

**SUMMARY OF APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *GAUDETE ET EXSULTATE*  
OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS  
ON THE CALL TO HOLINESS  
IN TODAY'S WORLD**

This is not an academic or doctrinal text. Its goal is “to repropose the call to holiness in a practical way for our own time.”

**CHAPTER 1: THE CALL TO HOLINESS**

There are many kinds of saints. Besides the Church's officially recognized saints, many more ordinary people have been hidden from history books yet have been decisive in changing the world. They include many Christian witnesses whose martyrdom is a feature of our time. “Each saint is a mission, planned by the Father to reflect and embody, at a specific moment in history, a certain aspect of the Gospel.” Holiness is experiencing the mysteries of Christ's life, “constantly dying and rising anew with him”, and reproducing aspects of his earthly life: his closeness to the outcast, his poverty, his self-sacrificing love. “Allow the Spirit to forge in you the personal mystery that can reflect Jesus Christ in today's world”, in a mission to build the kingdom of love, justice and universal peace.

Holiness is as diverse as humanity; the Lord has in mind a particular path for each believer, not just the clergy, the consecrated, or those who live a contemplative life. We are all called to holiness, whatever our role, “by living our lives with love and bearing witness”, and in the everyday turning to God. Among ways of bearing witness are “feminine styles of holiness”, of famous women saints and the “unknown and forgotten” women who daily transform their communities. As well as through big challenges, holiness grows through small gestures: refusing to gossip, listening with patience and love, saying a kind word to a poor person.

Holiness keeps you faithful to your deepest self, free from every form of enslavement, and bearing fruit for our world. Holiness does not make you less human, since it is an encounter between your weakness and the power of God's grace. But we need moments of solitude and silence before God, to face our true selves and let the Lord enter.

**CHAPTER 2: TWO SUBTLE ENEMIES OF HOLINESS**

Gnosticism and Pelagianism, two “false forms of holiness” from early Church history, still lead us astray. These heresies propose “an anthropocentric immanentism disguised as Catholic truth” by exaggerating human perfection without grace.

Gnostics fail to realize that our perfection is measured by the depth of our charity, not by information or knowledge. Separating intellect from the flesh, they reduce Jesus's teaching to a cold and harsh logic that seeks to dominate everything. But doctrine “is not a closed system, devoid of the dynamic capacity to pose questions, doubts, inquiries”. Christian experience is not a set of intellectual exercises; true Christian wisdom can never be separated from mercy towards our neighbour.

The same power that Gnosticism attributed to the intellect, Pelagianism attributed to the human will, to personal effort. Though modern Pelagians speak warmly of God's grace, they suggest that human will is something pure, perfect, all-powerful, to which grace is then added. They fail to realize that in this life human weaknesses are not healed completely and once for all by grace.

Grace builds on nature. It does not make us superhuman but takes hold of us and transforms us progressively. If we reject this historical and progressive reality, we can actually refuse and block the grace of the Lord. His friendship infinitely transcends us: we cannot buy it with our works, it can only be a gift born of his loving initiative. Only this permits us to cooperate by our own efforts in our progressive transformation.

When they overvalue human will and their own abilities, some Christians can tend towards obsession with the law; an absorption with social and political advantages; punctilious concern for the Church's liturgy, doctrine and prestige; vanity about the ability to manage practical matters; and an excessive concern with programmes of self-help and personal fulfilment as well as certain rules, customs or ways of acting. The life of the Church can become a museum piece or the possession of a select few. This deprives the Gospel of its simplicity, allure and savour, and reduces it to a blueprint that leaves few openings for the working of grace.

### **CHAPTER 3: IN THE LIGHT OF THE MASTER**

The Beatitudes are Jesus's portrayal of what it means to be holy in our daily lives. Here "happy" and "blessed" become synonymous with "holy". We gain true happiness by faithful practice of the Beatitudes. We can only practice them if the Holy Spirit fills us with his power and frees us from our weakness, selfishness, complacency and pride.

Pope Francis describes each of the Beatitudes and their invitation, concluding each section:

- "Being poor of heart: that is holiness."
- "Reacting with meekness and humility: that is holiness."
- "Knowing how to mourn with others: that is holiness."
- "Hungering and thirsting for righteousness: that is holiness."
- "Seeing and acting with mercy: that is holiness."
- "Keeping a heart free of all that tarnishes love: that is holiness."
- "Sowing peace all around us: that is holiness."
- "Accepting daily the path of the Gospel, even though it may cause us problems: that is holiness."

In the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel (vv. 31-46), Jesus expands on the Beatitude about mercy. "If we seek the holiness pleasing to God's eyes, this text offers us one clear criterion on which we will be judged." When we recognize Christ in the poor and the suffering, we see into the very heart of Christ, his deepest feelings and choices. "Our Lord made it very clear that holiness cannot be understood or lived apart from these demands".

Misleading ideologies can lead us on the one hand to separate these Gospel demands from their personal relationship with the Lord, so that Christianity becomes a sort of NGO stripped of the

luminous mysticism so evident in the lives of saints. On the other hand, there are those who dismiss the social engagement of others as superficial, worldly, secular, materialist, communist or populist; their own particular ethical preoccupation outweighs all others.

