

STUDY GUIDE

Gaudete et Exsultate

'Rejoice and Be Glad'



With less than eight weeks until Pope Francis visits Ireland, attention is focusing on his teachings and what his message will be to the Church in Ireland. Here we publish a study guide to the Pope's most recent document *Gaudete et Exsultate* prepared by **Prof. Eamonn Conway** of Mary Immaculate College, Limerick and **Greg Daly**, Assistant Editor of *The Irish Catholic*

Introduction

Pope Francis begins his new exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* – 'Rejoice and be glad' – by recalling how Jesus wants us to be saints, giving him everything and receiving the happiness for which we are created. The document, the Pope says, is not an academic text but is an attempt to express the call to holiness in a practical way for today.

COMMENTARY

Increasingly Catholics are asking themselves what exactly Pope Francis is up to in his efforts to renew the Church. For some, he is moving too quickly, for others, not quickly enough.

Just over five years ago then-Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, having reached the age of 75, had already submitted his resignation to Pope Benedict XVI. The next call he was expecting from the Holy See was to tell him that his successor as Archbishop of Buenos Aires had been selected and that he could retire in peace.

Instead, here we are busily preparing to welcome him to our country as our Pope.

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So, what has he been up to? In short, he has been systematically implementing the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) both by his words and his actions, and the more he does this the more we realise that in many respects we are still only in the early stages of embracing what the Holy Spirit has been beckoning us towards these past 50 years.

Unlike all the other Popes since Vatican II Pope Francis wasn't actually at the Council. Yet he has very much taken its continuing implementation to heart.

For instance, he has been working

hard to transform the leadership and governance structures of the Church by strengthening the World Synod of Bishops. Since Pope Francis' election we have had two synods on marriage and the family in rapid succession and this Autumn we will have another on the vocation of young people.

Synods are meant to ensure that the voices of bishops from all over the world are heard, listened and responded to by the Holy See. In turn, diocesan bishops are meant to listen to and ensure that they are attuned to the Holy Spirit at work in the hopes and aspirations of Christ's faithful who are struggling to respond to God's will in their daily lives.

Pope Francis has also created new leadership bodies in the Holy See and we await a major document on the restructuring of the Curia to be published in a couple of months' These changes in governance and leadership are not knee-jerk reactions to crises in the Church: they are reforms that the Second Vatican



Council foresaw as indispensable if the Church was going to be able to be truly a global Christian community at the service of God's reign,

capable of meeting the challenges of modern life.

As important as structural reform is to Pope Francis, however, more

important still is implementing the Council's understanding of the kind of life and vocation each of us Christians is called to by virtue of our baptism. This is the call to holiness.

The call to holiness is at the heart of Pope Francis' efforts to renew the Church. He has repeatedly upbraided bishops and curial officials on the need to ensure that they themselves are living authentically Christian lives.

The key message of the Synod on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment, to take place next October, is that young people are also called to holiness. Pope Francis wants young people to see holiness as their mission. He knows that most of them seek to live a life of value, meaning and purpose but often they do not know how to see this as a gift, invitation and calling from God, in other words, as a vocation to holiness. Similarly, the synods on marriage and the family, and the post-synodal exhortation *The Joy of Love* invites married people to understand their lives and that of their families as vocations at the service of the Joy of the Gospel.

Gaudete et Exultate is a call to each of us to rediscover and deepen our own vocation to holiness.



"(Jesus) wants us to be saints and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence."

—Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*

Chapter 1

The call to holiness

We are surrounded by a great number of saints, Pope Francis says, ranging from the heroes of the Bible, the saints recognised by the Church, and martyrs of all Christian denominations who intercede for us before God, to our own family members and other loved ones.

God saves no one in isolation, the Pope adds, but takes into account the complex fabric of human community. The holiness of the Church can be found in parents who raise their children with love, in men and women who work hard to support their families, in the sick, and in elderly religious who reflect God's happiness. Real history is made not just by dramatic figures but by the "souls who no history book ever mentions".

We are all called to holiness in our own distinct and special ways, women as much as men, and ordinary people as much as clergy and religious. People called to the consecrated life can be holy by living their commitments joyfully, married people by loving and caring for their spouses, workers by labouring honestly and skilfully in the service of others, parents and grandparents by patiently teaching children to follow Jesus, and people in authority by working for the common good and renouncing personal gain.

In the Scriptures, the Sacraments, holy places, living communities, the witness of the saints and its many types of beauty, the Church contains all that is needed to help us grow towards holiness, and God can always work the miracle of helping us become better. We should always turn to God, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and remember that all holiness is ultimately the fruit of the Spirit.

“When we consider saints, we shouldn't expect them to be perfect all the time, but should contemplate the totality of their life and their growth in holiness”

Holiness grows through small gestures. Refusing to engage in gossip, listening patiently to the cares of others, turning to Mary and praying the Rosary at a time of anxiety, and speaking kindly with a poor person in the street are all the kind of small steps that help make us holy. Holiness can be achieved through living in the moment, and trying to make ordinary moments occasions of extraordinary love.

Our individual missions on earth as Christians are our particular and distinctive paths to holiness. They come to have their fullest expression in Christ and can only be understood through him, with our holiness entailing experiencing with Christ the mysteries of his life. This means dying and rising anew with him, but can also mean reproducing, for example, his hidden life, his life in community, his poverty, or his closeness to outcasts. Contemplat-



ing these mysteries can lead us to reflect them in our own choices and attitudes, and we grow in holiness as we model our lives on that of Jesus.

When we consider saints, we shouldn't expect them to be perfect all the time, but should contemplate the totality of their life and their growth in holiness. Similarly, we should see our own lives as missions where we grow in holiness, learning to listen to God and discern what Jesus wants of us, and allowing ourselves to be transformed.

Our personal missions shouldn't be understood apart from the call to build up Christ's kingdom of love, justice and peace. Silence, peace and prayer are important and necessary but should not be negative expressions of fleeing interaction, activity, and service. We are called to be contemplatives in the midst of action; life should not distract us from holiness, and should not be disdained as a distraction from holiness. "Sooner or later, we have to face our true selves and let the Lord enter," the

Pope says, maintaining that "we need a spirit of holiness capable of filling both our solitude and our service".

