

# **A Reflection on GAUDATE ET EXSULTATE (Rejoice and be Glad) of Pope Francis**

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## **Introduction**

Good morning and welcome to our retreat. I wish to thank the Adult Faith Formation of St. Michael's Church for organizing this retreat. This is our third year of having this retreat. Taking time from your busy schedule to spend time with the Lord in prayer and reflection, is one way of deepening your relationship with God, and a step on the journey to holiness.

The Apostolic Exhortation *GAUDATE ET EXSULTATE* (Rejoice and be Glad) of Pope Francis is tremendously rich and insightful hence one paper cannot adequately unveil its invaluable content and message. This Apostolic Exhortation re-emphasizes the universal call to holiness of all Catholics. This paper gives an overview of *GAUDATE ET EXSULTATE*, and highlights some salient parts of this document, with regard to our call to holiness and the desire to seek holiness. I have interjected some of my own reflection with regard to the call to holiness.

## **GAUDATE ET EXSULTATE (Rejoice and be Glad)**

The Apostolic Exhortation *GAUDATE ET EXSULTATE* was issued by Pope Francis on March 19, 2018. Pope Francis expresses his aim of issuing this document: "My modest goal is to repropose the call to holiness in a practical way for our own time, with all its risk, challenges and opportunities. For the Lord has chosen each one of us 'to be holy and blameless before him' (Eph 1:4)" (Gaudate Et Exsultate, no. 2). This document is essentially about the call of each person in the Church to holiness in virtue of his or her baptism and confirmation. Pope Francis reiterates Second Vatican Council's teaching of the universal call of all Catholics to holiness. However, Pope Francis offers practical ways by which we should seek and attain holiness in our contemporary society.

Pope Francis presents holiness as not something for the selected few, especially clergy and religious, but for all Catholics. Oftentimes, we think we have to flee from the world in order to attain holiness. But that is not the case. Pope Francis encourages all Catholics to eagerly seek holiness according to their state in life. Pope Francis encourages us to think of the saint as someone next door, not someone far away. Thus, your mother, father, husband, wife, son, daughter, brother, sister, fellow parishioner, etc., can be a saint. And you too can be a saint.

## **The call to holiness**

The incessant yearning and desire to be closer to God is a journey towards holiness of life. To be holy means to be more and more like God and to be more Christ-like in our relationship with God. To be holy is to bridge the gap between the profession of faith and the practice of that same faith.

God always calls His people to be holy:

- "For I am the Lord your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy" (Lev 11:44).

- “For I am the Lord who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:45)
- “Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev 19:2).
- “He who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (1 Pet 1:15-16).

The basis for the call of the people of Israel to holiness, is their covenant relationship with God, which sets them apart from all other nations to serve and worship the Lord God. If God is to dwell in their midst, in their tabernacle, then they must avoid all impurities, and strive to be holy since their God is holy. Holiness, first and foremost, belongs to God. God is holy and it is in God’s nature to be holy. Holiness is fundamental to God’s nature. God is the source of all holiness. Thus, we can only talk of our call to holiness in relation to God because God is holy. The concept of the “holy” pertains to that which is ultimate, that is, God and the Sacred. However, holiness can be applied by extension to relationships with that source of the ultimate. It is in this regard that holiness is applicable to human beings because of our relationship with God and the grace of God which makes us holy. Since we are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27), the desire to be holy is innate in each of us because of the longing for God in our lives.

Our Lord Jesus enjoins us: “You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). Holiness becomes a way of being with God in Christ Jesus. Holiness is a response to the command of Jesus that we should be holy and perfect like our heavenly Father. Our call to holiness as Christians means that we must strive to be converted to God and move away from those things not of God. All Christians have been called and set apart to serve God in virtue of their baptism and confirmation. As St. Peter tells us: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9).

