

Pope Francis on the call to holiness in today's world

Extracts from the Apostolic Exhortation, GAUDETE ET EXSULTATE (Rejoice and be glad)

MORE ALIVE, MORE HUMAN

32. Do not be afraid of holiness. It will take away none of your energy, vitality or joy. On the contrary, you will become what the Father had in mind when he created you, and you will be faithful to your deepest self. To depend on God sets us free from every form of enslavement and leads us to recognize our great dignity. We see this in Saint Josephine Bakhita: 'Abducted and sold into slavery at the tender age of seven, she suffered much at the hands of cruel masters. But she came to understand the profound truth that God, and not man, is the true Master of every human being, of every human life. This experience became a source of great wisdom for this humble daughter of Africa'.
33. To the extent that each Christian grows in holiness, he or she will bear greater fruit for our world. The bishops of West Africa have observed that 'we are being called in the spirit of the New Evangelization to be evangelized and to evangelize through the empowering of all you, the baptized, to take up your roles as salt of the earth and light of the world wherever you find yourselves'.
34. Do not be afraid to set your sights higher, to allow yourself to be loved and liberated by God. Do not be afraid to let yourself be guided by the Holy Spirit. Holiness does not make you less human, since it is an encounter between your weakness and the power of God's grace. For in the words of León Bloy, when all is said and done, 'the only great tragedy in life, is not to become a saint'.

CHAPTER 3: IN THE LIGHT OF THE MASTER

63. There can be any number of theories about what constitutes holiness, with various explanations and distinctions. Such reflection may be useful, but nothing is more enlightening than turning to Jesus' words and seeing his way of teaching the truth. Jesus explained with great simplicity what it means to be holy when he gave us the Beatitudes (cf. *Mt 5:3-12; Lk 6:20-23*). The Beatitudes are like a Christian's identity card. So if anyone asks: 'What must one do to be a good Christian?', the answer is clear. We have to do, each in our own way, what Jesus told us in the Sermon on the Mount. In the Beatitudes, we find a portrait of the Master, which we are called to reflect in our daily lives.
64. The word 'happy' or 'blessed' thus becomes a synonym for 'holy'. It expresses the fact that those faithful to God and his word, by their self-giving, gain true happiness.

GOING AGAINST THE FLOW

65. Although Jesus' words may strike us as poetic, they clearly run counter to the way things are usually done in our world. Even if we find Jesus' message attractive, the world pushes us towards another way of living. The Beatitudes are in no way trite or undemanding, quite the opposite. We can only practise them if the Holy Spirit fills us with his power and frees us from our weakness, our selfishness, our complacency and our pride.
66. Let us listen once more to Jesus, with all the love and respect that the Master deserves. Let us allow his words to unsettle us, to challenge us and to demand a real change in the way we live. Otherwise, holiness will remain no more than an empty word. We turn now to the individual Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew (cf. *Mt 5:3-12*).

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

67. The Gospel invites us to peer into the depths of our heart, to see where we find our security in life. Usually the rich feel secure in their wealth, and think that, if that wealth is threatened, the whole meaning of their earthly life can collapse. Jesus himself tells us this in the parable of the rich fool: he speaks of a man who was sure of himself, yet foolish, for it did not dawn on him that he might die that very day (cf. *Lk 12:16-21*).
68. Wealth ensures nothing. Indeed, once we think we are rich, we can become so self-satisfied that we leave no room for God's word, for the love of our brothers and sisters, or for the enjoyment of the most important things in life. In this way, we miss out on the greatest treasure of all. That is why Jesus calls blessed those who are poor in spirit, those who have a poor heart, for there the Lord can enter with his perennial newness.
69. This spiritual poverty is closely linked to what Saint Ignatius of Loyola calls 'holy indifference', which brings us to a radiant interior freedom: 'We need to train ourselves to be indifferent in our attitude to all created things, in all that is permitted to our free will and not forbidden; so that on our part, we do not set our hearts on good health rather than bad, riches rather than poverty, honour rather than dishonour, a long life rather than a short one, and so in all the rest'.
70. Luke does not speak of poverty 'of spirit' but simply of those who are 'poor' (cf. *Lk 6:20*). In this way, he too invites us to live a plain and austere life. He calls us to share in the life of those most in need, the life lived by the Apostles, and ultimately to configure ourselves to Jesus who, though rich, 'made himself poor' (*2 Cor 8:9*).
- Being poor of heart: that is holiness.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth'

