

Our individual and unique callings to holiness

Shining reflections of our Lord

Pope Francis

In his May 15th homily for the canonization of ten blessed men and women – among them Charles de Foucauld and Titus Brandsma -- Pope Francis painted a clear picture of what holiness signifies. “At times, by over-emphasizing our efforts to do good works, we have created an ideal of holiness excessively based on ourselves, our personal heroics”, he affirmed. Instead, at the heart of Christianity there must be “amazement born of realizing that we are loved, prior to any response on our part”. It is a force that expands our hearts, transforms our lives, and leads us to “serve the Gospel and our brothers and sisters”, offering “our lives without expecting anything in return”.

We have heard what Jesus told his disciples before leaving this world and returning to the Father. He told us what it means to be a Christian: “Even as I have loved you, so you must love one another” (Jn 13:34). This is the legacy that Christ bequeathed to us, the ultimate criterion for discerning whether or not we are truly his disciples. It is the commandment of love. Let us stop to consider two essential elements of this commandment: Jesus’ love for us – “as I have loved you” – and the love he asks us to show to others – “so you must love one another”.

First, the words “as I have loved you”. How did Jesus love us? To the very end, to the total gift of himself. It is striking to think that he spoke these words on that night of darkness, when the atmosphere in the Upper Room was one of deep emotion and anxiety: deep emotion, because the Master was about to bid farewell to his disciples; anxiety because he had said that one of them would betray him. We can imagine the sorrow that filled the heart of Jesus, the dark clouds that were gathering in the hearts of the apostles, and their bitterness at seeing Judas who, after receiving the morsel dipped for him by the Master, left the room to enter into the night of betrayal. Yet at the very hour of his betrayal, Jesus reaffirmed his love for his own. For amid the darkness and tempests of life, that is the most important thing of all: God loves us.

Brothers and sisters, may this message be the core of our own faith and all the ways in which we express it: “...not that we loved God but that he loved us” (1 Jn 4:10). Let us never forget this. Our abilities and our merits are not the central thing, but rather the unconditional, free and unmerited love of God. Our Christian lives begin not with doctrine and good works, but with the amazement born of realizing that we are loved, prior to any response on our part. While the world frequently tries to convince us that we are valued only for what we can produce, the Gospel reminds us of the real truth of life: *we are loved*. [...] He loved us first; he waits for us; he keeps loving us. This is our identity: we are God’s loved ones. This is our strength: we are loved by God.

Acknowledging this truth requires a conversion in the way we often think of holiness. At times, by over-emphasizing our efforts to do good works, we have created an ideal of holiness excessively based on ourselves, our personal heroics, our capacity for renunciation, our readiness for self-sacrifice to achieve a reward. This can at times appear as an overly “pelagian” way of viewing life and holiness. We have turned holiness into an unattainable goal. We have separated it from everyday life, instead of looking for it and embracing it in our daily routines, in the dust of the streets, in the trials of real life and, in the words of Teresa of Avila to her Sisters, “among the pots and pans”.[...]

The love that we receive from the Lord is the force that transforms our lives. It opens our hearts and enables us to love. For this reason, Jesus says – here is the second element – “*as I have loved you, so must you love one another*”. That word “as” is not simply an invitation to imitate Jesus’ love; it tells us that we are able to love only because he has loved us, because he pours into our hearts his own Spirit, the Spirit of holiness, love that heals and transforms.[...] The love I give is united to Jesus’ love for me. “As” he loved me, so I can love others. The Christian life is just that simple. Let’s not make it more complicated with so many things. It is just that simple.

In practice, what does it mean to live this love? Before giving us this commandment, Jesus had washed the disciples’ feet; then, after giving it, he gave himself up to the wood of the cross. To love means this: *to serve and to give one’s life*. *To serve*, that is, not to put our own interests first [...] Specifically, we should ask ourselves, “What do I do for others?” [...]

Then, *to give one’s life*. This is about more than simply offering something of ours to others; it is about giving them our very selves. [...] Touching and looking, touching and looking at the flesh of Christ who suffers in our brothers and sisters. This is very important; it is what it means *to give one’s life*. Holiness does not consist of a few heroic gestures, but of many small acts of daily love. “Are you called to the consecrated life? [...] Then be holy by living out your commitment with joy. Are you married? Be holy by loving and caring for your husband or wife, as Christ does for the Church. Do you work for a living? Be holy by labouring with integrity and skill in the service of your brothers and sisters, by fighting for justice for your comrades, so that they do not remain without work, so that they always receive a just wage. Are you a parent or grandparent? Be holy by patiently teaching the little ones how to follow Jesus. Tell me, are you in a position of authority? [...] Then be holy by working for the common good and renouncing personal gain” (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 14). This is the path of holiness, and it is so simple! To see Jesus always in others.

To serve the Gospel and our brothers and sisters, to offer our lives without expecting anything in return [...]. That was how our fellow travellers canonized today lived their holiness. By embracing with enthusiasm their vocation – as a priest, as a consecrated woman, as a lay person – they devoted their lives to the Gospel. They discovered an incomparable joy and they became brilliant reflections of the Lord of history. For that is what a saint is: a luminous reflection of the Lord of history. May we strive to do the same. The path of holiness is not barred; it is universal and it starts with Baptism. Let us strive to follow it, for each of us is called to holiness, to a form of holiness all our own. [...] Truly, the Lord has a plan of love for everyone. He has a dream for your life, for my life, for the life of each of us. What else can I say? Pursue that dream with joy.