



Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father Francis

ON THE CALL TO HOLINESS IN TODAY'S WORLD

Gaudete et Exsultate

DISCUSSION AND STUDY GUIDE

By Marianne Lorraine Trouvé, FSP

Purpose of This Guide

Pope Francis addresses his apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* to all the members of the Church, setting before us the goal of holiness of life. This guide can be used either for individual study or for group discussion of this important document. The guide includes a brief summary of each chapter of the document, along with study questions and some reflections for prayer.



Introduction (nos. 1–2)

Summary

In this brief introduction, Pope Francis simply but clearly states his purpose in writing this document: “My modest goal is to repropose the call to holiness in a practical way for our own time, with all its risks, challenges, and opportunities. For the Lord has chosen each one of us ‘to be holy and blameless before him in love’” (Eph 1:4).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Although Pope Francis says he is proposing a “modest goal,” it is really a major and extremely important goal: holiness. Ultimately, the purpose of our lives is to become a saint. How do you feel about this goal? Do you trust that God will actually lead you there?
2. The Second Vatican Council also proposed the goal of holiness to all the members of the Church. In the document *Lumen Gentium* (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), the council said: “All the faithful of Christ, of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity” (no. 40). Pope Francis is not proposing anything new, but what is essential to being a Christian. Why do you think he chose to write a document on this topic at this time?

FOR PRAYER AND MEDITATION

Spend some time in prayerful conversation with God about how he is calling *you* to become a saint.

CHAPTER ONE

The Call to Holiness (nos. 3–34)

Summary

Pope Francis talks about who the saints are and what it means to be a saint. First he considers those whom we usually think of first, the canonized saints of the Church. They are our heavenly



intercessors who help us with their prayers. The saints in heaven have reached the goal of their journey and rejoice in perfect love of the Lord.

But there are also saints on earth, saints in the making, to be sure, but saints nonetheless. The pope calls them the saints “next door.” Holiness can be found in many hidden and surprising places in our lives. He reminds us that because of our Baptism we are called to be holy. Everyone is called to holiness, not just priests or religious who have more time to dedicate to prayer.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Sometimes in reading the lives of the saints who did extraordinary things or had special spiritual gifts, we may think, “I could never do that!” And you would be right, for God doesn’t call everyone to extraordinary things. And they are not essential for holiness. In no. 11, the pope makes the important point that we are not meant to imitate particular things any saint did, “for that could even lead us astray from the one specific path that the Lord has in mind for us.” For example, the Curé of Ars, Saint John Vianney, survived mostly on boiled potatoes and ate very little. That was his penance, but to be holy we don’t need to do that. In what ways can we imitate the saints in their virtue without necessarily doing the particular things they did?
2. In no. 16, the pope gives a simple and appealing example of holiness in everyday life. After reading that paragraph, how could you apply it to your own life?
3. What do you think of the example of Cardinal van Thuân in no. 17? How would living in the present moment make a difference in your own life?
4. In the section “Your mission in Christ,” Pope Francis says that in its fullest meaning “holiness is experiencing, in union with Christ, the mysteries of his life.” After reading this section, can you explain in your own words what the pope means by this? How are you called to live in union with the mysteries of Christ’s life?
5. How can you follow the pope’s advice to live your life’s mission by always asking “the Spirit what Jesus expects from you at every moment of your life and in every decision you must make”?

FOR PRAYER AND MEDITATION

Spend some time in prayer talking with God about your own life and the mission that God has given you.



CHAPTER TWO

Two Subtle Enemies of Holiness (nos. 35–62)

Summary

In this chapter Pope Francis discusses “two false forms of holiness,” namely, Gnosticism and Pelagianism. These are two early heresies. What do they entail?

The word Gnosticism derives from the Greek *gnosis*, or knowledge. Gnosticism is hard to define, as it was a general movement of religious thought that predated Christianity and later absorbed some Christian doctrines, but in a heretical way. In general, Gnosticism sought salvation through knowledge, which was a secret teaching reserved for the privileged few. It also was dualistic, in placing a sharp divide between matter and spirit. Gnostics taught that matter was evil and only spirit was good. This struck at the heart of Christianity, for it denied the Incarnation—that the Son of God became a man, Jesus Christ. For the Gnostics, Christ was not divine but a created being inferior to God. Variations of all these teachings existed in different Gnostic groups.