71. These are strong words in a world that from the beginning has been a place of conflict, disputes and enmity on all sides, where we constantly pigeonhole others on the basis of their ideas, their customs and even their way of speaking or dressing. Ultimately, it is the reign of pride and vanity, where each person thinks he or she has the right to dominate others. Nonetheless, impossible as it may seem, Jesus proposes a different way of doing things: the way of meekness. This is what we see him doing with his disciples. It is what we contemplate on his entrance to Jerusalem: 'Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey' (*Mt 21:5; Zech 9:9*).
72. Christ says: 'Learn from me; for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls' (*Mt 11:29*). If we are constantly upset and impatient with others, we will end up drained and weary. But if we regard the faults and limitations of others with tenderness and meekness, without an air of superiority, we can actually help them and stop wasting our energy on useless complaining. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux tells us that 'perfect charity consists in putting up with others' mistakes, and not being scandalized by their faults'.
73. Paul speaks of meekness as one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Gal 5:23*). He suggests that, if a wrongful action of one of our brothers or sisters troubles us, we should try to correct them, but 'with a spirit of meekness', since 'you too could be tempted' (*Gal 6:1*). Even when we defend our faith and convictions, we are to do so 'with meekness' (cf. *1 Pet 3:16*). Our enemies too are to be treated 'with meekness' (*2 Tim 2:25*). In the Church we have often erred by not embracing this demand of God's word.
74. Meekness is yet another expression of the interior poverty of those who put their trust in God alone. Indeed, in the Bible the

same word – *anawim* – usually refers both to the poor and to the meek. Someone might object: ‘If I am that meek, they will think that I am an idiot, a fool or a weakling’. At times they may, but so be it. It is always better to be meek, for then our deepest desires will be fulfilled. The meek ‘shall inherit the earth’, for they will see God’s promises accomplished in their lives. In every situation, the meek put their hope in the Lord, and those who hope for him shall possess the land... and enjoy the fullness of peace (cf. *Ps37:9.11*). For his part, the Lord trusts in them: ‘This is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word’ (*Is 66:2*).

Reacting with meekness and humility: that is holiness.

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted’

75. The world tells us exactly the opposite: entertainment, pleasure, diversion and escape make for the good life. The worldly person ignores problems of sickness or sorrow in the family or all around him; he averts his gaze. The world has no desire to mourn; it would rather disregard painful situations, cover them up or hide them. Much energy is expended on fleeing from situations of suffering in the belief that reality can be concealed. But the cross can never be absent.

76. A person who sees things as they truly are and sympathizes with pain and sorrow is capable of touching life’s depths and finding authentic happiness. He or she is consoled, not by the world but by Jesus. Such persons are unafraid to share in the suffering of others; they do not flee from painful situations. They discover the meaning of life by coming to the aid of those who suffer, understanding their anguish and bringing relief. They sense that the other is flesh of our flesh, and are not afraid to draw near, even to touch their wounds. They feel compassion for others in such a way that all distance vanishes. In this way they can embrace Saint Paul’s exhortation: ‘Weep with those who weep’ (*Rom 12:15*).

Knowing how to mourn with others: that is holiness.

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

77. Hunger and thirst are intense experiences, since they involve basic needs and our instinct for survival. There are those who desire justice and yearn for righteousness with similar intensity. Jesus says that they will be satisfied, for sooner or later justice will come. We can cooperate to make that possible, even if we may not always see the fruit of our efforts.

78. Jesus offers a justice other than that of the world, so often marred by petty interests and manipulated in various ways. Experience shows how easy it is to become mired in corruption, ensnared in the daily politics of *quid pro quo*, where everything becomes business. How many people suffer injustice, standing by powerlessly while others divvy up the good things of this life. Some give up fighting for real justice and opt to follow in the train of the winners. This has nothing to do with the hunger and thirst for justice that Jesus praises.

79. True justice comes about in people’s lives when they themselves are just in their decisions; it is expressed in their pursuit of justice for the poor and the weak. While it is true that the word ‘justice’ can be a synonym for faithfulness to God’s will in every aspect of our life, if we give the word too general a meaning, we forget that it is shown especially in justice towards those who are most vulnerable: ‘Seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow’ (*Is 1:17*).

Hungering and thirsting for righteousness: that is holiness.

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy’

80. Mercy has two aspects. It involves giving, helping and serving others, but it also includes forgiveness and understanding. Matthew sums it up in one golden rule: ‘In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you’ (7:12). The Catechism reminds us that this law is to be applied ‘in every case’, especially when we are ‘confronted by situations that make moral judgments less assured and decision difficult’.