Holiness is not something to fear, but is how we become who God intended us to be when he created us.

COMMENTARY

Pope Francis often reminds us that in the past we had some "adulterated", that is, seriously distorted, forms of Christianity. *Gaudete et Exsultate* sets

out to address a particular distortion Vatican II sought to correct in regard to how we understand holiness.

Let's face it: those of us who grew up in the Church long after the Council still imbibed the notion that holiness was for other people, people we viewed to be better than ourselves. To this day many of us still tend to think only of named saints as holy, perhaps also of popes, maybe some missionaries, and the occasional priest or religious we have met and admired. This tendency persists even though sadly we have had to face the fact that many of those we tended to look up to turned out to have had 'clay feet'.

“Prayer and the sacraments nourish us. They are the food for our journey into holiness. They unite us with a praying community”

The least holy person, we were led to believe, is likely to be the ordinary man, woman or child who didn't seem to have much time to do "holy things" because they were too busy making a living, looking after each other and their families and would be lucky to "scrape into Heaven" by going to Mass and confession as often as they could.

Even though we celebrate the Feast of All Saints of Ireland on November 6, we would still hesitate to include among those saints ordinary people, people like our parents or grandparents, people whom we know loved us as best they could but who at times were also frail, and, like ourselves, sinners.

We would hardly dare to hope that one day All Saints of Ireland





might even be our own Feast Day too. Yet, the most important history is written, Pope Francis tells us, by people “no history book ever mentions” (*Gaudete et Exultate*, hereafter GE, n. 8).

Last week while working on Lough Derg, I met a woman who spoke to me along the following lines: “I am really sorry I don’t seem to be able to pray any more. I have three children under the age of four and my husband and I struggle to make ends meet. We have to work whenever we can. My mother is sick a lot of the time and whatever time I have left over is spent caring for her. I used to be great at praying. I am really sorry, but God doesn’t get much of a ‘look in’ in my life nowadays.”

I was reminded of what Pope Francis has to say in *Gaudete et Exultate* as I tried to respond to her. What he says is this: for that woman, as for so many wonderful parents and other ordinary men and women, God is very much getting a ‘look in’ in her life but she does not realise it.

God is being encountered, met, responded to and loved in every gesture of care and kindness she shows to her family, in every struggling effort she makes to be faithful to her many responsibilities, in the joys that those moments bring her. God is getting a ‘look in’ also the way she faces the inevitable moments of sorrow and loss that will come her way with courage and perseverance.

Paraphrasing Pope Francis in *Gaudete et Exultate*, I said to her: “caring for your family and those you love is the particular path to holiness that God has laid out for you”. I was deeply moved when

tears of relief came into her eyes as she heard these words. She had felt that somehow doing the right thing by God, on the one hand, and caring for her loved ones, on the other, were in competition, and she couldn’t fulfill her responsibilities to both. It was a tremendous relief and source of joy to her to know that this was not the case.

“There is no ‘priority’ or ‘fast-track’ lane to holiness. We are all on an equal footing before God with equal opportunity...”

In a key paragraph Pope Francis writes: “Are you married? Be holy by caring for your husband or wife, as Christ does for the Church. Do you work for a living? Be holy by laboring with integrity and skill in the service of your brothers and sisters. Are you a parent or godparent? Be holy by patiently teaching the little ones how to follow Jesus” (GE n.14).

It’s not, of course, as though saying prayers and going to Mass are unimportant. Prayer and the sacraments nourish us. They are the food for our journey into holiness. They unite us with a praying community that supports and at times carries us. “No one is saved alone” (n. 6), Pope Francis says. We need to be alert to how the ‘rat-race’ can distract us from the need “to carry on a heartfelt dialogue with God” (n. 29). Holiness involves both prayer and action.

The universal call to holiness in the midst of our daily circumstances is the message of Pope Francis and it

is the message of Vatican II. In one of the key Vatican documents (*Lumen Gentium*, 40), we read: “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; by this holiness as such a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society.”

Vatican II levels the playing pitch when it comes to holiness while telling us that we all must get on the pitch, so to speak. There is no “priority” or “fast-track” lane to holiness. We are all on an equal footing before God with equal opportunity and responsibility to respond to the call to holiness in the unique manner and way God has planned for each one of us. “The important thing is that each believer discern his or her own path” (GE, n. 11).

The call to holiness is also a call to happiness. The title of the Exhortation, in Latin, *Gaudete et Exultate*, “Rejoice and be glad”, reminds us of this. It comes from Matthew 5:12 and is part of the Sermon on the Mount in which we find the Beatitudes.

Chapter 2 Two subtle enemies of holiness

Having mapped out how we are all called to holiness in our own special and unique ways, Pope Francis then cautions against two false ideas of holiness that can lead us away, which he identifies as the ancient heresies of Gnosticism and Pelagianism, still with us today in new forms.

In ancient times Gnosticism

[see panel on Page 20] was a type of religious approach that tended to emphase secret knowledge, and which understood God in an abstract way, as though pure spirit, rather than as having become incarnate – flesh and blood – among us, like us in all things but sin. When Gnosticism influenced Christianity in the ancient world, it led to Christians underplaying the humanity of Christ. In turn, this led people to misunderstand their own humanity and that holiness was to be found within the human condition, that is, within the ordinary events of our daily lives, mostly low-key, ordinary and uneventful, rather than by attempting to run away from or escape from these.

Pope Francis says that Gnosticism presumes a subjective faith based on knowledge that is meant to console us but ultimately keeps us locked into our own thoughts and feelings. Gnostics, he says, tend to think of the intellect as something abstract, separate from the flesh, with the effect that they disembodied God and do not understand the depths of his charity. They can reduce Christianity to a kind of system, where people measure perfection not by charity but by knowledge.

This kind of rationalism, that is, seeing everything in terms of reason alone, is not utterly contrary to Christianity, the Pope warns, but instead can be found throughout it in the temptation to think that the entirety of the Faith can be neatly packaged and explained; he warns that when somebody has an answer for every question it may be a sign that they are on the wrong road, unaware of how God can surprise us

or be present where we least expect, even in lives devastated by vices and addictions.