Gnosticism never totally disappeared, but various gnostic tendencies crept up at different times in Church history. For example, the Cathari movement or Albigensian heresy in southern France in the twelfth century was a form of Gnosticism. In today’s world, the New Age movement draws from gnostic ideas.

Pope Francis seems to be speaking of Gnosticism in a general way, not so much in relation to its particular doctrines. He focuses on the relation of faith and reason and encourages us to find a balance between sound theology and humility in using reason. We shouldn’t think that simply knowing things will make us saints.

Pelagianism is the second heresy he mentions. Pelagius (355–425) was a monk from the British Isles who taught a rather severe ascetical doctrine. He denied original sin, saying that the sin of Adam did not affect his descendants except by way of bad example. So he maintained that human nature was not wounded by the effects of that sin. This led him to further errors about grace. He taught that people could attain holiness by their own efforts. Pelagius denied the necessity of grace for living a good Christian life and ultimately, for salvation. Saint Augustine was the great foe of Pelagius. Augustine wrote many works explaining the errors of Pelagius and the importance of grace for our salvation. Like Gnosticism, various forms of Pelagianism have plagued the Church throughout its life. While the Gnostics emphasized the intellect and knowledge, Pelagians emphasized the will as being sufficient in itself for holiness.

Pope Francis seems to be thinking of Pelagianism in a general way insofar as it represents a mindset that relies more on human efforts than on the grace of God. He emphasizes our need for grace, that we can’t rely on our good works but must entrust ourselves to Jesus, our Savior.



Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is your understanding of Gnosticism based on what Pope Francis says about it?
2. How are faith and reason related? Saint John Paul II wrote an encyclical on this topic, *Fides et Ratio* (Faith and Reason.) He says that “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth,” and that “by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves” (opening lines). That encyclical is an excellent resource and may be found at the Vatican website: http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html.
3. What is your understanding of Pelagianism and what Pope Francis says about it?
4. A common saying runs: “Pray as if everything depends on God. Work as if everything depends on you.” How does that relate to the struggle with Pelagianism?

FOR PRAYER AND MEDITATION

The pope quotes these words of Saint Bonaventure: “The greatest possible wisdom is to share fruitfully what we have to give. . . . Even as mercy is the companion of wisdom, avarice is its enemy.”

Take some time to reflect on this and consider how your own relationship with God has led you to be merciful to others. Then offer a prayer of thanksgiving in your own words.

CHAPTER THREE

In the Light of the Master (nos. 63–109)

Summary

Pope Francis begins this chapter by saying that although there are many ideas about holiness, “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” (no. 63). This echoes what Christian writers have often said about the Sermon on the Mount in general, and the Beatitudes in particular. For example, Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote: “The sermon that Our Lord delivered on the mountain contains the whole process of forming the life of a Christian” (*Summa Th.*, I–II, q. 108, a. 3). The pope continues this tradition with a beautiful explanation and



reflection on each of the Beatitudes. These reflections are easily understood and can serve for profitable spiritual reading. After that section, he considers the parable of the last judgment in Matthew 25, in which Jesus states that whatever we do for the least among us, we do to him. Pope Francis draws out some implications of that in regard to works of mercy and social justice.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. In reading about the Beatitudes, what did you find most profitable for your spiritual growth?
2. In speaking about spiritual poverty, the pope recalls the “holy indifference” of Saint Ignatius Loyola. How do you think that this indifference can bring about greater freedom in your life?
3. Mercy is a favorite topic of Pope Francis. In no. 80 he relates mercy to forgiveness and understanding. It can be difficult to want to bestow mercy on someone who has hurt us, yet forgiveness brings peace. How is forgiveness also a way of bestowing mercy on ourselves?
4. How can we find a balance between the two extremes that the pope speaks about in nos. 100–101: on the one hand, to turn Christianity into a sort of NGO (non-governmental organization), and on the other hand, to ignore the demands of social justice?

FOR PRAYER AND MEDITATION

Jesus Master, fill my heart with love that is patient, not troubled over the shortcomings of others.

Grant me a love that is kind and thoughtful, that seeks to do good for others; a love that is not jealous but rejoices when others succeed.

Teach my heart a love that is attentive, alert, and prudent; that acts with simplicity and sincerity; that is not ambitious or intolerant, difficult to satisfy; that is not selfish but truly seeks the interests of God and my neighbor.