81. Giving and forgiving means reproducing in our lives some small measure of God’s perfection, which gives and forgives super-abundantly. For this reason, in the Gospel of Luke we do not hear the words, ‘Be perfect’ (*Mt 5:48*), but rather, ‘Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you’ (6:36-38). Luke then adds something not to be overlooked: ‘The measure you give will be the measure you get back’ (6:38). The yardstick we use for understanding and forgiving others will measure the forgiveness we receive. The yardstick we use for giving will measure what we receive. We should never forget this.

82. Jesus does not say, ‘Blessed are those who plot revenge’. He calls ‘blessed’ those who forgive and do so ‘seventy times seven’ (*Mt 18:22*). We need to think of ourselves as an army of the forgiven. All of us have been looked upon with divine compassion. If we approach the Lord with sincerity and listen carefully, there may well be times when we hear his reproach: ‘Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ (*Mt 18:33*).

Seeing and acting with mercy: that is holiness.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God’

83. This Beatitude speaks of those whose hearts are simple, pure and undefiled, for a heart capable of love admits nothing that might harm, weaken or endanger that love. The Bible uses the heart to describe our real intentions, the things we truly seek and desire, apart from all appearances. ‘Man sees the appearance, but the Lord looks into the heart’ (*1Sam 16:7*). God wants to speak to our hearts (cf. *Hos 2:16*); there he desires to write his law (cf. *Jer 31:33*). In a word, he wants to give us a new heart (cf. *Ezek36:26*).

84. ‘Guard your heart with all vigilance’ (*Prov 4:23*). Nothing stained by falsehood has any real worth in the Lord’s eyes. He ‘flees from deceit, and rises and departs from foolish thoughts’ (*Wis 1:5*). The Father, ‘who sees in secret’ (*Mt 6:6*), recognizes what is impure and insincere, mere display or appearance, as does the Son, who knows ‘what is in man’ (cf. *Jn 2:25*).

85. Certainly there can be no love without works of love, but this Beatitude reminds us that the Lord expects a commitment to our brothers and sisters that comes from the heart. For ‘if I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have no love, I gain nothing’ (*1 Cor 13:3*). In Matthew’s Gospel too, we see that what proceeds from the heart is what defiles a person (cf. 15:18), for from the heart come murder, theft, false witness, and other evil deeds (cf. 15:19). From the heart’s intentions come the desires and the deepest decisions that determine our actions.

86. A heart that loves God and neighbour (cf. *Mt 22:36-40*), genuinely and not merely in words, is a pure heart; it can see God. In his hymn to charity, Saint Paul says that ‘now we see in a mirror, dimly’ (*1 Cor 13:12*), but to the extent that truth and love prevail, we will then be able to see ‘face to face’. Jesus promises that those who are pure in heart ‘will see God’.

Keeping a heart free of all that tarnishes love: that is holiness.

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

87. This Beatitude makes us think of the many endless situations of war in our world. Yet we ourselves are often a cause of conflict or at least of misunderstanding. For example, I may hear something about someone and I go off and repeat it. I may even embellish it the second time around and keep spreading it... And the more harm it does, the more satisfaction I seem to derive from it. The world of gossip, inhabited by negative and destructive people, does not bring peace. Such people are really the enemies of peace; in no way are they 'blessed'.

88. Peacemakers truly 'make' peace; they build peace and friendship in society. To those who sow peace Jesus makes this magnificent promise: 'They will be called children of God' (*Mt 5:9*). He told his disciples that, wherever they went, they were to say: 'Peace to this house!' (*Lk 10:5*). The word of God exhorts every believer to work for peace, 'along with all who call upon the Lord with a pure heart' (cf. *2 Tim 2:22*), for 'the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace' (*Jas 3:18*). And if there are times in our community when we question what ought to be done, 'let us pursue what makes for peace' (*Rom 14:19*), for unity is preferable to conflict.

89. It is not easy to 'make' this evangelical peace, which excludes no one but embraces even those who are a bit odd, troublesome or difficult, demanding, different, beaten down by life or simply uninterested. It is hard work; it calls for great openness of mind and heart, since it is not about creating 'a consensus on paper or a transient peace for a contented minority', or a project 'by a few for the few'. Nor can it attempt to ignore or disregard conflict; instead, it must 'face conflict head on, resolve it and make it a link in the chain of a new process'. We need to be artisans of peace, for building peace is a craft that demands serenity, creativity, sensitivity and skill.

Sowing peace all around us: that is holiness.

