



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*St. Peter's Square*

*Wednesday, 13 April 2011*

[\[Video\]](#)

### ***The holiness***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

At the General Audiences in the past two years we have been accompanied by the figures of so many saints: we have learned to know them more closely and to understand that the whole of the Church's history is marked by these men and women who with their faith, with their charity, and with their life have been beacons for so many generations, as they are for us too. The saints expressed in various ways the powerful and transforming presence of the Risen One. They let Jesus so totally overwhelm their life that they could say with St Paul "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). Following their example, seeking their intercession, entering into communion with them, "brings us closer to Christ, so our companionship with the saints joins us to Christ, from whom as from their fountain and head issue every grace and the life of the People of God itself" (cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 50).

At the end of this series of Catecheses, therefore, I would like to offer some thoughts on what holiness is. What does it mean to be holy? Who is called to be holy? We are often led to think that holiness is a goal reserved for a few elect. St Paul, instead, speaks of God's great plan and says: "even as he (God) chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (Eph 1:4). And he was speaking about all of us. At the centre of

the divine plan is Christ in whom. God shows his Face, in accord with the favour of his will. The Mystery hidden in the centuries is revealed in its fullness in the Word made flesh. And Paul then says: “in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col 1:19).

In Christ the living God made himself close, visible, audible and tangible so that each one might draw from his fullness of grace and truth (cf. Jn 1:14-16). Therefore, the whole of Christian life knows one supreme law, which St Paul expresses in a formula that recurs in all his holy writings: in Jesus Christ. Holiness, the fullness of Christian life, does not consist in carrying out extraordinary enterprises but in being united with Christ, in living his mysteries, in making our own his example, his thoughts, his behaviour. The measure of holiness stems from the stature that Christ achieves in us, in as much as with the power of the Holy Spirit, we model our whole life on his.

It is being conformed to Jesus, as St Paul says: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8:29). And St Augustine exclaimed: “my life shall be a real life, being wholly filled by you” (*Confessions*, 10, XXVIII).

The Second Vatican Council, in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, speaks with clarity of the universal call to holiness, saying that no one is excluded: “The forms and tasks of life are many but holiness is one — that sanctity which is cultivated by all who act under God’s Spirit and... follow Christ, poor, humble and cross-bearing, that they may deserve to be partakers of his glory” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 41).

However, the question remains: how can we take the path to holiness, in order to respond to this call? Can I do this on my own initiative? The answer is clear. A holy life is not primarily the result of our efforts, of our actions, because it is God, the three times Holy (cf. Is 6:3) who sanctifies us, it is the Holy Spirit’s action that enlivens us from within, it is the very life of the Risen Christ that is communicated to us and that transforms us. To say so once again with the Second Vatican Council, “the followers of Christ, called by God not in virtue of their works but by his design and grace, and justified in the Lord Jesus, have been made sons of God in the baptism of faith and partakers of the divine nature, and so are truly sanctified. They must therefore hold onto and perfect in their lives that sanctification which they have received” (*ibid.*, n. 40).

Holiness, therefore, has its deepest root in the grace of baptism, in being grafted on to the Paschal Mystery of Christ, by which his Spirit is communicated to us, his very life as the Risen One. St Paul strongly emphasizes the transformation that baptismal grace brings about in man and he reaches the point of coining a new terminology, forged with the preposition “with”: *dead-with*, *buried-with*, *raised-with*, brought to *life-with*, with Christ; our destiny is indissolubly linked to his. “We were buried therefore with him by baptism” he writes, “into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead ... we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4). Yet God always respects our freedom and asks that we accept this gift and live the requirements it entails and he asks that we

let ourselves be transformed by the action of the Holy Spirit, conforming our will to the will of God.

How can it happen that our manner of thinking and our actions become thinking and action with Christ and of Christ? What is the soul of holiness? Once again the Second Vatican Council explains; it tells us that Christian holiness is nothing other than charity lived to the full. “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 Jn 4:16). Now God has poured out his love in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (cf. Rom 5:5); therefore the first and most necessary gift is charity, by which we love God above all things and our neighbour through love of him. But if charity, like a good seed, is to grow and fructify in the soul, each of the faithful must willingly hear the word of God and carry out his will with deeds, with the help of his grace. He must frequently receive the sacraments, chiefly the Eucharist, and take part in the holy liturgy; he must constantly apply himself to prayer, self-denial, active brotherly service and the exercise all the virtues. This is because love, as the bond of perfection and fullness of the law (cf. Col 3:14; Rom 13:10) governs, gives meaning to, and perfects all the means of sanctification” (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 42).

