, but rather open to God and his children. We must cultivate a “holy indifference”



to ego concerns. He relates this to being meek: “meekness is yet another expression of the interior poverty of those who put their trust in God alone,” not trying to dominate others, having compassion for others’ faults because we see our own. We ask God to be merciful to us as we are called to be merciful to others (#74).

Pope Francis brings his concept of encounter to the understanding of “Blessed are those who mourn.” He calls us to be present to those who suffer, not to avert our gaze and escape into diversion, entertainment, pleasure. Those who can encounter the other and sympathize with pain and sorrow are “capable of touching life’s depths and finding authentic happiness.” He or she “will be 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” (#76).

Discussing “Blessed are the merciful,” Pope Francis reminds us that the Catechism states that mercy is to be applied “in every case,” especially when we are “confronted by situations that make moral judgments less assured and decision difficult.” Mercy has been an important priority in Francis’ teaching, and he notes here that it involves forgiveness and understanding as well as “giving, helping and serving others.” He points out that in the Gospel of Luke, we are not told to be perfect 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.” He also notes that Luke reminds us “the yardstick we use for understanding and forgiving others will measure the forgiveness we receive” and calls the church community “an army of the forgiven” (#81-82).

Pope Francis relates that Jesus “warns us that the path he proposes goes against the flow, even making us challenge society by the way we live,” thus he blessed those “who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.” Many have been, and are being, persecuted “because they struggle for justice,

because they take seriously their commitment to God and to others” (#90). In contemporary society, political, media, economic, cultural, and religious institutions can become entangled and become “an obstacle to authentic human and social development,” making this Beatitude a challenge to live out. But, “whatever weariness and pain we may experience in living the commandment of love and following the way of justice, the cross remains the source of our growth and sanctification” (#92). The way of suffering and love for others is the path of the Gospel, Francis reminds us.

The Heart of the Matter

Saint John Paul II is quoted by Francis, reminding us that holiness cannot be lived apart from mercy, “the beating heart of the Gospel”: “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” (#97). Pope Francis is very clear on the core concept of Catholic social teaching:

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? (#98).

It is notable and very important that Pope Francis goes on to emphasize that helping one person would “not be enough.” Justice demands “seeking social change” through the transformation of sinful structures and the creation of “just social and economic systems” (#99). For Pope Francis, this also means pointing out the error of either seeking only a personal relationship with Christ without responding to the Gospel demands for a passionate commitment to those suffering, oppressed, at the



margins—or the error of distrusting the social engagement of others. One of the Pope’s strongest statements follows, emphasizing we cannot be one-issue Christians:

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 (#101).

Francis goes on to relate that some consider the plight of migrants an issue not as important as bioethical questions, a hierarchy of issues which he rejects. He locates the concern for the stranger in both the Old Testament (quoting Exodus, Leviticus and Isaiah) and in the New, again returning to Matthew’s Gospel, reminding us that Jesus told us that in welcoming the stranger we welcome him. “This is not a notion invented by some pope, or a momentary fad,” he states bluntly and forcefully (#103).

The final comments in Chapter Three of this exhortation focus on “the worship most acceptable to God,” which is prayerfully living out Christ’s command to love our neighbor and to show mercy in thought, word and deed. “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 ... mercy is the fullness of justice and the most radiant manifestation of God’s truth.” Pope Francis then discusses the negative effects of hedonism, consumerism, and media indulgence, all of which lead

us to focus on our own wellbeing, growing indifferent to the needs of others, and eventually, ironically, leaving us anxious and impoverished. The Gospel offers another path to fulfillment and happiness (#108).

Signs of Holiness Today

In Chapter Four, Pope Francis focuses on virtuous habits to counter the problems he sees in the world, problems such as inauthentic spirituality without God and love for his children, “anxiety, sometimes violent, that distracts and debilitates; negativity and sullenness; the self-content bred by consumerism” (#111). He also mentions cultural violence and the verbal aggression we see more and more in public discourse (#115).



Being grounded in God’s love and being open to experience His peace, Pope Francis posits, will help us deal with our own and others’ failings, to have the patience related to humility, to let go of the “aggressiveness of egotism” and to persevere in the good. We need to cultivate this sacred ground and “not fall into the temptation of looking for security in success, vain pleasures, possessions, power over others or social status” (#121).

Another major motif in this exhortation is the joy born out of such peace and openness. Pope Francis again reminds us that we are called in Scripture to rejoice and be glad in the Lord. To cultivate such joy demands that we do not “get so caught up in ourselves ... and our own needs” so that we do not recognize God’s gifts and the joy we can find in community; solidarity increases our joy “because it makes us capable of rejoicing in the good of others.” Consumerism can only offer “occasional and passing pleasures, but not joy” (#128).