We need to be careful to avoid mistaking our understandings of Christ’s teachings for the teaching itself, he says, or thinking that we somehow feel superior to people because we know or can explain things that are beyond others.

“A healthy and humble use of reason in order to reflect on the theological and moral teaching of the Gospel is one thing,” Pope Francis says. “It is another to reduce Jesus’ teaching to a cold and hard logic that seeks to dominate everything.”

Pelagianism [see panel on Page 21] had its roots in the recognition that Christian knowledge is not enough, but simply transformed that error by attributing holiness to personal effort and human will. This forgets how all holiness comes from God, and excludes the workings of divine mercy and grace in our lives.

There is a danger in speaking warmly of God’s grace while ultimately trusting in observance of rules of fidelity to styles of Catholicism, and forgetting how grace does not heal our weaknesses once and for all in this life. In this, it ignores how God can help people grow by building on their nature, with holiness being a journey in which grace works through time by transforming us progressively. It is crucial, the Pontiff says, to learn to walk in union with God, recognising that we dwell in him.

The Church has repeatedly taught, he says, that we are justified by God’s grace, not by our own efforts, with even our cooperation

Gnosticism

Gnosticism, which derives from the Greek word ‘knowledge’, is the modern name for a variety of sects and religious beliefs that became prominent against the background of the flowering of Christianity in the 2nd Century.

At the heart of Gnosticism is the belief that the material world is bad and the spiritual realm is good. Contradicting the Genesis account of Creation where God describes the material world as ‘very good’, Gnostics viewed the material world as irredeemable, and sought to focus solely on things of the spirit.

This hatred of the material world didn’t just apply to objects but also to our own bodies. They held that our souls are trapped inside our bodies, much like gold in mud. Theologians and philosophers often refer to this idea as ‘dualism’.

The goal for the Gnostics then was to escape our inferior bodies and reach new spiritual heights, which was only possible through a special secret knowledge given to a few select people. This knowledge, Gnostics believed, was given by Jesus and through learning

and living it, you would receive salvation.

Of course, given that Gnostics hated all things physical, they maintained that Christ wasn’t really incarnate, but purely a spiritual being. It may have looked like he had a body, but this was just an illusion. He actually came to save people from their bodies.

Often in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries, Gnostics would try to promote their ideas as true forms of Christianity by writing false gospels and attributing them to the disciples of Jesus. The 2nd Century Gospel of Judas for example, recounts how Judas Iscariot was really Jesus’ true disciple, as Jesus had taught him the real secrets of his divine message.

Belief

The Church, however, has routinely condemned Gnosticism for a number of reasons, mainly because it suggests that salvation is based on how much you know, and secondly, because it espouses the belief that our bodies are separate from our souls.

Catholics believe that we are ‘body-soul composites’, which is to say, there is intimate unity between our bodies and souls. The body, rather than a mere appendage, is conjoined to the soul, and it is this relationship that constitutes the human person. This theological belief is primarily rooted in the Incarnation, where Jesus truly became flesh, and in the Resurrection where it was not just Jesus’ spirit that rose again, but also his body.

Often, we have the misbelief that in Heaven we will be disembodied spirits, but Catholics hold that in Heaven we also have bodies. We’re not entirely sure what they will look like but following the example of Jesus who had a transformed body after he rose from the dead, we can gain an insight as to what it might be like.

As a reminder of the heresy of Gnosticism and the true character of Catholicism, simply remember the words we pray during the Nicene Creed: “I look forward to the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come”.

with God’s grace itself being the fruit of that same grace. This should be grounds for gratitude and humility, and something to be accepted with joy: our lives and our freedom are gifts from God, freely given, and never earned.

We should remember this, and avoid the temptation towards an unloving complacency which can entail obsessions with law, with social and political advantages, with the minutiae of Church liturgy and practice, with vanity over practical concerns, or with programmes of self-help and personal fulfilment.

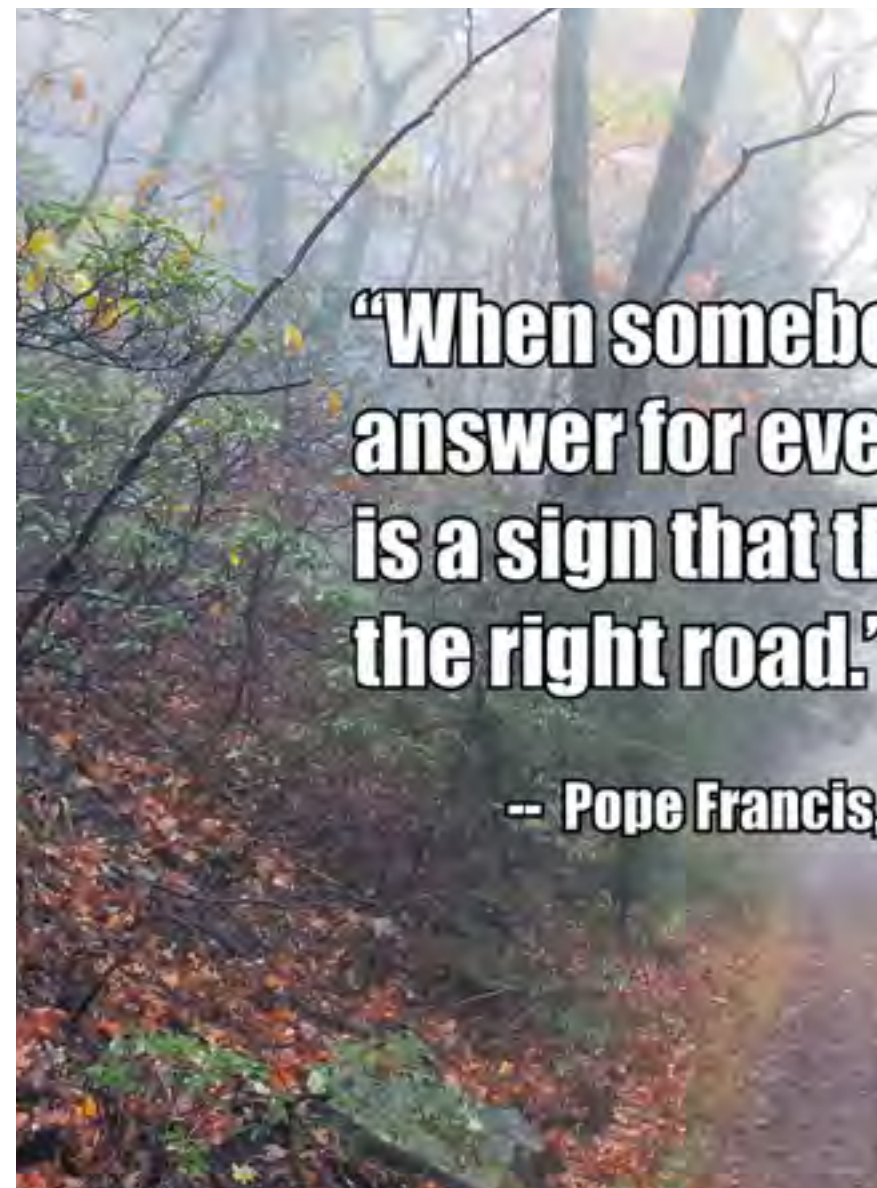
Obsessions with these things can prevent Christians from being led by the Spirit in the way of love, communicating the beauty and joy of the Gospel, and seeking out the lost amongst those who thirst for Christ. Too often, the Pope cautions, obsessions with rules or customs can make the Church seem a museum piece or an elitist club, causing whole communities or movements to “end up fossilised...or corrupt”, and with human strictures and structures complicating the Gospel in a way that leaves openings for the workings of grace.

