

April 13, 2018

Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

The Lord is Risen! Rejoice and be glad!

Early this week, the Vatican released Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation which he signed on the feast of St. Joseph last month, entitled *Gaudete et Exsultate* (Rejoice and Be Glad). It is a "call to holiness in today's world". In this letter of ours, we will attempt to summarize the points that hit our hearts as we read this apostolic exhortation and would like to share them with you. However, we do recommend that you take the time to read the entire document [Rejoice and Be Glad](#) with open hearts and not in a rushed manner. Trust us, it is easy to read!

In this document, our Holy Father urges every Christian to seriously desire "to be saints and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence." (1) He is calling us all to holiness "for our own time, with all its risks, challenges, and opportunities. . . by living our lives with love and bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves," in consecrated life, in holy marriage, as a laborer or worker for a living, as a parent or grandparent, or in a position of authority. (14)

He reminds us of our baptismal call to holiness, which we could attain by the power of the Holy Spirit.(15) This holiness to which the Lord calls us will grow through small gestures and at times as great challenges in life. (16,17) The most effective element in the path to holiness is **loving** with the Lord's unconditional love. (18) It is "charity lived to the full." To love like Jesus loves is not easy, but it is possible with His grace. (21)

We must see our entire life as a mission by listening to God in prayer and recognizing the signs He gives us. We must ask the Holy Spirit what Jesus expects of us every moment of our life and in every decision we make. (23) Anything we do that is done "out of anxiety, pride, or the need to impress others will not lead to holiness. " (28)

We must not be afraid of holiness, to set our sight higher, or to let ourselves be guided by the Holy Spirit. Holiness will not take away our energy, vitality, or joy. (32,34) Holiness does not make us less human, since it is an encounter between our weakness and the power of God's grace. According to Leon Bloy, when all is said and done, "the only great tragedy in life, is not to become a saint."(34) We must desire to be saints!

Our perfection is not measured by the amount of information or knowledge we have but by the depth of our charity or love for God and others. (37) We must always try to see Jesus in every human life (42), showing mercy with humility, and acknowledging the need for God's grace in every undertaking. (50)

The Church has always taught us that we are justified not by our own works or efforts, but by the grace of God who always takes the initiative. (52) In other words, we cannot rely on our own power to do

God's work and attain holiness. We must always remember that our earthly life and natural abilities are gifts from God, our freedom is a grace, an unmerited gift, and **love** alone will allow us to grow in the life of grace. (55,56)

During these modern times, however, many Christians worship the human will and their own abilities resulting in self-centeredness and elitist complacency, lacking in true love. They do not allow themselves to be led by the Holy Spirit in communicating the beauty and joy of the Gospel and seeking out the lost and thirsty for Christ. (57)

At the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave us the eight Beatitudes, the "identity card" of every Christian:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus teaches us one clear criterion on which we will be judged – our mercy towards others. "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me." We are to recognize the face of Jesus in the poor and the suffering. (96) But rather than be satisfied with helping one person alone, we must all seek social change to restore just social and economic systems, without excluding anyone. (99)

Gossip is an enemy of peace and people who engage in negative and destructive conversations are in no way blessed. (87) On the other hand, people who embrace even those who are odd, troublesome, difficult, demanding, different, beaten down by life, or uninterested, are peacemakers and will be called children of God. Sowing peace around us makes us holy.(88)

There are many forms of persecution. We can lose religious freedom or employment when we go against the flow of modern society such as choosing to defend life. We can be ridiculed or ignored for struggling for social justice. We can be killed for the sake of the Gospel. All of these bring about

holiness. (91-94) The Holy Father stresses the importance of defending migrants who risk their lives to offer a better future to their children. He reminds us that in welcoming the stranger we welcome Christ Himself. (102)

The worship most pleasing to God is devoting ourselves to living generously and showing concern for our destitute neighbor. (104) When we are merciful to others, we manifest ourselves as children of the Father of mercy. Mercy is the very foundation of the life of the Church. Those who really wish to give glory to God and grow in holiness are called to be single-minded and tenacious in their practice of the works of mercy. (105-107)

The Holy Father enumerates a few signs of holiness in today's world:

1) *Perseverance, patience, and meekness.*

Solid grounding in the God who loves and sustains us enables us to persevere amid life's difficulties, trials, and humiliations. (112-118) We must not fall into the temptation of looking for security in success, vain pleasures, possessions, and power over others.

