

## A CONTEMPORARY VIEW OF CHRISTIAN HOLINESS

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### Abstract

In modern times, the understanding of holiness is often overshadowed by notions of achievement in various areas of human existence, and holiness could be understood as merely human commitment in the moral realm. Therefore, within the Christian tradition there are discussions of a call to holiness and not only to moral perfection, where holiness rests above all on the fact of God's chosenness, to which the Christians respond by changing concrete lives. This article shall highlight several main characteristics of holiness as a model of Christian existence important to the Church in the third millennium.

Firstly, a biblical-theological account of holiness shall be presented as a landmark of understanding holiness in the Church and in theology. Then, the fundamental dimension of holiness shall be introduced which is the principle of giftedness, opposed in a certain contrast to the widely present principle of achievement and perfection. The third part shall highlight the exemplary character of holiness, which has the ability to attract others, thus realizing in the life of the Church its main character of holiness that comes from God Himself.

In their response to God, Christians find a model among the saints who have accepted various means of consecration within the Church and given God an answer to His call to holiness. Finally, the importance of a personal response to the call to holiness shall be indicated. The goal of Christian holiness is to unite with God, and on the way to this union, the effort of every individual who manifests himself primarily in accepting God's gifts and His grace is also needed. Moral and sacred life is not primarily the adventure of spiritual giants of tried and tested moral behaviour and virtues, where these behaviours and virtues are only the result of their own endeavour and humanistic aspirations, but rather holiness is a response to God to his great love, which he expressed in the history of salvation and in the lives of people.

*Keywords:* holiness, calling, perfection, saints, gift.

## Introduction

The theme of holiness is inexhaustible and always intriguing because it encompasses the whole spectrum of various notions and ways of living. Examples of known and unknown saints can inspire and perhaps discourage. Holiness among Christians is primarily a category that is indirectly received, that is, it is present in people to the extent in which they participate in the grace of God.<sup>1</sup> The theme of holiness in contemporary theology has become one of the important themes because it has found its important place in the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). One of the eight chapters of perhaps the most important document of the Second Vatican Council — the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church »Lumen gentium« — is titled »The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church«. This document makes it clear that holiness is reserved not only for special Christian groups or communities, or for ordained servants in the Church, but for all members of the Church. In No. 39 it is emphasized that »in the Church, everyone whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness, according to the saying of the Apostle: 'For this is the will of God, your sanctification' (1 Thess. 4:3; cf. Eph.1:4).« The Council's focus on holiness as a dynamic of the Christian life to which everyone is called has been becoming increasingly important in postconciliar movements and crucial for the life of believers in the modern society. However, the question remains, how do you respond to this call to holiness? Whether it is about realizing personal perfection or discovering the sanctity of life in an individual's ability to live the Gospel wherever the person is, to build a society of love, and to turn to another person by considering it precious, valuable, and beautiful beyond physical or moral appearance.<sup>2</sup>

After all, *Lumen Gentium* pointed out: »The Lord Jesus, the divine Teacher and Model of all perfection, preached holiness of life to each and everyone of His disciples of every condition. He Himself stands as the author and consummator of this holiness of life: 'Be you therefore perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mat. 5:48)«. <sup>3</sup> Understanding and perceiving holiness also determines the way of personal realization. Indeed, the depth of a Christian life, and thus

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Renzo. GERARDI, Svetost, in: *Enciklopedijski teološki rječnik*, Zagreb, 2009, 1126.

<sup>2</sup> POPE FRANCIS, *Fratelli tutti – Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and social Friendship* (3.X.2020), No. 94, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html). (Accessed: 12.I.2022).

