

READING, PRAYING, LIVING
POPE FRANCIS'S REJOICE AND BE GLAD

Reading, Praying, Living
Pope Francis's
Rejoice and Be Glad

A Faith Formation Guide

Daniel P. Horan, OFM



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Introduction

There is a striking anecdote about holiness that Thomas Merton, the late American Trappist monk and author, recounts in his 1948 best-selling spiritual autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*. He tells of walking down Sixth Avenue in New York City with his friend Robert Lax, the Jewish poet. Merton recalls that at some point Lax turned to him and asked: “What do you want to be, anyway?” Having recently converted to Catholicism, Merton responded: “I don’t know; I guess what I want is to be a good Catholic.” Without missing a beat, his friend replied: “What do you mean, you want to be a good Catholic? What you should say is that you want to be a saint.” Protesting that such a seemingly audacious claim was beyond him, was too difficult, was impossible, he asked Lax how exactly he was to become a saint. “By wanting to,” Lax responded. “All that is necessary to be a saint is to want to be one. Don’t you believe that God will make you what He created you to be, if you will consent to let Him do it? All you have to do is desire it.”¹

Too often we are like Merton walking down the sidewalk in New York. Whether through the voice of a close friend or a thought in our prayer or a passage in Scripture or a random song lyric, we are invited to consider our call as Christian women and men to live a life of holiness, to become the saints we were created to be. And in response, we frequently dismiss the idea out of hand. Sanctity is for the special, elite, and religious of the church, we might protest, not an ordinary person like me.

But as Christians each of us is, in fact, called to holiness by virtue of our baptism and the gospel life we have promised to live. Holiness should not be equated with external signs of piety or a regimen of private devotions. Holiness is far more inclusive and particular than we like to imagine. When we think it is reserved for some kind of divinely cast group of religious elites, we can too easily exempt ourselves from discerning, embracing, and living out our respective vocations as Christians in whatever time and place we find ourselves. Merton's contemporary and friend, Dorothy Day, the cofounder of the Catholic Worker movement, is attributed with saying often: "Don't call me a saint. I don't want to be dismissed that easily."² This was her way of pointing out that most Christians do not take the examples of the saints seriously enough. Sure, we admire the saints from afar; we build our statues, pray our prayers (especially when we lose our keys or need some help), and know the outlines of their heroic lives. But Day's point is that we don't really think their lives and the choices that shaped their lives have anything to do with us *personally*. We might imagine that the canonical saints the church celebrates throughout the liturgical year must have received some kind of special grace, some sort of Christian superpower that allowed them to be so holy. But Day and Lax and so many others want to remind us that saints were just like you and me! They weren't born saints, they were sinners as much as they were saints, but their *desire* to be holy—to do the will of God—is what prevailed. Their choice is also our choice.

But it's a choice we have to make ourselves each and every day. Fortunately, we have a great "cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1) to encourage us along the way. And alongside Lax, Merton, and Day, we can add a contemporary voice who speaks with authority and offers us wisdom about how to live the Gospel today: Pope Francis.

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Pope Francis has continued to surprise and inspire the church with his actions, preaching, and teaching. Each of these dimensions of his ministry as Bishop of Rome is important and plays a significant role in shaping the life of the church because the pope has a unique responsibility in serving not only the local church of Rome but also the universal church across the globe. This guide is designed to help readers approach, understand, and engage with one of Pope Francis's recent teachings, his apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*—Rejoice and Be Glad—on the universal call to holiness in the modern world. But before we dive into the text itself, it might be worthwhile to situate it within the broader context of church teaching.

Some Catholic Christians are surprised to learn that not all church teachings are of equal weight or significance.³ There is what the Second Vatican Council—the gathering of the world's bishops in Rome from 1962 to 1965 to address pastoral and doctrinal issues in communion with the pope—calls the “hierarchy of truths.” In its Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the council fathers made it clear that, “When comparing doctrines with one another, [Christians] should remember that in catholic doctrine there exists an order or ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith” (no. 11).⁴ Intuitively, this teaching about church teaching makes a lot of sense. Clearly the church's teaching on economic justice or artificial birth control is not of the same weight or importance as, for example, its teaching on the divinity of the Holy Spirit. This ordering or hierarchy is important for us to note because understanding where Pope Francis's latest teaching on holiness fits within the broader deposit of faith will help provide us with additional context.