Master, give me a love that is humble and gentle; a love that rejoices in the truth and is happy when others are valued and appreciated.

Fill my heart with a love that can adapt to all circumstances, accepting what God permits; a love that believes and hopes in everything, all the good things said about others.

Jesus Master, may I be an instrument of your love.

VENERABLE MOTHER THECLA MERLO, FSP



CHAPTER FOUR

Signs of Holiness in Today's World (nos. 110–157)

Summary

After discussing the Beatitudes as a general framework of holiness, Pope Francis sets out five important spiritual attitudes that help us in our Christian life.

1. Perseverance, patience, and meekness

Perseverance is a special virtue because it helps us meet a particular need. It can be easy to do something good once or twice. But to keep on doing good, for one's whole life, is not easy. How often have we started some effort toward holiness in a burst of fervor that then quickly dies out? Perseverance is the virtue that keeps us going even when things get tough.

In this section the pope mentions the importance of using the media, especially social media, in a way that shows charity and respect to others. "Fake news" and various forms of slander can often spread easily. He warns, "Even in Catholic media, limits can be overstepped, defamation and slander can become commonplace, and all ethical standards and respect for the good name of others can be abandoned" (no. 115). But as Christians we are called to bring charity into everything.

2. Joy and a sense of humor

Pope Francis brings out the examples of Mary and the saints to stress that we have every reason to be full of joy. He writes: "Christian joy is usually accompanied by a sense of humor. We see this clearly, for example, in Saint Thomas More, Saint Vincent de Paul, and Saint Philip Neri. Ill humor is no sign of holiness" (no. 126).

3. Boldness and passion

This boldness concerns the need to evangelize, to boldly proclaim the Gospel and bring Jesus to everyone. Pope Francis reminds us, "Look at Jesus. His deep compassion reached out to others. It did not make him hesitant, timid or self-conscious, as often happens with us" (no. 131).

4. The importance of community

As Christians we are not isolated but part of the community of the whole Church, as well as the particular communities we belong to. This communitarian aspect is essential to us on our journey to holiness, for no one can go it alone. As the pope reminds us, "The common life, whether in the family, the parish, the religious community or any other, is made up of small everyday things. This was true of the holy community formed by Jesus, Mary and Joseph, which



reflected in an exemplary way the beauty of the Trinitarian communion. It was also true of the life that Jesus shared with his disciples and with ordinary people” (no. 143).

5. *Constant prayer*

This is essential, for prayer is our lifeline to God. Pope Francis says, “I do not believe in holiness without prayer, even though that prayer need not be lengthy or involve intense emotions” (no. 147). He discusses different aspects of prayer and the place it should occupy in our lives. In his simple style he teaches us how to allow prayer to transform us into better disciples of Jesus.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Does your use of social media reflect the principles that Pope Francis speaks about? If not, how can you use it in a way that better reflects the Gospel?
2. How do you react to the statement, “Humility can only take root in the heart through humiliations.” (no. 118)?
3. In no. 142, Pope Francis quotes the beautiful passage from Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* about his conversation with his mother, Saint Monica, shortly before she died. Try reading this while thinking about your own departed loved ones, imagining them in the presence of the Lord. How does the hope of eternal life sustain us on our journey?
4. “Jesus asked his disciples to pay attention to details” (no. 144). In reading the list of details the pope mentions here, how can you apply that in your life?
5. Which of the various aspects of prayer that the pope discusses do you find most helpful in your own prayer life?

FOR PRAYER AND MEDITATION

Pick one of the virtues that the pope mentions and meditate on a Scripture passage in connection with it, for example, the virtue of humility (see no. 118). Ask the Holy Spirit to form that virtue in you.

My God, let me know and love you, so that I may find my happiness in you.
Enable me to know you ever more on earth, so that I may know you perfectly
in heaven.
Enable me to love you ever more on earth, so that I may love you perfectly
in heaven.
And may my joy be great on earth and perfect with you in heaven.