<sup>3</sup> SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Lumen Gentium. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (21. XI.1964), No. 40, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html). (Accessed: 11.I.2022) (Hereinafter: LG).

the path of holiness of a person, is immediately recognized by the love that a person has for God and for his neighbours, without exception. Holiness is always a matter of the heart and openness for love, accepting a personal calling, and surrendering to God. A dedication where every Christian embarks on a unique journey of building relationships with God and a personal journey of holiness. It is a question of choosing between mediocrity and the fullness of life with God. A prerequisite for the openness of holiness is allowing the grace of Baptism to bear fruit on the journey of holiness and openness to God. In this openness to God, the goal of Christian life is to always and again choose God.<sup>4</sup> Since Baptism is a true entry into the holiness of God through incorporation into Christ and the indwelling of his Spirit, it would be a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity.<sup>5</sup> Identifying ourselves with Christ and his will involves a commitment to build with Him that kingdom of love, justice and universal peace (GE 1-25). In order for every person to be able to realize this God's plan in life, it is important to understand the dynamics of relationships and possible ways of achieving a personal path of holiness, especially in the context of the modern challenges that a human being faces in its Christian existence. This article shall highlight several main characteristics of holiness as a model of Christian existence important to the Church in the third millennium. Firstly, a biblical-theological account of holiness shall be presented as a landmark of understanding holiness in the Church and in theology. Then the fundamental dimension of holiness shall be introduced which is the principle of giftedness, opposed in a certain contrast to the widely present principle of achievement and perfection. The third part shall highlight the exemplary character of holiness, which has the ability to attract others, thus realizing in the life of the Church its main character of holiness that comes from God Himself. Finally, the importance of a personal response to the call to holiness shall be indicated.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. POPE FRANCIS, *Gaudete et Exultate. Apostolic Exhortation on the Call to Holiness in Today's World* (19.III.2018), No. 15, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20180319\\_gaudete-et-exultate.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exultate.html). (Accessed: 11.II.2022) (Hereinafter: GE).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte. Apostolic Letter at the Close of the Great Jubilee of the year 2000* (19.4.2021), No. 31, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/2001/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_20010106\\_novo-millennio-ineunte.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte.html). (Accessed 28.XII.2021) (Hereinafter: NMI).

## 1. A brief overview of the Scripture notion of holiness

In Hebrew, the word *holy* (*kadoš*) means *separate*.<sup>6</sup> God is *holy* meaning *separate* from earthly reality and cannot be manipulated. God is above all else and nothing is like Him. God is always different, even from the expectations of holy people.<sup>7</sup> This is not just a discussion of moral perfection, separating Him from other creatures, it is about transcendence. This separation as a key characteristic in understanding the concept of holiness is not a deist understanding of God who would radically distance Himself from the world because of his exaltation. This separation denotes the fact that God cannot be »infected« with something impure or identified with something that would dishonour Him. Although being present in this world and caring for earthly realities, God remains always very different, which is expressed with the term *holy*. The Old Testament notion of God's holiness is not only some recognition given to God, but it is a fundamental invitation to a human being to be equal to the essence of the one in whose image he was created. The entire Book of Leviticus explains this call to follow God's holiness, which is not only some moral specialty but represents the peculiarity of the one who is aware of his belonging to God. »The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 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 19:1-2).<sup>8</sup> In this call there is a complete program of achieving this perfection in relation towards God, through various offerings, rituals, and eulogies, and in relation towards man by standing up for Him. With regard to the attitude towards God, it should be noted that one of the forms of longing for holiness is found in Isaiah 6:3: »Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.« It is a cry that raises awareness of the necessity to follow the one being celebrated. Therefore, »this ideal of perfection must not be misunderstood as if it involved some kind of extraordinary existence, possible only for a few 'uncommon heroes' of holiness. The ways of holiness are many, according to the vocation of each individual.« (NMI 31)

In the New Testament, evangelists do not deal explicitly with this concept, however we can experience it through all the miracles of Jesus. Through them, His holiness is established. Luke describes »the child to be born as 'holy'« (Luk. 1:35), which here alludes to the Old Testament meaning of »separate«, »differ-

<sup>6</sup> Cf. R. L. HARRIS – G. L. ARCHER – B. K. WALTKE, »qadaš« in: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Chicago, 1980, 786.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. D. P. WRIGHT, »Holiness (Old Testament)« in: *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol 3, New York – London – Toronto – Sydney – Auckland, 1992, 237-248.