2) *Joy and a sense of humor.*

Though completely realistic, saints radiate a positive and hopeful spirit. (122) The joy that is inspired by the Holy Spirit brings deep security, serene hope, and a spiritual fulfillment that the world cannot understand or appreciate. (125)

3) *Boldness and passion.*

In order to respond effectively to the Lord's command to go and teach the Gospel to all nations, we need boldness, enthusiasm, freedom to speak out, and apostolic fervor to evangelize and leave a mark in this world. (129) We must not be complacent nor mediocre disciples. The Church needs intentional disciples and passionate missionaries. (137-138)

4) *In community*

Growth in holiness is a journey in community. (141) In a community we are able to cherish the little details of love whose members care for one another and create an open and evangelizing environment. (145)

5) *In constant prayer*

Holiness consists in a habitual openness to the transcendent, expressed in prayer and adoration. It is essential to spend time with God, to listen to His words, and to learn from Him always. (150) Prayers of supplication express trust in God and the realization that by ourselves we can do nothing. (154) Prayers of intercession express our concern for others, embracing their lives, their deepest troubles, and loftiest dreams.

The spiritual life is a constant struggle against the devil. (159) We must never make the mistake of thinking that the devil is not real. This mistake would lead us to let down our guard and allow us to be vulnerable. When this happens our lives, our families, and our communities could be destroyed.(161) Our path to holiness is a constant battle against evil, but we have been given powerful weapons to fight this battle: prayer, meditation on the word of God, celebration of the Mass, Eucharistic adoration, the sacrament of Reconciliation, works of charity, community life, and missionary outreach. (162)

By cultivating all that is good in our lives, we will make progress in our spiritual life and able to fight the evil one. Those who choose to remain neutral, who renounce the ideal of giving themselves generously to the Lord, will never hold out. (163) Similarly, those who think they commit no grievous sins against God can fall into the state of dull lethargy, indifference, and finally weakness and corruption. (164) Spiritual corruption is worse than the fall of a sinner for everything appears acceptable including deception and other subtle forms of selfishness.(165)

How can we know if something comes from the Holy Spirit, the world, or the devil? The only way is through discernment which calls for something more than intelligence or common sense. We must ask the Holy Spirit for the gift of discernment which we need at all times to help us recognize God's will. (169) We must always be prepared to listen to the Lord's promptings, setting aside our own ideas and ways of seeing things. This attitude of listening entails obedience to the Gospel as the ultimate standard. (173)

Finally, our Holy Father wishes our Blessed Mother to crown the above reflections, since she lived the Beatitudes of Jesus like no other. (176) She rejoiced in the presence of God, treasured everything in her heart, and allowed herself to be pierced by the sword in obedience to the Father. She teaches us the perfect way to holiness and she always walks by our side. She embraces us without judging us. When we call on her with two words, "Hail Mary!" she is quick to respond. Satan is greatly afraid of this humble handmaid. He scrambles away the minute we invoke her name. By her apparitions and miracles throughout history and in many places around the world, we know that our salvation and holiness are always on her agenda.

We pray that we treasure these nuggets of wisdom and words of exhortation by our Holy Father to open our hearts to respond to the Lord's call to holiness and mission as we journey in this earthly life as beloved children of God. May these 50 days of the Easter season prepare us to celebrate the feast of Pentecost and welcome the Holy Spirit, this time in a more powerful and meaningful way in the light of the Risen Christ. Amen.

Your loving brother and sister in Christ,

Lito and Cecile