To avoid this, Pope Francis says, we should all remind ourselves of the hierarchy of virtues with charity at the very centre, and with Jesus calling us to see the faces of God and each other – and God, he says, is reflected in the faces of our brothers and sisters, especially those who are most vulnerable.

COMMENTARY

Many contrasting pathways for living our lives are held before us in contemporary society. They all promise prosperity and wellbeing but they generally prove illusory or, at best, transient. Pope Francis takes some time to deal with these illusory pathways.

He dwells especially on those that are counterfeiting, that is, that



look like authentic Christian pathways to holiness but in reality are subtle yet fatally misleading cul-de-sacs. When he refers to concepts such as Pelagianism and Gnosticism (see Chapter 2) he is using language we struggle to understand at first. Here he is referring to heresies that are as old as Christianity itself and that tend to recur in every age. A heresy is a belief that may in part be true but is not the whole truth and in fact, on its own, distorts and misrepresents the truth.

“Nothing expresses holiness in our daily lives more simply than the Beatitudes, which Pope Francis refers to as ‘a Christian’s identity card’”

We have taken some time to explain these terms because what the Pope has to say here is very important. Regarding Gnosticism, in a nutshell, Pope Francis is saying that we won’t talk our way into Heaven or get there by seeking to impress others with all the clever things we think we know about God that no one else knows.

Regarding Pelagianism, named after the monk Pelagius (ca 360 to 420 AD), we sometimes mistakenly believe we can “earn our own eternal keep”, so to speak. Rather than seeing eternal life with God as ultimately God’s gift to us, Pelagius felt we could attain heaven solely by personal effort. In this case heaven would be like a reward we could claim if along the pathway of life we ‘gathered enough coupons’, so to

speak, for being good. Many people still see getting to heaven in these terms. It has been forgotten, as Pope Francis writes, “that everything ‘depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy’ (Rom. 9:16) and that ‘he first loved us’ (cf 1 Jn 4:19)” (GE, n. 48).

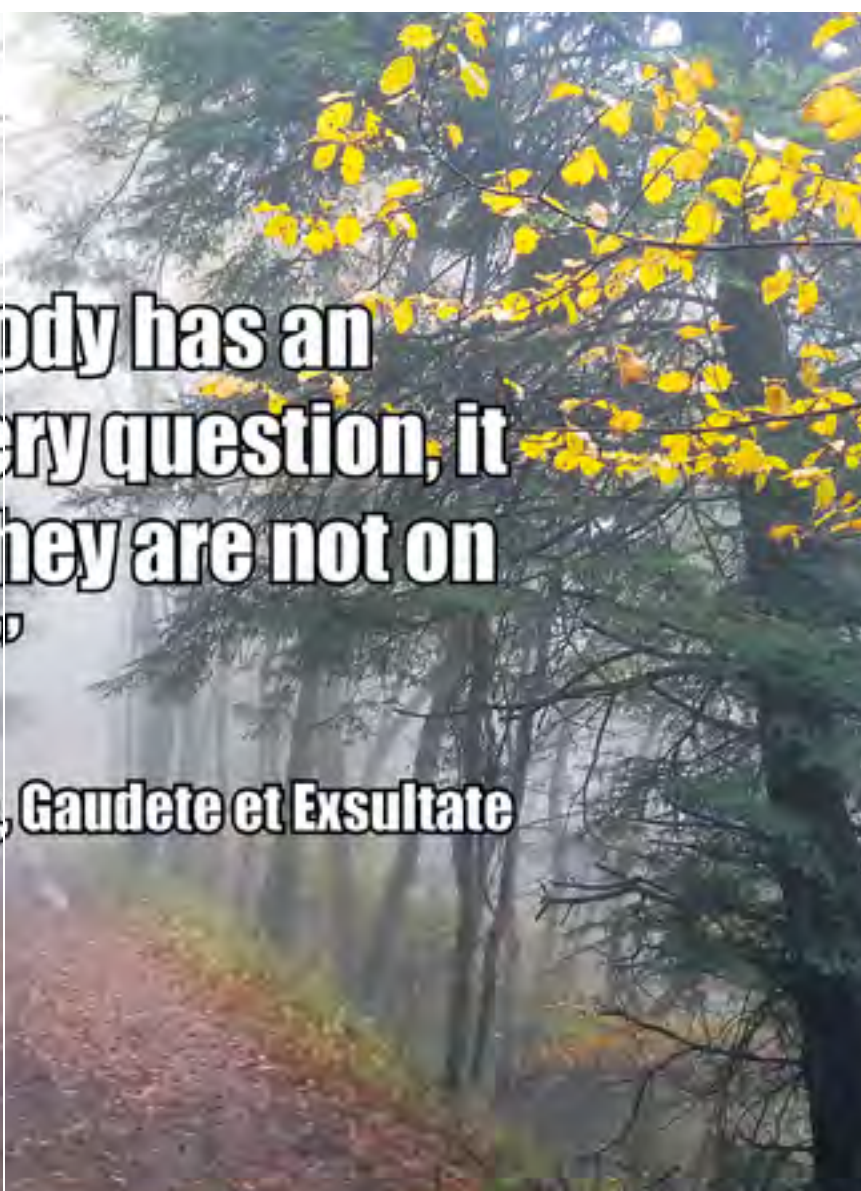
We see Pelagianism showing itself today in many self-help programmes that create the illusion that somehow we can manufacture happiness or bestow upon our own lives, by our own efforts, ultimate fulfillment.