Pope Francis also urges us to speak and live with boldness and enthusiasm, responding to Christ’s compassionate call to heal and liberate and to the Spirit’s breath of new life. Christian life should not be a “museum of memories. In every situation,



may the Holy Spirit cause us to contemplate history in the light of the risen Jesus. In this way, the Church will not stand still, but constantly welcome the Lord's surprises." We need to be continually open to 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" (#133).

We are reminded that "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," and it is there where we encounter Christ, where we can escape "our stale self-centeredness." Pope Francis calls us to shake off the complacency that keeps us in inertia; Christ can help 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" (#137). To be Christians is to always welcome "the Lord's surprises" and to respond to the signs of the times.

We can only grow in these habits of holiness in the "journey of community;" community creates "the God-enlightened space" where we can authentically and completely experience God (#142) and where we can move from the isolation of "a quest for well-being apart from others" (#146). Through community, we can learn to pray, which is to practice the presence of God and express love for our neighbor (#154). Sharing the Eucharist, we come to the table together and prepare together to go out to encounter our sisters and brothers.

Discernment

The last chapter of Pope Francis's exhortation to rejoice and be glad in community and in encounter is devoted to discernment. He speaks of the reality of evil and a spiritual understanding of the devil as the embodiment of evil; we need to be aware that we must "counterbalance" evil with cultivating the good, growing in love and developing the spiritual life within us. Discernment, which is more than "intelligence or common sense," is so necessary today, with all the noise and activity in modern life and modern media. It is critical that we discern what is in us and the signs of the times outside of us because we are called to be open to

the work of the Spirit, to be free to respond in new ways without a "rigid resistance to change," so we can create the Kingdom of God in this world (#168).

Spiritual discernment "does not exclude existential, psychological, sociological or moral insights drawn from the human sciences, it transcends them." Discernment is ultimately a grace that can be given to all, even "the lowly." It leads us beyond ourselves and our limitations to encounter Christ, and in encountering Christ, to see how we may encounter the other and to be a part of the healing of the world in new and creative ways (#170). We must be open and be ready to listen to God and to his people, to be willing to accept the call "that can shatter our security," and "allow the birth of a new synthesis that springs from a life inspired by the Spirit" (#172). Such a life "is not a matter of applying rules or repeating what was done in the past," because past solutions are not always useful in the present. Authentic discernment "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" (#173). Pope Francis's message calls everyone in the Church to be open to the creativity of the Spirit and to the people of God.

Finally, at the end of the text, Pope Francis reminds us this creativity is realized in God's time; we are only a part of the great work, and it demands we play our part with generosity and with a willingness to make sacrifices. Through solidarity for the common good, we can become open to the joy of working and growing in community and thus become co-creators of new life. God does not want to diminish our lives, Pope Francis affirms, but rather "to bring them to fulfillment" so we may flourish and help others to flourish through justice and peace. We are called to "expel fear" and be open to the movement of the Spirit (#176). Like Mary, we are called to live the Beatitudes and to be open to the new things that God calls us to, rejoicing in that which is to be born.



“...amid the thicket of precepts and prescriptions, Jesus clears a way to seeing two faces, that of the Father and that of our brother. 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 defenceless and those in need, God’s very image is found.”

—Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, #61

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What were the highlights of Pope Francis’s new exhortation as you read through the reflection and summary of it? What is new to you in this exhortation? What is most surprising? What is most interesting to you? What is most comforting? What is most challenging to you?
- What are some of the aspects of Pope Francis’s concept of holiness? What are the central messages of his apostolic exhortation as exemplified in his quotes that are included in this reflection and summary? What is he calling the Church, both the hierarchy and the people of God, to?
- What is Pope Francis’s message on communal spirituality as opposed to a private and personal spirituality? How do we develop our spirituality in community? What are the challenges, and the rewards, of such a spirituality? How do we integrate the message of *Rejoice and Be Glad* into our worship and educational communities?
- Why does Pope Francis believe we must always be open to the Spirit? What can prevent us from doing so? What do we need to cultivate this openness? What are some initial steps we can take to develop a spiritual sense of openness? How can we work in community to develop openness in our hearts?

FAITH IN ACTION

- Share this reflection on Pope Francis’s apostolic exhortation with others and find ways to discuss it in communal settings so you can practice growing spiritually with others in community.

PRAYER

Lead us to rejoicing in your word and works, O Lord. Move us to grow in holiness as we grow in openness to the Spirit who makes all things new. Ground us in community so we may encounter you and your children in deeper and deeper ways. Grace our creativity to be bold in creating your Kingdom of justice and peace. Keep us always in your loving embrace so we may fully embrace our sisters and brothers, especially those suffering and at the margins. Amen.

—Jane Deren, Ph.D.