### **Pauline usage of holiness**

When Paul addressed Christians as holy ones, saints, he referred to those “set apart by faith in Christ, as opposed to those who are not believers” (*Dictionary of Christian Spirituality, p. 481*). Let us look at Paul’s greetings in some of his epistles:

- “To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints” (Romans 1:7).
- “To the Church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints” (1 Corinthians 1:2).
- “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 1:1).
- “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi” (Philippians 1:1).

## The universal call to holiness

The Second Vatican Council, in its document *Lumen Gentium*, emphasizes the universal call to holiness of all Christians: clergy and laity alike. The sacrament of baptism unifies all Christians. Although there is a diversity of gifts and ministries in members of the Mystical Body of Christ, there is a common call to virtue and sanctity of life. As *Lumen Gentium* has pointed out: “In the Church not everyone marches along the same path, yet all are called to sanctity and have obtained an equal privilege of faith through the justice of God” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 32). It states further: “Therefore all in the Church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 39). *Lumen Gentium* goes on to elaborate on the necessity of holiness for the bishop, priest, married couples and parents, widows and single people. By living out their vocations faithfully, all contribute to the “holiness and activity of the Church” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 41).

However, the practice of holiness differs according to the different states of life. Thus, a bishop’s way of striving for holiness is not the same way as a married person. The married person’s approach to holiness varies from a single person. And for lay persons, one’s profession largely determines the most suitable and fruitful ways of seeking holiness. Thus, a soldier’s practice of spirituality and holiness differs from a trader, a banker differs from a full-time house wife, a university student differs from a transporter, and a politician differs from a priest or religious.

St. Francis De Sales (1567-1623 AD) in his writing on the *Devout Life* underscores the various ways of expressing holiness according to one’s state or profession in life:

- “The practice of devotion must differ for the gentleman and the artisan, the servant and the prince, the widow, young girl or wife.... Is the solitary life of a Carthusian suited to a bishop? Should those who are married practice the poverty of a Capuchin? If workmen spent as much time in church as religious, if religious were exposed to the same pastoral calls as bishop, such devotion would be ridiculous and cause intolerable disorder” (A reading from the Introduction to the *Devout Life* in DIVINE OFFICE, VOL. I, p. 97\*).

## GAUDATE ET EXSULTATE on the call to holiness

The first chapter of *GAUDATE ET EXSULTATE* is on the call to holiness. Pope Francis urges all in the Church, especially lay persons, not to be discouraged by the example of holiness which appears unattainable. Instead, all should strive for holiness according to one’s state in life. Pope Francis said that “To be holy does not require being a bishop, a priest or a religious” (*Gaudate Et Exsultate*, no. 14). To be holy means to love others to the full. This is how Pope Francis describes holiness:

- “At its core, holiness is experiencing in union with Christ, the mysteries of his life. It consists in uniting ourselves to the Lord’s death and Resurrection in a unique and personal way, constantly dying and rising anew with him. But it can also entail reproducing in our own lives various aspects of Jesus’ earthly life: his hidden life, his life in community, his closeness to the outcast, his poverty and other ways in which he showed his self-sacrificing love” (*Gaudate Et Exsultate*, no. 20).

Pope Francis urges Catholics to seek holiness in both solitude and service. We should live our lives in such a way that every minute of our lives is a step towards growth in holiness.

### The beatitudes as signpost to holiness

Pope Francis in chapter three uses the beatitudes, as taught by Jesus Christ in the sermon on the mount, to illustrate the path to holiness. He treats each beatitude and links it to holiness. He concludes each of the beatitudes this way:

- “Being poor of heart: that is holiness” (Gaudate Et Exsultate, no. 70).
- “Reacting with meekness and humility: that is holiness” (Gaudate Et Exsultate, no. 74).
- “Knowing how to mourn with others: that is holiness” (Gaudate Et Exsultate, no. 76).
- “Hungering and thirsting for righteousness: that is holiness” (Gaudate Et Exsultate, no. 79).
- “Seeing and acting with mercy: that is holiness” (Gaudate Et Exsultate, no. 82).
- “Keeping a heart free of all that tarnishes love: that is holiness” (Gaudate Et Exsultate, no. 86).
- “Sowing peace all around us: that is holiness” (Gaudate Et Exsultate, no. 89).
- “Accepting daily the path of the Gospel, even though it may cause us problems: that is holiness” (Gaudate Et Exsultate, no. 94).

