

**ADDRESS OF ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE, APOSTOLIC NUNCIO, TO
THE LEGATUS CHAPTER OF WASHINGTON, DC
“AN INTRODUCTION TO THE APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *GAUDETE ET EXSULTATE*”
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Introduction

As the Apostolic Nuncio, I want to welcome you to the Nunciature, the “house of the Pope”, where Pope Francis stayed during his visit to the United States in 2015, but also where his predecessors, Benedict XVI and John Paul II, stayed. How fitting it is that I, a papal legate, have the honor of welcoming you, the D.C. Chapter of Legatus to the “house of the Pope”!

At the start of his Pontificate, Pope Francis issued an Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* – the Joy of the Gospel – which began with these words:

The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ, joy is constantly born anew. (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 1).

The Holy Father called upon the whole Church to rediscover its missionary spirit and to become joyful followers of Christ and heralds of the good news of salvation – to be missionary disciples. Following the two synods on the family, the Holy Father issued his second exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* – the Joy of Love, which sought to address the pastoral care of the family. It began very simply: “The joy of love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church” (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, 19 March 2016, 1).

On April 9, 2018, his third exhortation was made public; it is entitled *Gaudete et Exsultate* – Rejoice and be glad! This exhortation, on which I wish to reflect this evening, addresses the universal call to holiness and makes practical suggestions that can help each of us discover the path that leads to sanctity according to our state in life. As I begin, I point out that all three exhortations make reference to joy. The Holy Father wants us to understand that to be a Christian is to be joyful, filled with the joy of knowing the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; of being members of his Church; and, of hearing the Good News.

The current exhortation is organized into five chapters. The first chapter deals with holiness; the second explores threats to holiness in the forms of Gnosticism and Pelagianism; the third is a meditation on the Beatitudes, a counter-cultural way of being a disciple in the world. The fourth chapter reflects on the signs that accompany the disciple as he or she grows in holiness. Finally, the exhortation concludes with a reminder that holiness demands vigilance and discernment in spiritual combat against the Evil One. This evening I want to provide an overview of the exhortation, hoping that you will read it and meditate on it.

The Call to Holiness

The Holy Father did not write the exhortation as a treatise on holiness but as a way to re-propose the call to holiness in a practical way, suitable for our times, mindful that the Lord has called us, just as he called Abraham to “walk before Him and be blameless.”

In our Catholic tradition we have a “cloud of witnesses”, as the Letter to the Hebrews says, who inspire us to holiness and union with God. The canonized saints of the Church were not

always perfect people, but “amid their faults and failings they kept moving forward and proved pleasing to God.” (*GE*, 3). The saints, who now serve in God’s presence, preserve their bonds of communion with the pilgrim Church and intercede for us, helping us on our journey, while the witness of their lives, including those of the martyrs, offers an “exemplary imitation of Christ.” (*GE*, 4)

The number of saints far exceeds those who have been beatified and canonized and includes many silent, hidden saintly people who lived their vocations in an extraordinary way in the ordinary things of life; they are what the Holy Father refers to as the “middle class of holiness.”

Holiness is not for the privileged few; rather, Pope Francis reiterates what the Second Vatican Council said, namely that the call is universal. He writes:

The Holy Spirit bestows holiness in abundance among God’s holy and faithful people, for “it has pleased God to make men and women holy and to save them, not as individuals without any bond between them, but rather as a people who might acknowledge him in truth and serve him in holiness.” (*GE*, 6)

Yes, God saves us corporately, and He calls us to holiness in ordinary things. Often, our holiness is shown in being patient with others, as when parents show patience with their children, or when men and women work hard and endure suffering for the good of their families, or when the sick and elderly bear their infirmities with joy (cf. *GE*, 7). It is these hidden saints who are left out of the history books who make the critical difference in our world by living their faith humbly and sincerely, showing forth “the most attractive face of the Church.”

The main point the Holy Father wishes to make is that God calls “all the faithful, whatever their condition or state – each in his or her own way – to that perfect holiness by which the Father himself is perfect.” (cf. *GE* 10) He calls each person in his or her own way; therefore, we should not get discouraged when we fail to live up to the standards or extraordinary works of the “first tier” saints; instead, we should set our hearts and minds to discerning the specific path that God has for us in light of the gifts that He has bestowed on us.

