

Walking by the Light of Christ

In the third chapter of his Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (Rejoice and Be Glad), Pope Francis notes that “there can be any number of theories about what constitutes holiness” (#63), but nothing is more enlightening than the two Gospel accounts in which Jesus clearly shows us the way to holiness – the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-12 and Lk 6:20-23) and the Great Criterion (Mt 25:31-46).

Beatitudes

Holiness is being poor of heart – looking to God for our security rather than wealth or other created things. (#67-70)

Holiness is being meek – not judgmental or controlling, not demanding or short-tempered, but, rather, patient, humble, gentle and understanding. (#71-74)

Holiness is being able to mourn with others – not denying or escaping from painful situations, but sharing others’ sorrows and anguish, being compassionate and bringing them relief. (#75-76)

Holiness is hungering and thirsting for righteousness – pursuing justice for those most vulnerable: the poor and the weak. (#77-79)

Holiness is being merciful – serving and helping others in need, as well as understanding and forgiving those who harm us. (#80-82)

Holiness is being pure of heart – keeping ourselves free of all that tarnishes love. Our good actions must proceed from a deep, inner commitment to love as Christ has shown us. (#83-86)

Holiness is being a peacemaker – building friendship in society, avoiding gossip, and facing conflict head on to resolve it and sow peace in our community. (#87-89)

Holiness is accepting the Gospel’s path, even though it may cause problems for us – doing the hard work of transforming our society into God’s Kingdom, despite the obstacles the world throws up against us. (#90-94)

The Great Criterion

In Mt 25:31-46, Jesus expands on the Beatitude that calls the merciful blessed, explaining that there is one clear standard by which we will be judged: how we responded to the neediest – those who were hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, or imprisoned. What we did – or failed to do – for them, we did – or failed to do – for Christ himself. Our holiness depends on our ability to recognize Christ in others, especially the poorest and neediest.

Holiness, then, is not about swooning in mystic rapture. As Saint John Paul II said: “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”. The text of Matthew 25:35-36 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)

I can see a needy person as an annoyance, a troubling sight, a political problem, even as a less-than-human creature. “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!” (#98)

Pope Francis cautions against two harmful errors:

- Separating these Gospel demands from one’s personal relationship with the Lord, as though a commitment to the needy would detract from one’s prayer life.
- Treating others’ social engagement as suspect (secular, materialist, populist, communist), or relativizing it – considering it less important than a particular ethical issue or cause that one supports.

He offers two examples of the latter error:

- Considering the defense of the unborn to be more important than caring for those already born – the destitute, the abandoned, the underprivileged, the infirm, the elderly, and victims of human trafficking.
- Considering the situation of migrants to be less important than bioethical questions, thus ignoring numerous Scriptural exhortations to welcome and respect the stranger.

Finally, Pope Francis reminds us that our prayer life should bring us closer to God, transforming our lives in the light of His mercy. We witness to the authenticity of our prayer by our actions of mercy towards our neighbors. We worship God with sacrifices and gifts, not because He needs them, but because they stir our devotion and move us to love our neighbors. If we become too concerned about ourselves, we will find it hard to show any real concern for those in need. We must cultivate a simplicity of life, heeding the Gospel’s call to mercy, to a life of holiness, not busy-ness.

Jesus’ words are few and straightforward, yet practical and valid for everyone, for Christianity is meant above all to be put into practice. (#109)