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

90. Jesus himself warns us that the path he proposes goes against the flow, even making us challenge society by the way we live and, as a result, becoming a nuisance. He reminds us how many people have been, and still are, persecuted simply because they struggle for justice, because they take seriously their commitment to God and to others. Unless we wish to sink into an obscure mediocrity, let us not long for an easy life, for 'whoever would save his life will lose it' (*Mt 16:25*).

91. In living the Gospel, we cannot expect that everything will be easy, for the thirst for power and worldly interests often stands in our way. Saint John Paul II noted that 'a society is alienated if its forms of social organization, production and consumption make it more difficult to offer this gift of self and to establish this solidarity between people'. In such a society, politics, mass communications and economic, cultural and even religious institutions become so entangled as to become an obstacle to authentic human and social development. As a result, the Beatitudes are not easy to live out; any attempt to do so will be viewed negatively, regarded with suspicion, and met with ridicule.

92. Whatever weariness and pain we may experience in living the commandment of love and following the way of justice, the cross remains the source of our growth and sanctification. We must never forget that when the New Testament tells us that we will have to endure suffering for the Gospel's sake, it speaks precisely of persecution (cf. *Acts 5:41*;).

93. Here we are speaking about inevitable persecution, not the kind of

persecution we might bring upon ourselves by our mistreatment of others. The saints are not odd and aloof, unbearable because of their vanity, negativity and bitterness. The Apostles of Christ were not like that. The Book of Acts states repeatedly that they enjoyed favour 'with all the people' (2:47; cf. 4:21.33; 5:13), even as some authorities harassed and persecuted them (cf. 4:1-3, 5:17-18).

94. Persecutions are not a reality of the past, for today too we experience them, whether by the shedding of blood, as is the case with so many contemporary martyrs, or by more subtle means, by slander and lies. Jesus calls us blessed when people 'utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account' (*Mt 5:11*). At other times, persecution can take the form of gibes that try to caricature our faith and make us seem ridiculous.

Accepting daily the path of the Gospel, even though it may cause us problems: that is holiness.

THE GREAT CRITERION

95. In the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel (vv. 31-46), Jesus expands on the Beatitude that calls the merciful blessed. If we seek the holiness pleasing to God's eyes, this text offers us one clear criterion on which we will be judged. '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' (vv. 35-36).

In fidelity to the Master

96. Holiness, then, is not about swooning in mystic rapture. As Saint [John Paul II](#) said: 'If we truly start out anew from the contemplation of Christ, we must learn to see him especially in the faces of those with whom he himself wished to be identified'. The text of Matthew 25:35-36 is 'not a simple invitation to charity: it is a page of Christology which sheds a ray of light on the mystery of Christ'. In this call to recognize him in the poor and the suffering, we see revealed the very heart of Christ, his deepest feelings and choices, which every saint seeks to imitate.

97. Given these uncompromising demands of Jesus, it is my duty to ask Christians to acknowledge and accept them in a spirit of genuine openness, *sine glossa*. In other words, without any 'ifs or buts' that could lessen their force. Our Lord made it very clear that holiness cannot be understood or lived apart from these demands, for mercy is 'the beating heart of the Gospel'.

98. If I encounter a person sleeping outdoors on a cold night, I can view him or her as an annoyance, an idler, an obstacle in my path, a troubling sight, a problem for politicians to sort out, or even a piece of refuse cluttering a public space. Or I can respond with faith and charity, and see in this person a human being with a dignity identical to my own, a creature infinitely loved by the Father, an image of God, a brother or sister redeemed by Jesus Christ. That is what it is to be a Christian! Can holiness somehow be understood apart from this lively recognition of the dignity of each human being?

99. For Christians, this involves a constant and healthy unease. Even if helping one person alone could justify all our efforts, it would not be enough. The bishops of Canada made this clear when they noted, for example, that the biblical understanding of the jubilee year was about more than simply performing certain good works. It also meant seeking social change: 'For later generations to also be released, clearly the goal had to be

the restoration of just social and economic systems, so there could no longer be exclusion’.