Pope Francis then used the Parable of the Last Judgement (Matthew 25:31-46) to underscore holiness. Essentially, holiness is measured in the degree of love of others. The more we excel in love of others, especially those seriously in need, the more we are on the path of holiness.

I wish to further highlight one of the beatitudes:

#### **“Blessed are the pure in heart, they shall see God” (Mt 5:8)**

To see God, face to face, is the hope and desire of all Christians. Thus, those who are poor in spirit, the meek of heart, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who promote peace in our world, and those who show mercy to others, will on the last day see the face of God. When our human nature is transformed, we can then see what no person can see with the ordinary eye; we shall see God. We shall gaze lovingly at God and see God face to face. On the other hand, seeing God can also occur *here and now*, though in an incomplete manner through contemplation in prayer. Contemplation in prayer is that sacred moment when the soul is so attuned to God that nothing matters again in this world. As St. Paul puts it: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12). St. John tells us: “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

This beatitude promises the blessedness of seeing God to those who are pure of heart. Thus, we should strive to purify our hearts through penance and works of charity so that we can stand the chance of seeing God. For the heart that is filled with the filth of sin and the dirt of this world shall not see God. Let the eyes of our souls be cleansed so that they can see what matters to God and then enjoy the blessedness of seeing God face to face. That is why the psalmist prays for a pure heart, “A pure heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit within me” (Psalm 51:12). Our hearts can become pure when they are constantly purified of sin. Then the eyes of the soul will be cleansed and the inward sight of the soul will enjoy the wonderful vision of God.

### The practical manifestation of holiness in our time

Chapter four of *GAUDATE ET EXSULTATE* emphasizes the signs of holiness in today’s world. First is solid grounding in God’s love. This consists of a person being patient and constant in doing good. Also, an inner peace and contentment that enables one to achieve calm and peace in a noisy, aggressive, and fast-pace society. This is a witness to holiness. To show love despite the pain and suffering one endures is a clear sign of holiness. Second, holiness is boldness, an impulse to evangelize and to leave a mark in the world. Holiness is manifested through boldness, zeal, and freedom to evangelize. As Catholics, we need to show the courage and boldness of the apostles and the early Christians in bearing witness to Christ and his Church.

Third, holiness cherishes community instead of isolation and individualism. As Pope Francis puts it: “Growth in holiness is a journey in community, side by side with others” (Gaudate Et Exsultate, no. 142). Community life as a recipe for holiness is lived in the family, parish, religious order, etc. Fourth, holiness is expressed through prayer. Prayer as the desire and yearning to be in communion with God is an integral part of holiness. Prayer here is how long but being in the spirit of prayer through my daily activity, always thinking of God all day long through my activity. Afterwards, one creates time and spend some time alone with God in prayer. Pope Francis notes: “For each disciple, it is essential to spend time with the Master, to listen to his words, and to learn from him always. Unless we listen, all our words will be nothing but useless chatter” (Gaudate Et Exsultate, no. 150). It is unimaginable to attain holiness without a consistent life of prayer.

### Conclusion

Pope Francis concludes *GAUDATE ET EXSULTATE* by invoking the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mary is a model of holiness and of living out the beatitudes. “Mary is the saint among the saints, blessed above all others” (Gaudate Et Exsultate, no. 176). Pope Francis through this Exhortation has rekindled the desire for holiness in all Catholics. Hence, all of us should continually strive to be saints. I may not feel like a saint today, but I should never give up the desire to be a saint. I should never relent in placing myself before the mercy of God. I should constantly seek God’s grace despite my sins and weaknesses. I can be a saint tomorrow because with God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26) and nothing is impossible to God (Luke 1:37).

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