Chapter 3 In the light of the Master

Nothing expresses holiness in our daily lives more simply than the Beatitudes, which Pope Francis refers to as “a Christian’s identity card”. The words ‘happy’ and ‘blessed’ in the Beatitudes are synonyms for ‘holy’, with the Beatitudes expressing how “those faithful to God and his word, by their self-giving, gain true happiness”.

The Beatitudes are challenging, running against how the world does things, and can only be achieved if the Spirit empowers us to do so.

● Wealth ensures nothing, the Pope says, and wealth can lead to a self-satisfaction that leaves no room for God, other people, or the enjoyment of life’s most important things. We should cultivate an indifference to created things so we do not set our hearts on them, he says, noting how according to Luke’s Gospel Jesus invites us to a plain and austere life.



situations, but someone who sees things as they are and sympathises with pain and sorrow can touch life's depths and find true happiness, consoled by Jesus. Such a person can share in the suffering of others, helping them to deal with loss and grow closer to God and others.

● Those who yearn for righteousness will be satisfied eventually, the Pope says, pointing out that Jesus offers a perfect justice that is not of this world and unmarred by petty interests and manipulation. True justice in our lives requires us to be just in our decisions and especially in the pursuit of justice for the poor and weak.

“If we meet others’ faults and limitations with tenderness and meekness, we can help them without in a way that nourishes and sustains both them and us...”

● Mercy entails giving, helping and serving others but also includes forgiveness and understanding. The golden rule is “in everything, do to others as you would have them do to you”, with this rule applied in every case, especially ones where situations make decisions difficult. We are called to be merciful always, to refrain from judging and condemning people, and to forgive. We need, Pope Francis says, to think of ourselves “as an army of the forgiven” and to show others the mercy we have been shown.

● Nothing stained by falsehood has any real worth to God, the Pope says, noting that God sees all, and knows what is impure and insincere. Our love is called to be pure, with our commitment to our brothers and

● The world can be a place of pride and vanity where people pigeonhole others based on ideas or customs, and even how they speak or dress and where it's normal to seek to dominate others. Constant anger and impatience with others can leave us drained and weary, though if we meet others faults and limitations with tenderness and meekness, we

can help them without in a way that nourishes and sustains both them and us. Meekness is an expression of interior poverty that helps us place our trust in the Lord and see God's promises accomplished in our lives.

● The world says entertainment and pleasure make for the good life, and disregards sickness and sorrow, avoiding or concealing painful

Pelagianism

Pelagianism, sometimes called the Pelagian Heresy, is a 5th Century heresy believed to have been taught by a British monk called Pelagius. He was born around 360AD and died in the 420s. Against the teachings of the Church, Pelagianism holds that Original Sin did not taint human nature and that humans can will themselves to salvation without the grace of God.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes it like this: “man could, by the natural power of free will and without the necessary help of God's grace, lead a morally good life” (CCC, 406).

Pelagius held that the Fall in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve disobeyed God was simply an example of humans behaving badly, and consequently there is no Original Sin from which Adam's descendants need to be redeemed.

In other words, every single person is born as a blank slate with no inherent bent toward sinning. In this way, people can freely choose between good and evil without the help of God – holiness

can be attained entirely through one's unaided free will by being good. Having ceased from sin, the Christian would be acceptable to God through their own merit or achievement.

This belief didn't go unnoticed by the Church because it markedly undermined orthodox teaching on concepts such as original sin and grace.

Serious issue

Pelagius, for example, had a serious issue with infant baptism – it wasn't needed as there was no original sin from which to be cleansed! He also thought that grace didn't affect or prompt good works even in the slightest. In order to dispel confusion over these beliefs, the Council of Carthage in 418 provided corrections on the errors of early Pelagians. The council stated that new-born infants must be baptised on account of Original Sin, and that without God's grace it is absolutely impossible to perform good works.

Thus, the Church reaffirmed its long-held position that it is only

through the grace of God that we can perform good works, and also that it is grace that creates the possibility for salvation.

Although Pelagius died 16 centuries ago, the beliefs that he created have not yet been forgotten and routinely show up from time to time. Nowadays, when most people talk about Pelagianism, they aren't really referring to this sophisticated but incorrect historical idea, but rather a mentality of self-centredness, individualism and a false notion of autonomy.

This has become a problem common in today's much more secular society where the notion of God's sustenance and direction is rejected. Instead, it has been replaced with a focus on worldly pursuits based on the belief that true happiness can be reached by concentrating on oneself without recognising the power and presence of God in the world. Often, we can all be guilty of this, but always keep in mind: we can't be good or be saved without God.



sisters coming from the heart. A pure heart is one that loves God and neighbour genuinely and not simply in words.

● Gossip is the enemy of peace, which we are called to build in society; peace, friendship, and unity are preferable to conflict, the Pontiff says, even though this can be difficult to achieve. Peacemaking is hard work, calling for openness of mind and heart, since it is not about creating a paper consensus but about facing and resolving conflict head-on.

“Helping individuals, he adds, is not enough; social and economic justice are needed too, so there is no longer exclusion”

● Jesus' Gospel path may make us challenge and annoy society through how we live, and may lead us to be ridiculed and persecuted, but we ought not to long for an easy life “unless we wish to sink into an obscure mediocrity”. Persecutions for the sake of the Gospel are inevitable, and should not be confused with persecution brought upon our-

selves in response to the mistreatment of others. The Cross, through all genuine persecution, remains the source of our growth and sanctification, and it is holiness to continue to follow the Gospel path even if it causes us problems.