Most of the teaching authority exercised by the pope is done according to what is technically called “ordinary magisterium.” The term “magisterium,” while often conflated with the particular

bishop or group of bishops doing the teaching, actually refers simply to the teaching authority of the church, which is *exercised* by a bishop or group of bishops in several contexts. Very rarely over the church's two-millennia-long history has this teaching authority—*magisterium*—been exercised in an extraordinary way, which would mean that a particular teaching was taught with the charism of infallibility (i.e., taught irreversibly and without possibility of error concerning our salvation). Typically, the teaching of a pope, exercising ordinary magisterium as universal shepherd and teacher, falls into the levels of teaching commonly known as “authoritative doctrine” or “prudential admonitions.” Authoritative doctrine is where, for example, we find many moral teachings of the church. These are not taught with the charism of infallibility but are nonetheless to be taken seriously and assented to by the faithful. Prudential admonitions is a broad category into which numerous teachings can be located, each of which falls short of authoritative doctrine. It is in this last category that we commonly find what theologian Richard Gaillardetz calls “concrete applications of church teaching.”⁵

Pope Francis's *Gaudete et Exsultate* (hereafter GE) is precisely a concrete application of church teaching. Specifically, it is, as the pope himself states, an effort “to repropose the call to holiness in a practical way for our own time, with all its risks, challenges and opportunities” (GE 2). Rather than introduce a new doctrine or moral teaching, Pope Francis took the opportunity to address the universal church on the theme of holiness in an effort to develop something previously taught by the Second Vatican Council in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*.

There are a few key themes worth keeping in mind as you read through the apostolic exhortation and move through this guide, themes that will surface over and over again.

1. *Holiness is a universal call rooted in baptism.* The pursuit of holiness is not an optional element of Christian faith,

reserved as it were for a few special people in each generation. Instead, all women and men are called to live a life of Christian discipleship according to the pattern laid out by Jesus in the Gospel and in the contexts in which they find themselves. As Thomas Merton learned from his wise friend, Robert Lax, we are all called to be saints because we are all called to be holy—the question is whether or not we are willing.

2. *Holiness is a communal mission.* There is no such thing as an “independent contractor” or “sole proprietor” or “freelance” Christian. You can only be a Christian in community, which is seen from the very outset of Jesus’s life and ministry. Through baptism we are united in the Spirit, and God intends us to support one another in our journey toward Christian holiness. Likewise, just as we can build one another up, we can—and, sadly, often do—become obstacles for one another. Part of what it means to be holy is an increased awareness of the communal dimension of our Christian life.
3. *There are false forms of holiness that threaten to distract us from true holiness.* Pope Francis dedicated two of the five chapters in this exhortation to addressing the threats and challenges we face in striving toward holiness in the modern world. Some of the threats are perennial—various heresies, the temptations of the devil—while others are particularly modern. We must be mindful that the appearance of what some presume is “holy” may not reflect authentic Christian holiness but instead reflect a self-righteous or superficial attitude.
4. *Scripture is the grounding source for Christian holiness.* In responding to the persistent threats of gnosticism in the

second chapter, Pope Francis joins a long Christian tradition of defending the straightforwardness and simplicity of God's revelation to humanity. There is no "secret knowledge" (*gnosis*); nor is there any advanced information that only the saints have access to and that is hidden from us ordinary Christians. The teachings of Jesus are as they appear and, as the pope reiterates throughout this and other texts, are too often "complicated" by Christians who wish to domesticate or water down the Gospel. In addition to referencing the Bible throughout, Pope Francis dedicates his longest chapter to a rich exploration of the Beatitudes in order to show how Scripture is the grounding source for holiness.

5. *Holiness is impossible without prayer.* While this last theme may not have a whole chapter dedicated to it or seem at first glance as prominent as some of the other themes, it is nevertheless present throughout and beneath the whole exhortation. Pope Francis consistently reminds us to call on the Holy Spirit, to seek the intercession of the saints who have gone before us, and to move beyond simply saying prayers toward allowing our whole lives to become a prayer. Furthermore, the pope sees prayer—personal and communal—as the only viable response to the threats Christians face in their journey toward holiness.

