

Call to Holiness – Overview

On April 9, the Vatican released Pope Francis' third Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (Rejoice and Be Glad). This type of writing is generally ranked as the third highest papal issuance, after an encyclical and an apostolic constitution. It is not intended to be a doctrinal exposition, but rather an encouragement to undertake a particular activity. Francis' earlier exhortations were *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel, 2013) and *Amoris Laetitia* (On Love in the Family, 2016).

The subject of this exhortation is the call to holiness in today's world. As Pope Francis notes at the outset, the Lord "wants us to be saints and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence." (#1) He states his purpose this way: "My modest goal is to repropose the call to holiness in a practical way for our own time, with all its risks, challenges and opportunities." (#2)

The Holy Father develops the exhortation in five chapters:

1 – The Call to Holiness

Francis reminds us that the saints include not just those formally canonized but also the members of God's People who live holiness in the midst of their communities. His focus is primarily on the call to holiness that the Lord addresses to each of us. Being holy doesn't require becoming a cleric or religious – it simply means living with love and bearing witness to the Gospel wherever we find ourselves. Our entire life is a mission in Christ, and we need to be aware of how our daily activities can make us holy.

2 – Two Enemies of Holiness

Francis warns of two false forms of holiness:

- Gnosticism – the heresy that exalts knowledge and complex understanding over the mysteries of God and faith
- Pelagianism – the heresy that attributes all accomplishments to the human will, and considers justification to result from human works rather than divine mercy

3 – In the Light of the Master

Jesus explained what holiness is with the Beatitudes, and Francis considers what each of them tells us about holiness. He concludes with the "Great Criterion" of God's judgment – what we have done for those in need.

4 – Signs of Holiness in Today's World

Francis highlights five expressions of love for God and neighbor that he considers especially important:

- Perseverance, Patience and Meekness
- Joy and a Sense of Humor
- Boldness and Passion
- Life in Community
- Constant Prayer

5 – Spiritual Combat, Vigilance and Discernment

We struggle not only with the world and a worldly mentality, and with human weakness, but also with the devil, and if we dismiss the reality of evil, we risk weakening and corrupting our spiritual lives.

Discernment is a gift of the Spirit through which we can come to realize whether something is advancing us in holiness or is diverting us toward evil.

Pope Francis concludes with a reminder that “Mary is the saint among the saints, blessed above all others. She teaches us the way of holiness and she walks ever at our side. She does not let us remain fallen and at times she takes us into her arms without judging us.” (#176)

Finally, he implores: “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.” (#177)