Jesus expands on the Beatitudes about mercy at Matthew 31-46, Pope Francis says, mapping out a clear criterion by which our holiness will be judged by God when he calls on us to recognise him in the poor and suffering. Holiness cannot be understood or lived apart from these demands, he says, saying how a Christian who encounters a homeless person on a cold night, for example, must see this person as “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”.

Helping individuals, he adds, is not enough; social and economic justice are needed too, so there is no longer exclusion.

Misleading ideologies can lead us to two harmful errors, he cautions. Warning of working to help others as though our actions stand apart from our personal relationship with Jesus, he points to great saints whose

mental prayer, Gospel reading, and love of God fuelled their passionate and effective commitment to others. The other key error is to dismiss the social engagement of Christians as superficial, secular, communist or populist, or to relativise it as though the only thing that matters is the one particular ethical issue or cause they themselves defend.

Prayer is essential to our love of God, he says, and the best way to judge its authenticity is the extent to which we are transformed by mercy, with the ultimate criterion on which we are judged being what we have done for others.

COMMENTARY

Front and centre of the map guiding us along the authentic path to happiness are the Beatitudes, which Pope Francis refers to as the Christian's identity card (*GE*, n.63) and upon which he invites us to meditate in Chapter 3 of the Exhortation.

The kind of life-style to which they invite us, if only we could adopt it, is a sure guarantee of deep joy both in this life and in the next. Mercy, is the key; both showing mercy to others and becoming willing and able recipients of God's mercy and the mercy of others ourselves. This is the message that lies at the heart of *Gaudete et Exultate*.

In each of Pope Francis' documents to date he has provided a biblical text for our reflection. For instance, as we saw last week, in *The Joy of Love* he provides us with a beautiful reflection in Chapter 4 on 1 Corinthians 13: "Love is always patient and kind..."

With each of these texts we could make a very worthwhile retreat for ourselves reflecting patiently on the passage and the Pope's commentary in the context of our everyday lives.

Chapter 4 Signs of holiness in today's world

Having shown how the Beatitudes and Matthew 25:31-46 map out a kind of blueprint for living a holy life, Pope Francis then turns to describe what he sees as five great expressions of love for God and neighbour of particular importance in today's world given certain dangers and limitations present in modern society.

First, he says, a solid grounding in God can give us an inner strength and peace that enables us to persevere amid life's ups and downs, to endure hostility, betrayal and failings on the part of others, and to give a witness of holiness through patience and constancy in doing good.

Along with accompanying others in bad times, this should entail us recognising our aggressive and selfish inclinations, without letting them take root and without being drawn into networks of verbal violence such as on the internet and the media, including the Catholic media, where the commandment against bearing false witness is sometimes completely ignored.

Looking down on others and always trying to teach them lessons can be a subtle form of violence, he says, with the path to holy humility entailing humiliations that we must learn to suffer and offer up. Daily



humiliations, he says, can include keeping silent to save our families, praising others rather than boasting of ourselves, or choosing unwelcome tasks, even bearing injustices so they can be offered up. This humility and freedom from selfishness can help us dare to demand justice or defend the weak, regardless of what it will cost our reputations.

The second sign of holiness today, the Pontiff says, is joy and a sense of humour. The saints, he says, are joyful and full of good humour, radiating a positive and hopeful spirit, even in times of affliction. Though hard times come, the supernatural joy born of trust in God's love for us endures, bringing "deep security, serene hope and a spiritual fulfilment that the world cannot understand or appreciate".

In contrast, he cautions, sadness can be a sign of ingratitude and an inability to recognise God's gifts, and while passing pleasures can be got from today's individualistic and consumerist culture, this is not to be confused with true joy.

A bold and passionate impulse to speak out, to share the Good News and leave a mark in the world, is a third sign of holiness, Pope Francis says. Jesus' assurance that he is with us to the end of the world should enable us to go forth and serve with the same courage that the Spirit stirred up in the Apostles.

The true courage of a life lived in a way that is open to God should lead us to spend our lives in Christ's service and not fear reaching out, leaving safe havens and the shores and closed spaces we know. God, he says, impels us constantly to set out anew to the fringes and beyond, to where humanity is most wounded, and where men and women, even

beneath the appearance of a shallow conformity, continue to seek an answer to the question of life's meaning.