<sup>8</sup> The text contains connections to the 10 commandments of God, see Lev. 19:1-36.

ent«. Peter's confession confirms his awareness of who his teacher is, that he is »the Messiah, the Son of the living God.« (Mat. 16:16) and therefore *holy*. Peter speaks to Him: »Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.« (Joh. 6:68-69) It is nonetheless interesting to note that mostly demons explicitly profess this property of Jesus: »What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.« (Mar. 1:24); »Let us alone! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.« (Luk. 4:34) The practical dimension of holiness present in the Old Testament will find its resonance mostly with St Paul: »I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.« (Rom. 12:1), which contains in itself according to Crnčević and Šaško: »a) a life's credibility in connection with experience; b) a perspective of the transcendent that goes beyond human possibilities (when I say 'transcends', I mean transcending in itself understandable experiences of need).«<sup>9</sup> In the First Letter to the Thessalonians, we read: »May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.« (1Th. 5:23). To *sanctify* here should be understood as surrendering to the holy. This process involves surrendering to Christ in everyday life. Pope Benedict says: »Holiness, the fullness of Christian life, does not consist in carrying out extraordinary enterprises but in being united with Christ, in living his mysteries, in making our own his example, his thoughts, his behaviour. The measure of holiness stems from the stature that Christ achieves in us, in as much as with the power of the Holy Spirit, we model our whole life on his.«<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Principle of giftedness in the face of the widely present principle of achievement and perfection

Modern man is observed and valued in light of personal achievements and realization of the ideal of perfection. Consequently, the discourse on holiness and its

<sup>9</sup> Ante CRNČEVIĆ – Ivan ŠAŠKO, *Liturgija i tijelo*, Zagreb, 2020, 29-30. Although the authors primarily refer to the liturgy as an experience of transcendence, it is certainly important to understand that God speaks to man, seeks him where he is in order to »pull« him where he is, in order to step beyond himself.

<sup>10</sup> POPE BENEDICT XVI, *The holiness*. General audience, (13.IV.2011), [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2011/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20110413.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20110413.html) (Accessed: 20.XII.2021).

understanding derives from a projection of the contemporary model of functioning in society towards the field of relations with God and personal devotion.

Holiness in the Christian tradition always requires a personal and concrete response from the individual. The Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms: »Charity is the soul of the holiness to which all are called: it 'governs, shapes, and perfects all the means of sanctification.'<sup>11</sup> Because of love, holiness itself that may seem unachievable, is in fact God's way of realizing every person's plan of salvation. It is common knowledge that love for God is expressed through prayer and adoration, but this love becomes false if it does not result in concrete acts of love for people that somebody encounters. That is why Pope Francis points out: »May you come to realize what that word is, the message of Jesus that God wants to speak to the world by your life.«<sup>12</sup> That is why the personal path of holiness is unique yet also provocative for society and neighbours. At the same time on a personal level, a person is constantly exposed to the »threats« of the world and the body. When theology speaks of the body, one refers to a human nature that is prone to sin.<sup>13</sup> »Christian upbringing starts from the truth about God, about our adoration and gratitude to his greatness and goodness, and from the truth about the gift. From this religious root emerges the power of self-control, sobriety, critical freedom in the face of superfluous – imposed materialistic culture – sincere gift of myself to others, voluntariness, commitment to reconciliation and communion.«<sup>14</sup>

### 2.1. *Holiness is God's gift, and it is not a personal achievement*

It is an indispensable understanding that holiness is not a human achievement but purely a gift from God, proportionate to the degree of relationship with God.<sup>15</sup> This gift of God, just like any other, is understood in the Christian tradition like any other gift that is accepted and opened with gratitude. In the case of holiness, it is a free acceptance of God's will so that God can act in the world through people and in people. Holiness is an ideal, however, in the modern society it is increasingly seen as an »old-fashioned« or »obsolete« ideal, condi-

<sup>11</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 826, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_\\_\\_P29.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P29.HTM). (Hereinafter: CCC).