SAINT AUGUSTINE



CHAPTER FIVE

Spiritual Combat, Vigilance, and Discernment (nos. 158–177)

Summary

Pope Francis is blunt in stating that the spiritual life involves a battle, and that this battle is against our adversary, the devil: “The Christian life is a constant battle. We need strength and courage to withstand the temptations of the devil and to proclaim the Gospel. . . . Nor can this battle be reduced to the struggle against our human weaknesses and proclivities (be they laziness, lust, envy, jealousy, or any others). It is also a constant struggle against the devil, the prince of evil” (nos. 158–159). From the beginning of his pontificate, Francis has often spoken about the reality of the devil. He continues: “Indeed, in leaving us the Our Father, Jesus wanted us to conclude by asking the Father to ‘deliver us from evil.’ That final word does not refer to evil in the abstract; a more exact translation would be “the evil one.” It indicates a personal being who assails us. Jesus taught us to ask daily for deliverance from him, lest his power prevail over us. The pope then draws out some implications of this combat, warning us to be on guard against spiritual corruption.

In the second part of this chapter he turns to the subject of discernment. He says that this gift is especially necessary today, because we are constantly bombarded with media and entertainment that can hinder us from making good decisions. As a Jesuit, Pope Francis is formed in the spirituality of discernment given to us by Saint Ignatius Loyola. In the pope’s reflections, he emphasizes the need for listening to the Holy Spirit, for making a daily examination of conscience, and to be open to doing God’s will in our lives.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. It can be disturbing to think about the reality of the devil, a malevolent being who can attack us with temptations and confusion. Yet Christ has won the victory over evil through his Cross. What are some means you can use to resist temptations and follow the light given by the Holy Spirit?
2. In warning against spiritual corruption, Pope Francis speaks about becoming “lukewarm” (no. 164–165). What are some ways to avoid being lukewarm and keep the love of Christ burning ardently in our hearts?
3. How familiar are you with the practice of discernment? In no. 169, Pope Francis recommends that we make a daily examination of conscience, which is an excellent way to help



us see what the Holy Spirit is saying to us. How might you incorporate that into your daily routine? It doesn't have to take a long time.

4. The pope ends by reflecting on the role of Mary, who lived the Beatitudes as no one else ever has. How can you make Mary more a part of your life of faith and prayer?

FOR PRAYER AND MEDITATION

A well-known prayer for help against the devil is the prayer to Saint Michael the Archangel:

Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in the battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him we humbly pray; and do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Host, by the power of God, cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits, who roam through the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen.

Prayer of Saint Ignatius of Loyola to follow God's will:

May it please the supreme and divine Goodness to give us all abundant grace ever to know his most holy will and perfectly to fulfill it.

Method for a Daily Examination of Conscience

If you feel a desire to set out on the path to holiness of life, self-awareness is one of the keys to achieve that wish. Self-knowledge is an ongoing process leading to spiritual growth as one begins to listen attentively to the voice of conscience. Everyone has this inner voice at the core of their being, and here every person is truly alone with God. This voice, which speaks without words, consistently calls every person to do good and avoid evil. Attentive to this inner voice, the heart asks: how well have I been living as a follower of Jesus Christ? The candid response to this question sets one on the path to self-honesty and opens the way to holiness of life.

The practice of the daily examen (for ten or fifteen minutes) offers the opportunity to look at how things stand between yourself and God; it offers the chance to assess the dynamics of your relationship with God, giving you an opportunity to evaluate some of your priorities. God speaks in many ways, but how well are you listening? Consider using the following outline for the practice of your daily examen:

- ♦ Choose a quiet space and recollect yourself. Call upon the Holy Spirit to help you be attentive to the Lord's presence in and around you, and then wait and find comfort in God who is with you.
- ♦ As you reflect on your day, recall those experiences that bring to mind the generosity and goodness of God. Call to mind the reasons you have to be grateful. What are you most thankful for today?



- ◆ Ask for the grace to see yourself as God, who is your Savior, sees you.
- ◆ Review the day, and converse with God about the things that happened at work, at home. Think about your interactions with co-workers and family members, etc., and identify significant thoughts, actions, omissions, and desires that speak to you about your relationship with God, with others, and with yourself. Is there something that stands out today? Is there a pattern to this kind of behavior?
- ◆ Speak to the Lord about those aspects and ask for insight to know what these things reveal about you and your relationship with God. Acknowledge those patterns of behavior and attitudes that disrupt your relationship with God and others, and ask the Lord for mercy, giving thanks for his unconditional love for you.
- ◆ Look ahead and decide how you will act tomorrow, taking steps to leave behind those thoughts or actions that diminish your resolve to live as a committed follower of Jesus Christ. Make an act of trust in God and ask for the grace to live your life in his love.

MARY MARK WICKENHISER, FSP