Being holy does not require being a bishop, priest or religious (cf. *GE*, 14) or fleeing from the world; rather, we are called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness to the Lord in all that we do – our work, our family life, our leisure, etc. We grow in holiness through small gestures, even in times of great challenge. The Holy Father offers the example of Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan who was imprisoned, but rather than squander his time, he chose “to live the present moment, filling it to the brim with love” and “to accomplish ordinary actions in an extraordinary way.” (cf. *GE*, 17)

The first chapter concludes with an invitation to recognize what Saint Paul said: “This is the will of God – your sanctification.” (1 Thess 4:3) Our sanctification comes through carrying out our mission. Our mission has “its fullest meaning in Christ and can only be understood through him.” That is, we must unite ourselves constantly to the death and resurrection of the Lord in a personal way, having first meditated on the mysteries of His Life.

The Holy Father cites Pope Benedict who noted that “holiness is nothing other than charity lived to the full” and that “the measure of our holiness stems from the stature that Christ achieves in us, to the extent that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we model our whole life on his.” (*GE*, 21) We attempt to imitate Christ and to follow the example of the saints, mindful of the totality of their

life and mission. The Holy Father invites all of us to see our entire life as a mission – to reflect Christ in the world. (*GE*, 23) Demonstrating his Jesuit roots, Pope Francis remarks that our personal mission is really inseparable from that of building the kingdom and that union with Christ means being committed to building that kingdom.

The vast majority of us are called not to the monastic, contemplative life, but are called to be contemplatives in action. (cf. *GE*, 26) This contemplative spirit means recovering “the personal space needed to carry on a heartfelt dialogue with God” and being generous with our time – offering it to God in prayer or service. Such generosity will not take away our vitality or joy (*GE*, 32), but will instead bear much fruit. Holiness, union with Christ, does not make us less human, but more human! (*GE* 34)

Two Subtle Enemies of Holiness

In the second chapter of the exhortation, the Holy Father examines two enemies of holiness: Gnosticism and Pelagianism. These heresies have re-emerged throughout the history of the Church, and our era is no exception.

Historically, the Gnostics claimed to have a “special knowledge” and to be “enlightened”, while others were considered to be “ignorant masses.” In articles 36-46, the Holy Father describes a particular form of Gnosticism that goes hand in hand with dualism; that is “they (the Gnostics) think of the intellect as separate from the flesh” (cf. *GE*, 37), holding to a “disembodied spirituality.”

Gnostics err, in part, because they fail to realize that one’s perfection is not measured by information or intellectual knowledge but by the depth of one’s charity. The Gnosticism, critiqued by the Holy Father, is characterized by a doctrine or knowledge that does not leave room for mystery and the movement of the Holy Spirit (cf. *GE*, 40-42) and occasionally attempts to use so-called knowledge to control the lives of others.

Today, even without adopting the anthropological errors of Gnostics, we can, if we are well-educated or well-catechized, fall into a spiritual trap, thinking that we know something and, therefore, that we have already achieved holiness, or we can adopt a prideful attitude (*GE*, 45). Saint Gregory the Great teaches us that pride is the “queen and mother of all sins”, which gives birth to the seven deadly sins.

However, more insidious is the re-emergence of Pelagianism, which under the guise of virtue, tends to place great prominence on the human will, failing to recognize the effects of sin on human nature and the necessity of grace, even if neo-Pelagians pay “lip-service” to the idea of grace. Pope Francis describes them this way:

When some of them tell the weak that all things can be accomplished with God’s grace, deep down they tend to give the idea that all things are possible by the human will, as if it were something pure, perfect, all powerful, to which grace is added. (*GE*, 49)

The danger of Pelagianism lies in the lack of acknowledgment of human limitations, which, in turn, prevents grace from working more effectively within us and blocks about our deeper conversion and our path to holiness. Failure to recognize our limits blinds us to seeing the steps the Lord wishes us to take to be holy and causes us to miss opportunities to experience His grace.