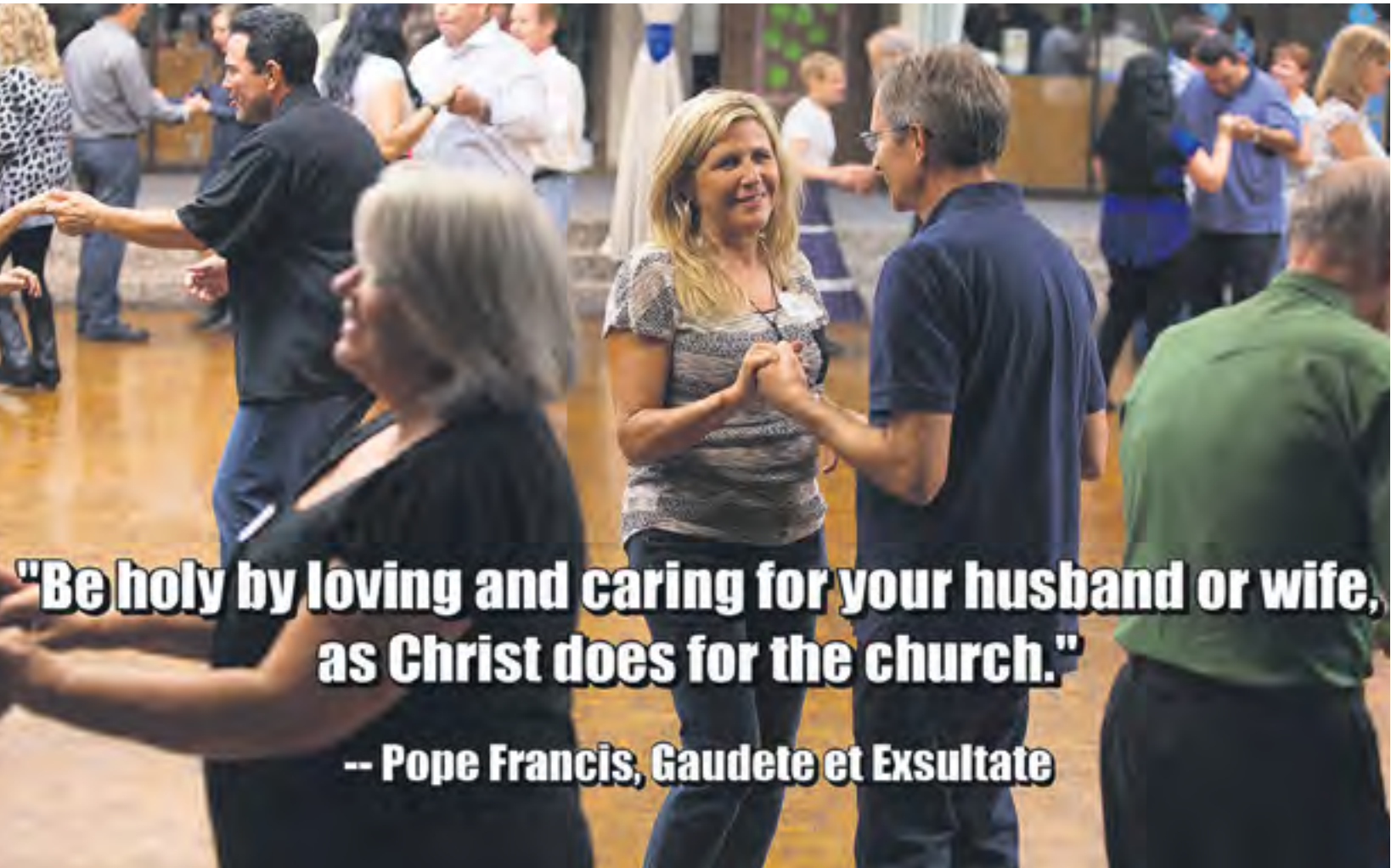
We must not fear to let the Lord shake us from our complacency, to rethink our usual way of doing things, and to be inspired by those missionaries who have been and are enthusiastic about sharing true life, challenging us to abandon a dull and dreary mediocrity.

A fourth sign of holiness, the Pontiff reminds us, is community – in isolation we can lose our sense of reality and inner clarity, but growth in holiness is a journey in community. Monasteries and other religious communities are obvious examples of this, and Pope Francis reminds us too that families are communities, with spouses in holy marriages being means for each other's sanctification. Living and working alongside others is a path of spiritual growth.

Sharing the word and celebrating the Eucharist together fosters friendship and solidarity and makes us holy and missionary communities, giving rise to authentic and shared mystical experiences that, though important, are less frequent and less important than the sort of small everyday things to which Jesus asked the disciples to pay attention.

Far from a growing consumerist individualism that tends to isolate us in a quest for a selfish well-being, a community "that cherishes the little details of love", he says, is a place where the risen Lord is present and where we can be granted consoling experiences of God.

Finally, he says, outlining the fifth sign, holiness consists of a habitual openness to God, expressed in prayer and adoration. While prayer need



not be lengthy or intense, it is essential to holiness, the Pope believes. Our attitude should be prayerful, he says, attentive as much as possible to the presence of God, and some moments spent alone before God is necessary.

“Trust-filled prayer is a response of a heart open to encountering God face to face, where all is peaceful and the quiet voice of the Lord can be heard,” the Pope says, explaining that the paths of holiness to which the Lord calls us can be discerned in that silence. For each disciple, he says, it is necessary to listen to the Master’s words and learn from him always. Prayerful silence, he stresses, must never be regarded as an escape from or rejection of the world, but must instead be an opportunity to allow ourselves to be healed and transformed by God.

God entered into our history, the Pope adds, and so our prayer is interwoven with memories; we should think of our own history when we pray, asking God to shed his light on it and reveal his mercy. Prayers of supplication, petition, and intercession, where we ask God for things, are expressions of our faith in God, our perseverance in hope, and our love for our neighbours.

Reading of the Scriptures, he concludes, enable us to listen to Jesus’ voice, and leads us to the Eucharist where God is truly present and where we renew our covenant with him and allow him to transform us.

COMMENTARY

In this chapter Pope Francis offers us five signs of holiness, what he calls “great expressions of love of God and neighbor that I consider of particular importance in the light of certain dangers and limitations in today’s culture” (GE, n. 111).

People will be struck by how ordinary the attributes he asks us to cultivate actually are: perseverance,

patience, meekness, joy, humour, passion, courage, prayerfulness and valuing community. Yet in the ‘rat-race’ of life, in what he called in *Laudato Si’*, “the age of rapidification”, it can be very difficult to develop and sustain these attributes in our daily lives. We can be easily distracted, indeed paralysed in patterns of behavior that have us only half-living our lives.

As Pope Francis says, “no one is saved alone as an isolated individual” (GE, n. 6). So here’s a suggestion. We need companions along our path to holiness. We need spiritual guides. Could we consider availing of the Sacrament of Penance as an aid to our growth in these “great expressions of love”?

We talk a lot today about adult faith formation but as a Church we have done too little to help adult Christians make a genuinely adult confession.

Too often confession consists in simply listing our sinful shortcomings, much the same as we did in our first confession as children, saying we are sorry, receiving absolution and performing a simple penance, usually a prayer. I have had men and women in their 70s confessing to me that, along with “the odd curse” and “missing their morning and evening prayers”, they were also “disobedient to their parents”, parents long deceased!

As a priest working in Germany, I learned that children in that country seemed to have been better prepared for confession than back at home in Ireland.

Generally, they didn’t come in with ‘the usual shopping list’ learned off as a formula. Instead, they were guided to keep an eye on a particular aspect of their lives in need of growth and reform. It could be laziness at home, selfishness in regard to caring for others, not making enough time to pray or to learn about God, and so on. During confes-



sion they would report on how they had been getting on, express sorrow if they hadn’t been doing well and renew their commitment to growth before God.