Our defence 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. But “equally sacred” are the lives of the poor, the destitute, the abandoned and underprivileged; the infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia; victims of human trafficking and new forms of slavery. Nor should the situation of migrants be a lesser issue compared to “grave” bioethical questions. For a Christian “the only proper attitude is to stand in the shoes of those brothers and sisters of ours who risk their lives to offer a future to their children.”

#### **CHAPTER 4: SIGNS OF HOLINESS IN TODAY’S WORLD**

The Pope speaks next about “certain aspects of the call to holiness that I hope will prove especially meaningful”, in the form of “five great expressions of love for God and neighbour that I consider of particular importance in the light of certain dangers and limitations present in today’s culture.”

##### *1) Perseverance, patience and meekness.*

This describes the inner strength, grounded in God, that makes it possible to give a witness of constancy in doing good. We need to recognize and combat our aggressive and selfish inclinations. Christians “can be caught up in networks of verbal violence through the internet and the various forums of digital communication.” Even in Catholic media, limits can be overstepped, defamation and slander can become commonplace. “It is striking that at times, in claiming to uphold the other commandments, they completely ignore the eighth, which forbids bearing false witness or lying, and ruthlessly vilify others.”

It is not good when we look down on others like heartless judges, lording it over them and always trying to teach them lessons. That is itself a subtle form of violence.

Being on the path to holiness means enduring “daily humiliations”, e.g. “those who keep silent to save their families, who prefer to praise others rather than boast about themselves, or who choose the less welcome tasks, at times even choosing to bear an injustice so as to offer it to the Lord.” To act in this way “presumes a heart set at peace by Christ, freed from the aggressiveness born of overweening egotism.”

##### *2) Joy and a sense of humour*

The saints are joyful and full of good humour. They radiate a positive and hopeful spirit, even in hard times. Ill humour is no sign of holiness. Sadness can be a sign of ingratitude for God’s gifts. Today’s individualistic and consumerist culture does not dispense real joy; consumerism only bloats the heart.

### 3) *Boldness and passion*

Holiness is also *parrhesía*: boldness, an impulse to evangelize and to leave a mark in this world. “Boldness and apostolic courage are an essential part of mission.” If we dare to go to the fringes, we will find Jesus already there, in the hearts of our brothers and sisters, in their wounded flesh, their troubles and their profound desolation.

More than bureaucrats and functionaries, the Church needs passionate missionaries, enthusiastic about sharing true life. The saints surprise us, they confound us, because by their lives they urge us to abandon a dull and dreary mediocrity. The Holy Spirit allows 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.

### 4) *In community*

Growth in holiness is a journey of living and working in community with others. Sharing the word and celebrating the Eucharist together fosters fraternity and makes us a holy and missionary community. It also gives rise to authentic and shared mystical experiences.

Such experiences, however, are less frequent and important than small everyday things. Jesus asked his disciples to pay attention to small details: wine running out at a party, a missing sheep, a widow’s two small coins. Sometimes we are granted, amid these little details, consoling experiences of God.

### 5) *In constant prayer*

Trust-filled prayer of any length is a response of a heart open to encountering God face to face, where the quiet voice of the Lord can be heard. In that silence, we can discern the paths of holiness to which the Lord is calling us. For each disciple, it is essential to spend time with the Master, to listen to his words, and to learn from him always.

God enters our history, and so our prayer is interwoven with memories. Think of your own history when you pray, and there you will find much mercy.

Prayer of *supplication* is an expression of a heart that trusts in God and realizes that it can do nothing of itself. Prayer of *petition* often calms our hearts and helps us persevere in hope. Prayer of *intercession* is an act of trust in God and, at the same time, an expression of love for our neighbour.

In the Eucharist, the written word attains its greatest efficacy, for there the living Word is truly present.

## **CHAPTER 5: SPIRITUAL COMBAT, VIGILANCE AND DISCERNMENT**

Evil is present from the very first pages of the Scriptures. We should not dismiss the devil as a myth, a figure of speech or an idea, lest we let down our guard and end up more vulnerable.

Our path towards holiness is a constant battle for which the Lord equips us with prayer, the word of God, the celebration of Mass, Eucharistic adoration, sacramental Reconciliation, works of charity, etc.

The path of holiness is a source of peace and joy, given to us by the Spirit. How can we know if something comes from the Holy Spirit, not from the spirit of the world or the devil? By discernment, which differs from intelligence and common sense. The gift of discernment is all the more necessary today because contemporary life proclaims so many distractions as equally valid and good.

Discernment is a grace. It is not only for the more intelligent or better educated. It requires no special abilities, but it does require listening: to the Lord and to others, and to reality itself, which always challenges us in new ways. Listening frees us to set aside our own partial or insufficient ideas, our usual ways of seeing things. We need to discern God's timetable, lest we disregard his invitation to grow. For this reason, I ask all Christians to examine their conscience daily in sincere dialogue with the Lord.

We need the silence of prolonged prayer to better perceive God's language, interpret the real meaning of the inspirations we believe we have received, calm our anxieties and see the whole of our existence afresh in God's own light.

Our attentive discernment entails obedience to the Gospel as the ultimate standard, but also to the Magisterium that guards it, as we seek in the treasury of the Church for whatever is most fruitful for the "today" of salvation; for rigidity has no place before the perennial "today" of the risen Lord.

God asks everything of us, yet he also gives everything to us. He does not want to enter our lives to diminish them but to bring them to fulfilment. 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.

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