

Two Enemies of Holiness

In the second chapter of his Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (Rejoice and Be Glad), Pope Francis examines and warns us about two heresies which have plagued the Church since early Christian times and are still around today – Gnosticism and Pelagianism. Both seduce people with their presentations of doctrinal security which hide their underlying elitism.

Gnosticism is a movement that began during the first few centuries of Christianity. Its basic belief was that all matter is evil, created by an evil power, and that the spirit-realm is good. Humans have a divine spark within them, and the way to liberate this spark and unite with the divine is to develop an understanding of certain secret knowledge. Within Christian communities, Gnostics took ideas from John and Paul about the importance of the Word, the conflict between flesh and spirit, and the inadequacy of the Law to bring one to salvation. Some believed that Jesus was a lesser divinity – not a human at all – sent to show mankind how to get in touch with the secret knowledge that was the key to divine life. Others thought he was only a human who attained divinity through his acquisition of the hidden knowledge and taught his disciples to do the same.

Gnosticism was eventually considered a heresy, condemned as early as the late 2nd Century by St. Irenaeus. Many of the doctrines defined in the Nicene Creed (325 A.D.) directly refuted Gnostic teachings. Gnosticism declined afterwards, but has remained an undercurrent among some Christians ever since.

Modern Gnostics judge others based on their ability to understand the complexity of certain doctrines. The intellect is all-important. Developing a superior comprehension of the secret knowledge is prized over relationships and interactions with others. Their understandings are the only correct ones, making sense of faith and the Gospels.

Gnosticism is one of the most sinister ideologies because, while unduly exalting knowledge or a specific experience, it considers its own vision of reality to be perfect. Thus, perhaps without even realizing it, this ideology feeds on itself and becomes even more myopic. (#40)

Gnostics try to turn their claims to superior knowledge into control over others, insisting that unless they come to that same knowledge, God is not in them. But God is present in every human life and we must try to find the Lord in every person.

A dangerous confusion can arise. We can think that because we know something, or are able to explain it in certain terms, we are already saints, perfect and better than the “ignorant masses.” Saint John Paul II warned of the temptation on the part of those in the Church who are more highly educated “to feel somehow superior to other members of the faithful.” In point of fact, what we think we know should always motivate us to respond more fully to God’s love. Indeed, “you learn so as to live: theology and holiness are inseparable”. (#45)

Resurfacing in our time is another old heresy, Pelagianism, which holds that a person can live a morally good life without the need for God's helping grace, that Adam's sin affected only his own relationship with God and that there is no original sin, nor need for redemption. To help us live sinlessly, God instructed people through the Mosaic Law and Christ's teachings and good example. But essentially, we can achieve salvation through sheer willpower, through our natural ability to do good. Pelagius was a monk in the late 4th/ early 5th Century, a contemporary of St. Augustine, who challenged him. Pelagianism, which developed beyond his direct teachings, was condemned by the Councils of Carthage (418) and Ephesus (431).

Pope Francis was critical of modern Pelagianism when he was still a cardinal and has spoken against it on multiple occasions since becoming pope, including in his first Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, in 2013. Those who fall into this heresy ultimately trust in their own powers, and even though they may praise God's grace, deep down they think that all things can be accomplished by the human will, to which God's grace is then added.

Ultimately, the lack of a heartfelt and prayerful acknowledgment of our limitations prevents grace from working more effectively within us, for no room is left for bringing about the potential good that is part of a sincere and genuine journey of growth. (#50)

Through insisting on their own abilities and prescribing adherence to certain practices, the new Pelagians ignore the often-repeated lesson of the Scriptures that justification comes from the love and mercy of God, not from what we do. We cannot merit grace, we can only gratefully receive it for our salvation. God's grace "surpasses the power of human intellect and will" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1998). Even the abilities we do have are already a gracious gift from a loving God.

We cannot celebrate this free gift of the Lord's friendship unless we realize that our earthly life and our natural abilities are his gift. ... Only on the basis of God's gift, freely accepted and humbly received, can we cooperate by our own efforts in our progressive transformation. (#s 55, 56)

Yet some insist on justification by their own efforts, worshipping human will and their own abilities, resulting in a self-centered and elitist complacency.

This finds expression in a variety of apparently unconnected ways of thinking and acting: 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. Some Christians spend their time and energy on these things, rather than letting themselves be led by the Spirit in the way of love. (#57)

We need only follow the essential command – to love God and our neighbor. That is the true path to holiness.