If things had been going well then the confessor might invite them to identify another area of their life in need of attention, like a gardener finding a new patch in need of tilling and planting. “When, in God’s presence, we examine our life’s journey”, Pope Francis says, “no areas can be off limits” (GE, n. 175)

The Sacrament of Penance isn’t meant to be just a sporadic wiping clean of the slate but rather a regular encounter with the mercy of Christ guiding our personal spiritual growth in a programmatic way. In the Sacrament of Penance the confessor can also be experienced as a supportive and at times challenging “soul-friend”, *Anam Cara*, as was commonplace in early Irish Christianity.

Over the years I have invited penitents to consider the Sacrament of Penance in these terms and they have found it helpful as I have myself.

As Pope Francis, following St Ignatius, reminds us, we only ever grow in small incremental steps. Holiness is forged not so much through our successes in living the Christian life but by our perseverance and commitment, our fidelity and our passion. In contrast, sin is the stubborn refusal to grow especially where God is calling forth new life in us (see GE, n.169).

So, imagine going to confession and with the confessor’s help we recognise and acknowledge certain ‘Stop Signs’ to spiritual growth in our lives. We discern divine ‘No Go Areas’ where God is not really welcome: a pattern of selfishness, a neglected relationship, an addiction, or a gift that could be put at the service of the community or the Gospel but is lying unused. It might be a stubborn refusal to forgive or accept forgiveness.

We can be overwhelmed and even paralysed by how much and how miserably we fall short of what God asks of us.

To avoid this, and bearing in mind that we only grow and change in small, careful, deliberate steps, would it be helpful during confession to focus in particular on one or two areas in need of growth and have the confessor help us to make a plan to get out of whatever rut our life might be in and grow a little more into the person God has planned for us to be?

Chapter 4 of this exhortation is a very helpful Examination of Conscience for a truly adult confession. Note in particular how holiness is not just about ‘me and God’ but relates to my contribution to the life of the Christian community and the society in which I live. Perhaps in Ireland we have over-emphasised holiness as something private ‘between me and my God’ and therefore also sin as something that only affects ourselves before God. “Growth in holiness is a journey in community, side by side with others”, Pope Francis reminds us (GE, n. 141).

Chapter 5: Spiritual combat, vigilance and discernment

The Christian life is a constant battle, Pope Francis says, not merely against the world, worldly mentalities and our own weaknesses and inclinations, but against the devil, who Jesus warned against and in whose defeats Jesus rejoices.

The devil, the Pope says, is not simply a myth or figure of speech, and from earliest times his supernatural reality has been recognised, with him being present from the very first pages of the Scriptures.

It is not for nothing that Jesus concluded the Our Father with a petition that we be delivered from evil – a precise translation of that would ask that we be delivered from “the evil one”.

Dismissing the reality of the devil, and thinking of him only as a symbol causes us to lower our guards and exposes ourselves to his threats. “The devil does not need to possess us,” the Pontiff warns. “He poisons us with the venom of hatred, desolation, envy and vice. When we let down our guard, he takes advantage of it to destroy our lives, our families and our communities.”

Those who do not realise how our path to holiness is a constant struggle will be prey to failure or mediocrity, Pope Francis says, explaining that God has given us powerful weapons in faith-filled prayer, meditation on the Scriptures, the celebration of Mass, Eucharistic adoration, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, works of charity, community life, and missionary outreach.

“Mary lived Jesus’ Beatitudes like none other: she teaches us the ways of holiness, and walks by our sides, consoling us, not judging us, and never needing to be told what is happening in our lives”

The path to holiness is a source of peace and joy, given by the Spirit, but we must be attentive to our temptations and failures, the Pope continues, warning that the spiritual corruption that arises from a lack of attention is a comfortable and self-satisfied form of blindness where deception, slander, and egotism become acceptable.

Discernment, then, is vital to help us see whether things come from the Holy Spirit or from the spirit of the world, or from the devil. This is a gift of the Holy Spirit, cultivated through prayer, reflection, reading and good counsel.

Distinct from intelligence and common sense, and all the more necessary in a world filled with distractions, discernment requires us to listen to God and to what is within us and around us.

This is needed at all times, the Pope says, not merely when facing crucial decisions. It is a weapon in spiritual combat that empowers us



Pope Francis celebrates Mass at the Palexpo Convention Center in Geneva this month. Photos: CNS

to follow the Lord more faithfully and is often exercised in small everyday things that might mistakenly be dismissed as irrelevant. He urges all Christians to engage in a daily examination of conscience in dialogue with the Lord, and stresses that all Christians need the silence of prolonged prayer to help us better to understand how God is speaking to us.

Even in prayer we can close ourselves to God’s will, so prayerful

discernment must be born of a readiness to listen, the Pope says, with our attitude of listening entailing obedience to the Gospel and to the Church’s teaching authority, as we seek in the treasury of the Church for whatever is most fruitful for addressing the problems of today.

A key condition for progress in discernment, the Pope says, is an understanding that God’s timetable is different to ours and that he

has patience with people and does not act rashly. Happiness is experienced, he says, when we accept that God’s ways are mysterious.

In all aspects of our life we can continue to grow in holiness, Pope Francis stresses, and we should not fear to open up even the most difficult parts of our lives to God who wishes to bring us to fulfilment.

Finally, he says, Mary lived Jesus’ Beatitudes like none other: she

teaches us the ways of holiness, and walks by our sides, consoling us, not judging us, and never needing to be told what is happening in our lives. She is, the Pope says, always there for us to turn to when we pray the Hail Mary.

COMMENTARY

Every time we pray the Our Father we ask to be delivered from evil yet do we believe that we are in any real danger of succumbing to evil? This short chapter will be difficult for many because it confronts us with the reality of evil in our world, a reality we often seek to deny. Yet evil affects us all, often in subtle ways.

False and deceiving gods wear familiar and friendly faces and Pope Francis has named these for us not only here but also in *Laudato Si’* in terms of the degradation of our common home and lack of respect for the rhythm both of human nature and of ecology. Here, he invites us to be mature and adult in discerning how evil is present and active in our lives and in our communities and to be clever and committed in combatting it.

At the same time he reminds us that Christ triumphs over evil through the cross, which is “borne with combative tenderness against the assaults of evil” (*GE*, n. 163). The path to holiness involves embracing the cross that is given to us, confident that we do not carry it alone or in vain.