Perhaps this language of the Second Vatican Council is a little too solemn for us, perhaps we should say things even more simply. What is the essential? The essential means never leaving a Sunday without an encounter with the Risen Christ in the Eucharist; this is not an additional burden but is light for the whole week. It means never beginning and never ending a day without at least a brief contact with God. And, on the path of our life it means following the “signposts” that God has communicated to us in the Ten Commandments, interpreted with Christ, which are merely the explanation of what love is in specific situations. It seems to me that this is the true simplicity and greatness of a life of holiness: the encounter with the Risen One on Sunday; contact with God at the beginning and at the end of the day; following, in decisions, the “signposts” that God has communicated to us, which are but forms of charity.

“Hence the true disciple of Christ is marked by love both of God and of neighbour” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 42). This is the true simplicity, greatness and depth of Christian life, of being holy. This is why St Augustine, in commenting on the fourth chapter of the First Letter of St John, could make a bold statement: “*Dilige et fac quod vis* [Love and do what you will]” And he continued: “If you keep silent, keep silent by love: if you speak, speak by love; if you correct, correct by love; if you pardon, pardon by love; let love be rooted in you, and from the root nothing but good can grow” (7,8 pl 35). Those who are guided by love, who live charity to the full, are guided by God, because God is love. Hence these important words apply: “*Dilige et fac quod vis*”, “Love and do what you will”.

We might ask ourselves: can we, with our limitations, with our weaknesses, aim so high? During the Liturgical Year, the Church invites us to commemorate a host of saints, the ones, that is, who lived charity to the full, who knew how to love and follow Christ in their daily lives. They tell us that it is possible for everyone to take this road. In every epoch of the Church’s history, on every

latitude of the world map, the saints belong to all the ages and to every state of life, they are actual faces of every people, language and nation. And they have very different characters.

Actually I must say that also for my personal faith many saints, not all, are true stars in the firmament of history. And I would like to add that for me not only a few great saints whom I love and whom I know well are “signposts”, but precisely also the simple saints, that is, the good people I see in my life who will never be canonized. They are ordinary people, so to speak, without visible heroism but in their everyday goodness I see the truth of faith. This goodness, which they have developed in the faith of the Church, is for me the most reliable apology of Christianity and the sign of where the truth lies.

In the Communion of Saints, canonized and not canonized, which the Church lives thanks to Christ in all her members, we enjoy their presence and their company and cultivate the firm hope that we shall be able to imitate their journey and share one day in the same blessed life, eternal life.

Dear friends, how great and beautiful, as well as simple is the Christian vocation seen in this light! We are all called to holiness: it is the very measure of Christian living. Once again St Paul expresses it with great intensity when he writes: “grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.... His gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:7, 11-13).

I would like to ask all to open themselves to the action of the Holy Spirit, who transforms our life, to be, we too, as small pieces in the great mosaic of holiness that God continues to create in history, so that the face of Christ may shine out in the fullness of its splendour. Let us not be afraid to aim high, for God’s heights; let us not be afraid that God will ask too much of us, but let ourselves be guided by his Word in every daily action, even when we feel poor, inadequate, sinners. It will be he who transforms us in accordance with his love. Many thanks.

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**To special groups:**

I am pleased to greet the members of the European Society of Temporomandibular Joint Surgeons meeting these days in Rome. I also greet the participants in the World Anesthesia Congress. My warm welcome goes to the priests of the Institute for Continuing Theological Education of the North American College. To the Saint Bonaventure Wind Ensemble and Choir from Canada I express my gratitude for their praise of God in song. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims present at today’s Audience, especially those from England, Finland, the Philippines and the United States, I invoke God’s abundant blessings.

Lastly, my greeting goes to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. In this last week of Lent, I urge you to continue with commitment on your spiritual journey towards Easter. Dear *young people*, intensify your witness of love faithful to the Crucified Christ. May you, dear *sick people*, look to the Cross of the Lord to offer with courage the trial of illness. And may you, dear *newlyweds*, ensure that your spousal union is always enlivened by divine love.

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I am pleased to send my warm greetings to all who are gathering at Xavier College in Melbourne for the *Third National Family Gathering*. This important event is an occasion for you not only to witness to the bonds of affection within your individual families, but also to deepen them with the wider family of God, which is the Church, so that you become protagonists of a new humanity, a renewed culture of love and unity, of life and stability, giving glory to God our Father at all times. I assure you of my prayers, especially for your children and for those who are ill. Commending you to the Holy Family of Nazareth and invoking the intercession of Saint Mary MacKillop, I willingly impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of joy and peace.

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