I imagine that when we have successes in life and in our career, rather than acknowledge the grace of God at work, often we can attribute the success only to our own efforts and begin living without Him. Saint Augustine was the most eloquent of the Fathers in combatting Pelagianism. From Augustine to the Synod of Orange to the Council of Trent, the Church has consistently taught that we are justified, not by our own works and efforts, but by God's grace, which the *Catechism* teaches "surpasses the power of human intellect and will." (cf. *GE*, 52-54)

Growth in holiness demands recognizing one's limits, accepting our abilities as gifts from God, and entrusting ourselves to God, whose friendship we need in the struggle against evil. A great danger lies in insisting upon justification through one's own efforts, will, and abilities (*GE*, 57), which can result in self-centeredness and elitist complacency. The greatest remedy for these tendencies is the practice of the virtues, especially the theological virtues, the greatest of which is charity (*GE*, 60), which is the fulfillment of the Law.

In Light of the Master: The Beatitudes and the Great Criterion

In the third chapter of the exhortation, the Holy Father offers practical advice to grow in holiness – counsel that was first offered by the Divine Master in his great Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:1-12a) and in his teaching on the last judgment (Mt 25:31-46).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes up the mountain. He is the New Moses and the fulfillment of the Law and the prophets. He begins his Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes, which the Pope describes as a "Christian's identity card." (cf. *GE*, 63) The word "blessed" used in the beatitudes is a synonym for "holy." The Christian, called to be holy, is invited to daily adopt the interior dispositions of the beatitudes, which are not "trite or undemanding" (cf. *GE* 65), but which are a practical way of living the faith.

The Holy Father proceeds to provide short meditations on each of the beatitudes. Time does not allow us to examine them all, but I invite you to spend time in prayer and reflection on this chapter, which is similar to his meditations on First Corinthians in *Amoris Laetitia*. The beatitude I bring to your attention is the first: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.*" (Mt 5:3)

As members of Legatus, you undoubtedly have experienced success and even prospered in your professional careers. Many of you use your resources as stewards of God's gifts to build up his Church and to influence the culture and your workplaces with the values of the Gospel. Certainly, there are many inspiring witnesses among us for which we should be grateful. At the same time, Pope Francis writes: "The Gospel invites us to peer into the depths of our heart, to see where we find our security in life." (*GE*, 67)

Does our security come from our wealth and accomplishments or does it come from God? Wealth in itself is not bad; rather, the spiritual battle is waged in the human heart. Having many of this world's goods and comforts, there is a risk that "we can become so self-satisfied that we leave no room for God's word, for the love of our brothers and sisters, or for the enjoyment of the most important things in life."

Frequently I hear of how people must work so much to acquire more wealth and that they have little time for their faith or their families. How do we overcome this? One way is through simplicity of life, which helps us show solidarity with the poor and creates space in our life for good. (*GE*, 70) Poverty alone does not make a person holy. The Holy Father suggests a further

step: spiritual poverty. (cf. *GE*, 69) This spiritual poverty allows the Lord to enter our lives with a perennial newness. Pope Francis links this spiritual poverty with the concept of Ignatian indifference.

Ignatian indifference does not mean that we do not care about things. It is something altogether different. Here, the Pope references the “Principle and Foundation” from the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises, which reads:

The human person is created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and by doing so save his or her soul; and it is for the human person that the other things on the face of the earth are created, as helps to the pursuit of this end. It follows from this that the person has to use these things in so far as they help toward this end, and to be free of them in so far as they stand in the way of it.

To attain this, we need to make ourselves indifferent toward all created things, provided the matter is subject to our free choice and there is no prohibition. Thus, for our part we should not want health more than sickness, wealth more than poverty, fame more than disgrace, a long life more than a short one – and so with everything else; desiring and choosing only what conduces more to the end for which we are created. (Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 23d)

Ignatian indifference is strongly connected to a radical interior freedom, which enables a person to choose that which leads to the purpose for which we are made: namely, to praise, reverence and serve God and to save one’s soul through union with him; that is, to be holy.

Again, time does not permit an examination of all the meditations on the beatitudes, but hopefully, this one illustrates the Holy Father’s approach. Beyond the Beatitudes, Pope Francis states that if “we seek the holiness pleasing to God’s eyes”, then there is one clear criterion, offered to us in the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel (Mt 25:31-46), specifically in verses 35-36: “*I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.*”

Holiness is shown not only in our love of God but also in our love of neighbor, especially in the poorest of the poor. Here, Pope Francis cites Saint John Paul II who said, “If we truly start anew from the contemplation of Christ, we must learn to see him especially in the faces of those with whom he himself wished to be identified.” (cf. *GE*, 96) To truly accept the demands of this aspect of the Gospel demands living in a “constant and health unease.”