Gaudete et Exsultate is an accessible, inspiring, and timely document that is sure to become a classic in Christian spirituality. Pope Francis's reminder about who we claim to be as Christians calls us out of a superficial and complacent way of life and into an exciting and robust life of discipleship and Christian faith. May this guide provide you with a worthwhile resource to understand, reflect, and incorporate this teaching into your own life.



What Holiness Is and Is Not

The first two chapters of *Gaudete et Exsultate* focus on the meaning of holiness, specifically, what it is and what it is not. In chapter 1, Pope Francis begins with restating the tradition we have of holding up Christian women and men who have lived exemplary lives of holiness as role models for contemporary believers. While these capital-S Saints are indeed to be celebrated and looked to for guidance, inspiration, and intercession, they are not the only people we can look to for examples of good Christian witness. Pope Francis introduces the notion of “the saints ‘next door’” as a way to describe the everyday, ordinary, holy people who may never receive the universal recognition of sainthood but are a kind of saint no less. This is tied to the pope’s point that holiness is not something for a few, select, and elite members of the church, but, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, holiness is a universal call for all the baptized. What this call means for us, and how we are called to live in response to that call, is the aim of this chapter.

Chapter 2 takes the complementary perspective: if the meaning of holiness is unpacked in the first chapter, the second one looks at what holiness is not. Pope Francis describes this as “false forms of holiness,” and he introduces two ancient heresies that

continue to appear in our own age under a new guise: gnosticism and pelagianism. The pope sees these as threats to authentic holiness, which need to be recognized and addressed in our own time, especially in a digital age.

1

The Call to Holiness

Children raised in the Christian faith often learn the stories of the saints early on. The narratives about these holy women and men are usually extraordinary, with the most miraculous or heroic episodes highlighted. As we grow older, it is commonplace for us to retain a certain admiration for these Christian exemplars without ever asking deeper questions about what exactly makes them holy or how their stories are meant to inform our own experience of the faith. Even those who are active churchgoers can remain locked in a well-meaning but superficial appreciation for what it means to be holy, placing the saints in a category removed and distant from the everyday experiences of reality that we encounter.

Recognizing this widespread tendency, Pope Francis opens chapter 1 with a deep dive into what holiness means, who is called to it, and how we might get there. He begins by reiterating what exactly a “saint” is, explaining that the canonical saints (meaning those women and men whose Christian life is officially recognized as a fitting model of Christian discipleship for the universal church) include not only Christians like St. Mary Magdalene or St. Anthony of Padua but also those ancestors of ours in faith that go back to the Hebrew Bible—the great prophets and leaders of the Old Testament such as Sarah and Abraham

(GE 3). All those we hold up as models of how to live God's will in the world constitute what the Letter to the Hebrews describes as "that great cloud of witnesses" or what theologians like Elizabeth Johnson and Benedict XVI have called the "friends of God."¹ Pope Francis reminds us that these great friends of God and prophets are not merely the subjects of fairy tales or inspiring stories to recount from a distance, remembering them as we might recall the characters and plots of our favorite novels. No, these women and men are joined to us in the Holy Spirit according to what we call the communion of saints. "The saints now in God's presence preserve their bonds of love and communion with us" (GE 4), the Holy Father recounts; they are in relationship with us through prayer and the grace of God, and they can assist us through their intercession.



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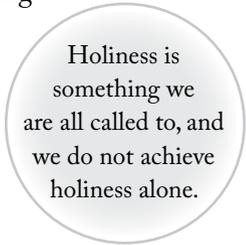
What makes these women and men special is not something that comes from without, as in a superpower that God gives to them alone. Instead, it is their ability to respond with a yes to God like that of Mary of Nazareth when she responded to Gabriel's invitation in Luke's gospel: "May it be done to me according to your word" (1:38). To say in an official way that someone is a saint simply means that they followed in Christ's footsteps, imitated the Lord in their unique circumstances and social locations, and offered their lives to God. Sometimes those circumstances mean making the greatest sacrifice for one's faith. "The processes of beatification and canonization recognize the signs of heroic virtue, the sacrifice of one's life in martyrdom, and certain cases where a life is constantly offered for others, even until death" (GE 5).