Ideologies striking at the heart of the Gospel

100. I regret that ideologies lead us at times to two harmful errors. On the one hand, there is the error of those Christians who separate these Gospel demands from their personal relationship with the Lord, from their interior union with him, from openness to his grace. Christianity thus becomes a sort of NGO stripped of the luminous mysticism so evident in the lives of Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Teresa of Calcutta, and many others. For these great saints, mental prayer, the love of God and the reading of the Gospel in no way detracted from their passionate and effective commitment to their neighbours; quite the opposite.
101. The other harmful ideological error is found in those who find suspect the social engagement of others, seeing it as superficial, worldly, secular, materialist, communist or populist. Or they relativize it, as if there are other more important matters, or the only thing that counts is one particular ethical issue or cause that they themselves defend. 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. Equally sacred, however, are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every form of rejection. We cannot uphold an ideal of holiness that would ignore injustice in a world where some revel, spend with abandon and live only for the latest consumer goods, even as others look on from afar, living their entire lives in abject poverty.
102. We often hear it said that, with respect to relativism and the flaws of our present world, the situation of migrants, for example, is a lesser issue. Some Catholics consider it a secondary issue compared to the ‘grave’ bioethical questions. That a politician looking for votes might say such a thing is understandable, but not a Christian, for whom 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. Can we not realize that this is exactly what Jesus demands of us, when he tells us that in welcoming the stranger we welcome him (cf. *Mt 25:35*)? Saint Benedict did so readily, and though it might have ‘complicated’ the life of his monks, he ordered that all guests who knocked at the monastery door be welcomed ‘like Christ’, with a gesture of veneration; the poor and pilgrims were to be met with ‘the greatest care and solicitude’.
103. A similar approach is found in the Old Testament: ‘You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you yourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt’ (*Ex 22:21*). ‘When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt’ (*Lev 19:33-34*). This is not a notion invented by some Pope, or a momentary fad. In today’s world too, we are called to follow the path of spiritual wisdom proposed by the prophet Isaiah to show what is pleasing to God. ‘Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn’ (*58:7-8*).

The worship most acceptable to God

104. We may think that we give glory to God only by our worship and prayer, or simply by following certain ethical norms. It is true that the primacy belongs to our relationship with God, but we cannot forget that the ultimate criterion on which our lives will be judged is what we have done for others. Prayer is most precious, for it nourishes a daily commitment to love. Our worship becomes pleasing to God when we devote ourselves to living generously, and allow God’s gift, granted in prayer, to be shown in our concern for our brothers and sisters.
105. Similarly, the best way to discern if our prayer is authentic is to judge to what extent our life is being transformed in the light of mercy. For ‘mercy is not only an action of the Father; it becomes a criterion for ascertaining who his true children are’. Mercy ‘is the very foundation of the Church’s life’. In this regard, I would like to reiterate that mercy does not exclude justice and truth; indeed, ‘we have to say that mercy is the fullness of justice and the most radiant manifestation of God’s truth’. It is ‘the key to heaven’.
106. Here I think of Saint Thomas Aquinas, who asked which actions of ours are noblest, which external works best show our love for God. Thomas answered unhesitatingly that they are the works of mercy towards our neighbour, even more than our acts of worship: ‘We worship God by outward sacrifices and gifts, not for his own benefit, but for that of ourselves and our neighbour. For he does not need our sacrifices, but wishes them to be offered to him, in order to stir our devotion and to profit our neighbour. Hence mercy, whereby we supply others’ defects, is a sacrifice more acceptable to him, as conducting more directly to our neighbour’s well-being’.
107. Those who really wish to give glory to God by their lives, who truly long to grow in holiness, are called to be single-minded and tenacious in their practice of the works of mercy. Saint Teresa of Calcutta clearly realized this: ‘Yes, I have many human faults and failures... But God bends down and uses us, you and me, to be his love and his compassion in the world; he bears our sins, our troubles and our faults. He depends on us to love the world and to show how much he loves it. If we are too concerned with ourselves, we will have no time left for others’.
108. Hedonism and consumerism can prove our downfall, for when we are obsessed with our own pleasure, we end up being all too concerned about ourselves and our rights, and we feel a desperate need for free time to enjoy ourselves. We will find it hard to feel and show any real concern for those in need, unless we are able to cultivate a certain simplicity of life, resisting the feverish demands of a consumer society, which leave us impoverished and unsatisfied, anxious to have it all now. Similarly, when we allow ourselves to be caught up in superficial information, instant communication and virtual reality, we can waste precious time and become indifferent to the suffering flesh of our brothers and sisters. Yet even amid this whirlwind of activity, the Gospel continues to resound, offering us the promise of a different life, a healthier and happier life.
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109. The powerful witness of the saints is revealed in their lives, shaped by the Beatitudes and the criterion of the final judgement. Jesus’ words are few and straightforward, yet practical and valid for everyone, for Christianity is meant above all to be put into practice. It can also be an object of study and reflection, but only to help us better live the Gospel in our daily lives. I recommend rereading these great biblical texts frequently, referring back to them, praying with them, trying to embody them. They will benefit us; they will make us genuinely happy.