

What the universal call to holiness entails

Living like modern pagans will not suffice, as the increased misery of our society only proves.

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Why aren't we holy? God, in fact, wills that we become holy: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification" (1 Thess 4:3). So why aren't we? The problem surely does not lie with him. And that leaves only one other answer: we are the problem.

God has given us everything we need to be holy: his forgiveness, righteousness, grace and even his divine life. Through our baptism, we have begun a construction

project, but we can't complete it on our own. God must bestow his grace on us because he calls us to a supernatural life beyond the natural capacities of humanity. But after he gives us what we need, we have to begin the hard labor of building.

Perhaps this is why Jesus himself was a craftsman, modeling for us the work we must undertake to build the temple of God with our lives.

We're often stuck, stagnant even. It's as if we have opened an IKEA box and remain looking at the pieces for the rest of our lives. We might say, "God, why aren't you doing the work of making me holy?" But St. Augustine would reply, "God created us without us, but he did not will to save us without us" (see the Catechism §1847). **We must cooperate freely, using our free will to seek God in love, spend time with him in prayer and order our interior life through the life of the virtues.**

The Second Vatican Council opened up a great project of evangelization directed toward the modern world. In our secular time, Catholics too often conceived of the Church in institutional terms as "them." They will do it. The clergy and religious—they will run the schools, teach the faith to our children and spend the time in the chapel praying for us. That's what they do. The laity—we go to Church on Sunday and try to avoid mortal sin—pray, pay and obey, as they used to say—enabling the institutional Church to fulfill its mission in the world. **The Council sought to draw forth the laity to embrace their mission of sanctifying the world from within through their work and prayer.**

This new project of evangelization fell flat, at least for now, leading instead to a period of disorientation and decline. Let's take one prominent example pertinent to our topic: the universal call to holiness. The fifth chapter of the Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen*

Gentium, is titled “On the Universal Call to Holiness in the Church.” The title is uncontroversial. As we have established, God wills our sanctification. He does not intend for any dud Christians whose interior life fails to sprout and bear fruit. **He has given us the gift of faith to grow, mature and act as leaven in the world. This is his plan for our holiness and that of the world.**

The entire chapter is worth reading, but it concludes powerfully:

Therefore, all the faithful of Christ are invited to strive for the holiness and perfection of their own proper state. Indeed, they have an obligation to so strive. Let all then have care that they guide aright their own deepest sentiments of soul. Let neither the use of the things of this world nor attachment to riches, which is against the spirit of evangelical poverty, hinder them in their quest for perfect love. Let them heed the admonition of the Apostle to those who use this world; let them not come to terms with this world; for this world, as we see it, is passing away. (§42)

The vision of Vatican II, calling all the faithful of the Church to a greater life of holiness and devotion, has not yet been realized. Too many interpret this call as a dumbing down of God’s expectations or a lowering of the bar.

Following the Council, it became the norm to excuse sin and laxity, and even to accommodate it. Rather, the call to holiness should serve as our rallying cry to **break us out of complacency.** All the baptized are members of Christ’s Body, the Church, and bear the responsibility of entering into the mission of the head in our own way. **The lay faithful are called to grow in love, breaking out of bad habits and especially any sinful practices in order to live the Christian life boldly.**

What are the necessary ingredients of holiness? Even within the short quote from *Lumen Gentium* above, we see that it entails conversion, turning away from the world and toward God's perfect love. **We must strive for it, understanding that this conversion must grow so that our whole life is given over to God unhindered by earthly attachments.** We could say, following St. Francis de Sales, that **holiness requires the faithful to pursue a life of devotion:**

And forasmuch as **devotion consists in a high degree of real love, it not only makes us ready, active and diligent in following all God's commands, but it also excites us to be ready and loving in performing as many good works as possible,** even such as are not enjoined upon us, but are only matters of counsel or inspiration. (Introduction to the *Devout Life*, part 1, chapter 1)

Dumbing things down impedes the will of God for our sanctification, putting up an obstacle to genuine holiness. St. Paul explains what this sanctification willed by God entails: "that you abstain from immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God" (1 Thes 4:3-5).

To be holy, we must be challenged to convert and believe the Gospel ever more fully. The Council's call to holiness and evangelization requires deep and genuine conversion from sin into a life impelled by grace. **Living like modern pagans will not suffice, as the increased misery of our society only proves.**

If we're the problem, then let's attack it, dying to ourselves and living for Christ. Let's take up our cross and follow in the footsteps of the master with great devotion, cooperating fully with God's will for our holiness.