Pope Francis uses the example of Blessed Maria Gabriella Sagheddu to illustrate this point. To many people, the story of Blessed Maria is an obscure one. She was a young woman born

in 1914 in what is now Italy. Most accounts of her early life generally suggest that it was uneventful, even boring. Over time she desired to deepen her faith and eventually entered a Trappist convent as a young woman, where she remained until her death at the young age of twenty-five. What was so eventful about her life? What was so heroic? In brief: nothing. She was someone who in little ways dedicated her life to prayer and reflection, praying in particular for the unity of all Christians. She did this in small yet meaningful ways each day, without fanfare or overt self-interest. Her holiness is seen not in a tremendous singular act, but in the day-to-day decisions she made to follow Christ more closely in all that she did.

As inspiring as the lives of the canonical saints are, we must recall that sanctity is not a zero-sum game with absolute winners and losers. Holiness, or at least the call to strive for holiness, is a universal calling shared by all women and men. Drawing on the wisdom of the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, the pope is quick to assure us that, "The Holy Spirit bestows holiness in abundance among God's holy and faithful people, for 'it has pleased God to make men and women holy and to save them, not as individuals without any bond between them, but rather as a people who might acknowledge him in truth and serve him in holiness'" (GE 6).² This is an important passage for two reasons: holiness is something we are all called to, and we do not achieve holiness alone. Both of these themes are worth unpacking a little.

First, Pope Francis is reinforcing church teaching that explains that holiness is not reserved for a select few. He states this more clearly later in this chapter when addressing each of us and explaining that to be holy "does not require being a bishop, a priest or a religious. We are frequently tempted to think that holiness is



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only for those who can withdraw from ordinary affairs to spend much time in prayer.” As the pope makes clear, “This is not the case. We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves” (GE 14). The condition that makes our holiness possible is the universal gift of God’s self as Spirit. Our response to God’s gift of this grace in every moment of every day and in every place we find ourselves is what it means to live a holy Christian life. Pope Francis provides numerous examples in this section to illustrate this point. He talks about consecrated religious, married couples, laborers, parents, grandparents, and community leaders.

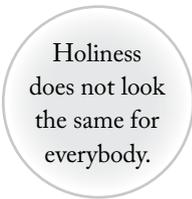
This call to holiness that originates in our baptism is not something that is accomplished merely by performing one or two big and heroic gestures. For most people the path to holiness, to living the way God intends us to live, occurs through small gestures, little decisions, how we shape our attitudes, and what we do for one another. Here we might think of the great wisdom of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, India, who was fond of saying that each of us may not each be able to do grand, large sacrificial gestures, but we can each “do small things with great love.”³ What we do when we are in the checkout line at the grocery store or how we respond to the request from a stranger for assistance or how we surrender our own interest to be present to a loved one who is ill or struggling—these are indeed small things, but small things that invite us to practice showing Christian love.

Holiness does not look the same for everybody. Recalling the multitude of stories that come from the lives of the canonical saints, Pope Francis reminds us: “There are some testimonies that may prove helpful and inspiring, but that we are not meant to copy, for that could even lead us astray from the one specific path that the Lord has in mind for us.” He adds, “The important thing is that each believer discern his or her own path, that they bring out the very best of themselves, the most personal gifts that God has placed in their hearts, rather than hopelessly trying to

imitate something not meant for them” (GE 11). On this point, I recall something attributed to Pope Francis’s namesake, St. Francis of Assisi. It is said that near the end of St. Francis’s life, as he lay dying surrounded by those who loved him, he addressed his brother friars with an instruction: “The Lord has shown me what was mine to do, may the Lord show you what is yours.”⁴ St. Francis did not believe that God wanted those inspired by his life and ministry to copy exactly how he lived and what he did in this life. God does not need us to be another St. Francis—God needs us to become saints ourselves! As if to flesh out this point, the pope provides a hypothetical example of a day in the life of an ordinary woman whose holiness is reflected in responding to the circumstances of her particular context.