With its charitable works, the Church cannot be reduced to a non-governmental organization (NGO), nor can it simply discount as materialist, communist or populist, the demands of the Gospel (cf. *GE*, 100-101); rather, acts of mercy and charity are at the heart of the Gospel. True worship of God includes love for our neighbor. The Holy Father notes that “Our worship becomes pleasing to God when we devote ourselves to living generously, and allow God’s gift, granted in prayer, to be shown in our concern for our brothers and sisters.” (*GE*, 104)

The saints themselves serve as powerful witnesses to lives shaped by the Beatitudes and by the criterion of the final judgment. I am told that the late-Cardinal Francis George of Chicago used to comment on the Last Judgment scene in the Sistine Chapel that the Book of Life was

very slender, compared to the other book. Perhaps, this observation might spur us on to acts of mercy and charity.

Signs of Holiness

Within the framework of holiness offered by the Beatitudes and Matthew 25, Pope Francis mentions signs or attitudes that should accompany disciples on the path of holiness. These include: perseverance, patience and meekness; joy and a sense of humor; boldness and passion; communal life; and, constancy in prayer.

The first signs – perseverance, patience and meekness – come from having a solid relationship with God, being rooted in the God who loves and sustains us. (*GE*, 112) This rootedness in God allows us to persevere amid hardship, anxiety and distress. They help us to avoid seeking revenge when another person harms us and to avoid being overwhelmed with activities or stress, accepting all things from God and understanding that, ultimately, we are in His hands. (cf. *GE*, 114)

Often, our interior peace is disturbed when we are attacked, especially these days by the media – whether traditional or the new forms of social media. It is easy for Catholics to respond in an aggressive and worldly way, without having to deal with the direct consequences of gossip, slander, or lying and without having to see the reaction of others to our attacks.

The Christian on the path to holiness, not only knows how to avoid engaging in this type of violence, but also does not waste energy complaining. (*GE*, 116) He or she is willing to endure sufferings and humiliations, which allow humility to take root, and to offer these to the Lord. (*GE*, 118) In this, the Christian is gradually conformed to Jesus, especially in His Passion. Often humiliations are endured for the sake of one's family, when one keeps silent rather than defend oneself or retaliate (cf. *GE*, 119) or when one chooses a less welcome or praiseworthy task but carries it out with joy.

The life of the disciple on the path of holiness is also marked by joy and a sense of humor. (cf. *GE*, 122-128) I began by talking about how the three exhortations of the Holy Father all deal with joy. This isn't the worldly joy that comes from consumption or the joy that passes; rather it is a supernatural joy that "adapts and changes, but always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved." (*GE*, 125) This joy also manifests itself in and is accompanied by having a sense of humor, as exemplified in the life of St. Philip Neri. This joy comes from living in communion with God and others and in offering our lives in service of others.

Holiness of life includes being bold and passionate – that is having the apostolic courage to evangelize, trusting that the Lord is always with us. Often our evangelical efforts fail due to a lack of fervor and an unwillingness to risk anything for the Lord. The Holy Father describes it as keeping "close to the shore", when the Lord calls us to "put out into the deep" and "to lower our nets for a big catch". (cf. Luke 5:4)

This boldness is essential to fulfilling our mission wherever God has placed us and implies being open to the Spirit, who gives us the gift of boldness. The Holy Father reminds us that "we need the Spirit's prompting, lest we be paralyzed by fear and excessive caution, lest we grow used to keeping within safe bounds." (*GE*, 133) In the Easter season, we hear daily of the

transformation of the Apostles and their boldness, in the power of the Resurrection and the Holy Spirit; this demonstrates what can happen within us too. It speaks to the eternal newness of God, who “impels us constantly to set out anew, to pass beyond what is familiar, to the fringes and beyond.” (GE, 135) In a sense, the Pope wants to shake us out of our complacency so that we may really strive for holiness.