Here is an example: a woman goes shopping, she meets a neighbor and they begin to speak, and the gossip starts. But she says in her heart: “No, I will not speak badly of anyone.” This is a step forward in holiness.

Later, at home, one of her children wants to talk to her about his hopes and dreams, and even though she is tired, she sits down and listens with patience and love. That is another sacrifice that brings holiness. Later she experiences some anxiety, but recalling the love of the Virgin Mary, she takes her rosary and prays with faith. Yet another path of holiness. Later still, she goes out onto the street, encounters a poor person and stops to say a kind word to him. One more step. (GE 16)



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While there are admittedly some cultural stereotypes underlying this particular example, the general point about the daily, particular, and small gestures along the path to holiness is well taken. We can all relate to times when we have had the opportunity to indulge in gossip or “vent” about someone who has annoyed or

angered us. What do we choose to do in that instance? We can all relate to the experience of being tired and desiring nothing more than to be alone or seek some peace and quiet when another person needed us. How do we respond to that person? We can all relate to the choice before us when we are confronted by the need of a stranger who might ask us for some assistance or, at the very least, recognition that he or she simply exists. Do we take the time to acknowledge the dignity and value of the person in our midst? Each and every day these little choices reflect our willingness—or lack thereof—to respond to God's invitation to Christian holiness.

Second, Pope Francis reminds us that our path to holiness is never an independent or individual process. Just as we receive our primary vocation to Christian holiness at baptism, we also enter into a community, which we call the Body of Christ. "We are never completely ourselves unless we belong to a people," the pope says. "That is why no one is saved alone, as an isolated individual. Rather, God draws us to himself, taking into account the complex fabric of interpersonal relationships present in a human community" (GE 6). This sense of community, which we call the church, is founded on the example that God gives us in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, God did not wish for us to form a community merely among ourselves. Rather, God desired to enter into this very same community through the incarnation, as Pope Francis reiterates: "God wanted to enter into the life and history of a people" (GE 6). So important is community, relationship, connection, family, and love that God planned to be a part of this community from all eternity and became flesh to share in this life.

This central element of Christian life—community—is something that Pope Francis has spent a fair amount of time discussing in earlier writings. In his earlier apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* ("The Joy of the Gospel," hereafter EG), the

pope explains that, like the call we have received to pursue holiness, we have also received a call from Christ to be messengers of the Good News to the whole world. “In our day Jesus’ command to ‘go and make disciples’ echoes in the changing scenarios and ever new challenges to the Church’s mission of evangelization, and all of us are called to take part in this new missionary ‘going forth’. Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel” (EG 20).

It’s not enough to respond to this call individually, but we are called as a community of believers, the Body of Christ. Holiness is found in responding to the needs of those we meet, but it also involves going out into the margins to meet people where they are and therefore requires of us taking the risk to go out beyond the limits of what we find comfortable and safe. This rightly appears as a daunting task, but drawing on the insights of the New Zealand bishops, the pope reminds us that “just to try to love as Christ loved us shows that Christ shares his own risen life with us. In this way, our lives demonstrate his power at work—even in the midst of human weakness” (GE 18).⁵

Far too often many Christians see holiness as an individual trait achieved by this or that extraordinary person. And yet, Jesus always called people into relationship, into community, into dialogue with others. It’s one thing to reflect on the ways we are or are not saying yes to God. It is another thing to ask questions of our faith community more broadly and ask if we are doing our own part to facilitate the mission and ministry of Christ in our world. Here we might think of the admonition of St. Paul to the Romans where he reminds the early Christians and us today: “Let us then pursue what leads to peace and to building up one another” (14:19). This value stands in stark contrast with what so many of our cultures and societies encourage us to embrace.

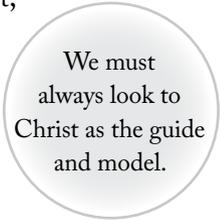
It's not that we are actively discouraged from participating in communal activities and associations, but instead such pursuits are often intended to serve us as individuals. This worldly wisdom encourages us to ask: "What am *I* getting out of being a part of this group?" In contrast, the wisdom of God seen in Scripture and throughout Pope Francis's exhortation encourages us to ask: "How am I working with others to build up the Kingdom of God for the benefit of all people?"

We can think of the last three sections of chapter 1 as Pope Francis's effort to develop the notion of holiness in terms of vocation. Indeed, everyone has received this call in baptism, and this call is something that takes place within and because of the community of the church, but each of us has a unique mission or purpose. In unpacking what it means to talk about Christian holiness, the pope explains that our particular vocations always involve union with Christ, working for the reign of God, and becoming more authentically our true selves. Let's take a closer look at each of these elements.

When thinking about what God is calling us to in life, examining what our ultimate purpose is, we ought to ask ourselves: what is my end goal? Or, what is the right path for me in life? It seems to me, from my personal experience and pastoral ministry, that these sorts of questions are rarely considered in a big overarching way. Typically, women and men ask questions that arise at a given moment and in a particular context. What college should I attend? What field of study should I pursue? What internship is the best for me? Which job offer should I take? Should I marry this person? When is the right time to start a family? And so on. While asking these specific questions is certainly important, the pope is inviting us to consider what *general* compass or orientation point we use to help us discern the correct answer. Pope Francis invites us to think about how each of our particular choices in any given time relates to the ultimate mission to which God has called us. "A Christian can-

not think of his or her mission on earth without seeing it as a path of holiness, for ‘this is the will of God, your sanctification’ (1 Thessalonians 4:3)” (GE 19). In thinking about this broader, ongoing, and lifelong path of holiness to which God has called us, we must always look to Christ as the guide and model.

That mission has its fullest meaning in Christ, and can only be understood through him. At its core, holiness is experiencing, in union with Christ, the mysteries of his life. It consists in uniting ourselves to the Lord’s death and resurrection in a unique and personal way, constantly dying and rising anew with him. But it can also entail reproducing in our own lives various aspects of Jesus’s earthly life: his hidden life, his life in community, his closeness to the outcast, his poverty and other ways in which he showed his self-sacrificing love. (GE 20)



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It is here that Pope Francis draws from his formation as a Jesuit and encourages us to consider engaging our imaginations in prayer and discernment. When reflecting on questions about how we ought to live and what we ought to do, can we place ourselves in the narratives of the Gospel? It has become a cliché to ask “what would Jesus do,” but there remains some wisdom in asking ourselves what *did* Jesus do in order to ground our own choices and actions. It’s not that Pope Francis envisions each of us becoming little replicas of Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, it’s a matter of becoming a person whose own compass is oriented to Christ in order that we may each become the person God intends us to be. This is what it means to pursue a life of Christian holiness.

In an age when individualism and indifference to the experiences of others are two major threats, and these are concerns about which the Holy Father speaks often, it can seem counterintuitive

to explore greater meaning in our lives apart from what is immediately satisfying or seemingly advantageous for each of us personally. Yet, we are told that true peace and satisfaction is found only when our own life aligns with God's plan for us. "Always ask the Spirit what Jesus expects from you at every moment of your life and in every decision you make, so as to discern its place in the mission you have received" (GE 23). In doing this, we draw nearer to Christ and can become his true disciples in the world. But, as the pope reminds us, this requires a shift in our thinking and our attitudes. "Let yourself be transformed. Let yourself be renewed by the Spirit, so that this can happen, lest you fail in your precious mission. The Lord will bring it to fulfillment despite your mistakes and missteps, provided that you do not abandon the path of love but remain ever open to his supernatural grace, which purifies and enlightens" (GE 24).

In addition to uniting with Christ to discover our true mission or vocation, Pope Francis also explains that every one of us, regardless of our respective social locations and particular callings, is meant to contribute to the in-breaking of God's reign. "Your identification with Christ and his will involves a commitment to build with him that kingdom of love, justice and universal peace" (GE 25). One of the things the pope is challenging in this section is our propensity toward compartmentalizing our lives. Many Christians are content to recall their faith for one hour or so each week when gathered for Mass on Sunday. Perhaps you are someone whose devotional life extends beyond the weekly liturgy to include personal prayer and private meditation. Such activities are good and important. A life that strives toward holiness is, however, one that incorporates everything. "Everything can be accepted and integrated into our life in this world, and become a part of our path to holiness. We are called to be contemplatives even in the midst of action, and to grow in holiness by responsibly and generously carrying out our proper mission" (GE 26).