Holiness is lived in community. Earlier I said that we are not saved merely as individuals but corporately. Growth in holiness is a journey in community, side by side with others (cf. GE, 141) – whether in a parish or in our families. The witness of the saints, from the Seven Holy Founders of the Servite Order, to the Korean Martyrs, or even to the more recent martyrs of Algeria, testify to this communal holiness. Spouses too strive for holiness together.

The source and summit of all life in the Church is the Holy Eucharist, which “fosters fraternity and makes us a holy and missionary community.” (GE, 142) The Eucharist build up the Church in holiness so that she may be a “community that cherishes the little details of love, whose members care for one another and create an open an evangelizing environment.” (cf. GE, 145) Living a life of holiness in community can be an antidote to “the growing consumerist individualism that tends to isolate us in a quest for well-being apart from others”. (GE, 146)

Finally, the Holy Father concludes the chapter by noting that “holiness consists in a habitual openness to the transcendent, expressed in prayer and adoration.” (GE, 147) In this regard, while we try to engage the world rather than flee it, we must spend moments alone with God in silence – to fill our lives with the Presence of God and to discern, in light of the Spirit, the path of holiness to which we have been called by the Lord. (cf. GE, 149-150) There is a need for daily prayer, which can include remembrance of God’s work in history and in our lives; this remembrance helps us to be mindful of the many blessings we have received and can foster within us a true spirit of gratitude.

It also helps us recall our dependence upon God and the need for continued trust, for apart from Him, we can do nothing. This remembrance spurs the whole Church on to intercede for others with great confidence. In humble supplication, we can fulfill the two-fold commandment to love God and our neighbor. (GE, 154). In addition to remembrance, our prayer can also include meditation on the scriptures, which will also lead us to desire more greatly the Eucharist, which renews our lives and sustains us on the journey of holiness.

Spiritual Combat, Vigilance and Discernment

The Exhortation concludes with a reminder that Christian life is a constant battle. (EG, 158) The Holy Father points out that we are not only fighting against a worldly mentality and mediocrity, but also are struggling against the devil, the Evil One, who is not a “myth, a representation, a symbol, a figure of speech or an idea.” (GE, 161) To think of the devil as such would lead us to be less vigilant and more susceptible to spiritual attack.

We need to be vigilant against him, confident that in Christ we attain the Victory. This vigilance demands constancy in prayer, meditation on God’s Word, regular reception of the sacraments, and works of charity. (cf. GE 162) The best defense against the devil is a healthy spiritual life and progressive growth in love, recognizing that our victory is in Christ and in His death and Resurrection.

The Holy Father concludes by returning to a favorite theme of his and of Ignatius of Loyola: discernment. The disciple must discern what is from God and what is from the devil. The gift of discernment is becoming more necessary than ever, given the “immense possibilities for action and distraction” that the world offers, all of which are presented as valid or good. (cf. *GE*, 167) Discernment is necessary in both great things and small things, but is a true weapon in spiritual combat, allowing us to follow the Lord more faithfully.

Discernment cannot be forced. On the contrary, it is a spiritual gift that transcends existential, psychological, sociological and even the moral insights of the human sciences. (cf. *GE*, 170) It requires reason, prudence, stillness, and humility. I say humility because it requires listening. The Holy Father says that “prayerful discernment must be born of a readiness to listen: to the Lord, and to others, and to reality itself, which always challenges us in new ways.” (*GE*, 172) This prayerful discernment necessarily includes listening to God as he speaks to us in the Scriptures and through the Church’s Magisterium. Discernment demands openness to the Spirit of God, who liberates us from fear and guides along the path that leads to life.

Conclusion

In offering us this exhortation, the Holy Father did not intend to offer a full treatise on holiness, but speaking as a pastor, he wanted to truly encourage the faithful to appreciate their own vocations and to remind them of their mission and duty to sanctify the world. We are called to be joyful missionary disciples, and there is no more effective tool for the new evangelization than personal and communal holiness, to which each of the baptized are called:

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Holy Father wrote:

Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are “disciples” or “missionaries”, but rather, we are “missionary disciples”. (*EG*, 119)

As missionary disciples then, let us go forth with joy to be holy. Rejoice and be glad – for the Lord has called you; He loves you; and, He is with you on your mission!