In a way that anticipates the next chapter, in which the pope addresses what holiness is not and some persistent challenges to living a life of holiness, he mentions briefly in this section that those who feel compelled to “appear holy” or perform certain pious or scrupulous activities in order to impress others, bolster their pride, or alleviate their anxiety about being sufficiently Christian are not practicing authentic holiness (GE 28). This is an important message to those who are inclined to judge themselves or others by outward signs or appearances. One could “look” holy and in fact be very far away from what God desires of us. There are numerous times in the gospels when Jesus also warns his followers of this disconnect. Recall the narrative about the Pharisee and the tax collector at the temple: Which one “looks” holy by outward appearances? Which one actually is holy in action? Recall the parable in Matthew’s gospel of the father who instructs his two sons to go work in his field. The first says he will but then does not; the second says he will not but ultimately does. Which one actually is holy in action?

The way around the superficiality of holiness is to develop one’s prayer life. Pope Francis tells us that we must seek out “moments of quiet, solitude and silence before God” (GE 29). Echoing the profound wisdom of Thomas Merton, the pope connects our embrace of solitude and discovery of God with our coming to discover our “true selves.”⁶ Too many distractions and external forces threaten to prevent us from discovering who we are meant to be. The only way we can come to know who we really are is to come to know God, for it is God who has lovingly brought each of us into existence and created us with our particular mission. We are encouraged to form an integrated understanding of our faith and the quest for holiness, one that does not separate out the would-be sacred from the seemingly profane but rather recognizes that “every minute of our lives can be a step along the path to growth in holiness” (GE 31).

Pope Francis closes this chapter with an exhortation to not be afraid of embracing the call to discover our “true selves” or, as he puts it alternatively, “your deepest self” (GE 32). He recounts the harrowing story of St. Josephine Bakhita, the Sudanese-born woman who was kidnapped and sold into slavery when she was seven years old. For decades she was tortured, abused, and dehumanized. When she was eventually freed, she entered religious life as a Canossian sister and shared her story throughout Italy about the hope she found in Jesus Christ amid the unthinkable atrocities and indignities she had faced. St. Josephine provides us with an extreme example of absolute dependence on God. Given the horrendous experience she faced, it would strike many of us as a miracle that she had any faith in God or humanity. And yet, as Pope Francis suggests, the stories of the saints reveal to us that the more dependent we are on God, the closer we draw to the Lord, the more we rely on the Holy Spirit—the more we experience true freedom. So many of the messages we receive from our technologically saturated and consumer-driven world tell us that we must construct our own identities, forge our own paths, do what we want, and assert ourselves at all costs. The message of *Gaudete et Exsultate*, summarizing the message of the Gospel, is quite the opposite. It is only in pursuing a life of holiness that comes from union with Christ, using our gifts in working for the Kingdom of God, and discovering who we are in God that we come to recognize who it is that we were created to be.

Suggestions for Prayer

1. Consider one of the passages from the gospels in which Jesus is addressing his disciples. Imagine yourself in that setting, picture yourself hearing the voice of Jesus speak to you and your circumstances today. What is Jesus asking of you? What are you being encouraged to change or do?

2. Reflect on who has been a “saint next door” in your life—a family member, a friend, a coworker, a stranger—and consider what about their life encourages you to be a better Christian. If the person is living, say a prayer of gratitude for them. If the person is deceased, pray for them and for their intercession.

Reflection Questions

1. How have you thought of holiness throughout your life? Was holiness something you considered reserved for a select few or something toward which all people should strive?
2. What are the ways that you are resistant to God’s call to holiness? Do you feel unworthy of such a call? Frightened by such a call?
3. What role does God play in your decision making? How can you better align your life with the narrative of Christ? How can you better incorporate the Holy Spirit in your prayer life?