<sup>12</sup> POPE FRANCIS, GE, no. 24.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Daniel BURKE, *Navigating the Interior Life: Spiritual Direction and the Journey to God*, Steubenville, 2012, 2-4.

<sup>14</sup> Ante CRNČEVIĆ – Ivan ŠAŠKO, *Liturgija i tijelo*, Zagreb, 2020., 178.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Zoran KRSTIĆ, Kršćanska svetost kao objava Božje svetosti, in: *Diacovensia* 24 (2016) 3, 363-374.

tioned by a list of prohibitions whose implementation allows the realization of holiness through personal commitment and efforts towards the wreath of glory on the altar. There are two difficulties of such an interpretation: holiness is defined as a list of rules that the modern man seeks to free himself from and the other difficulty is the confidence that holiness is achieved through personal commitment and effort. Living according to God's will is not a set of laws and regulations but rather encountering the person of Jesus Christ. Pope Francis clearly affirms this differentiation: »The Church has repeatedly taught that we are justified not by our own works or efforts, but by the grace of the Lord, who always takes the initiative.« (GE 52).

He also points out elsewhere, »More than rules and obligations, the choice that Jesus sets before us is to follow him as friends follow one another, seeking each other's company and spending time together out of pure friendship. Everything else will come in time, and even failures in life can be an invaluable way of experiencing that friendship, which will never be lost.«<sup>16</sup> The way of holiness is the way of friendship with Christ, and friendship is never an achievement but a gift. Since there is no single measure for friendship, because it is always a question of accepting and spending time, hence God did not imagine and did not set one measure or »mould« of holiness into which everyone must enter. His measure of holiness is always and above all love and relationship. According to the understanding of biblical anthropology, man was created in the image of God out of love and for love. He was created out of love and to love. Therefore, to love and to be loved is a vocation and a profound need of a human person.<sup>17</sup> It follows that the initiative which changes the dynamics of the relationship is always God's. The path of realization of personal holiness is not to fulfil our duties but to discover God's presence and develop a relationship of love and friendship that is then reflected in all areas of our lives. It could be said that the holiness as God's gift makes man perfect. Indeed, God first shows the way to perfection by the fact that he creates out of love, limiting Himself to make room for his creatures. In this sense, accepting to die is nothing other than giving to others the joy of the world<sup>18</sup>. For the martyrs or saints therefore, death is not a

<sup>16</sup> POPE FRANCIS, *Christus Vivit. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and to the Entire People of God* (25.III.2019), No. 290, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20190325\\_christus-vivit.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html) (Accessed: 14.II.2022).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. HRVATSKA BISKUPSKA KONFERENCIJA, *Direktorij za obiteljski pastoral Crkve u Hrvatskoj*, Zagreb, 2002, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Odilon-Gbènoukpo SINGBO, *La théologie du don à l'épreuve de la perfectibilité transhumaniste de l'homme*, in: *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, 143 (2021), 283.

punishment, it is even an extreme expression of love and the supreme manifestation of self-giving. This death which »gives itself and gives me to myself as the possibility par excellence« and which »does not steal from the donation (...) the one who could receive it, it inscribes him forever in the horizon of the unique donation.«<sup>19</sup> In this sense, holiness is not a sign of personal achievement but an expression of human gratefulness to God.

## 2.2. *A call to holiness is not a call to perfection*

Christians are called to holiness through Baptism, but the question is always how to accomplish this in the living organism of the Church in concrete history, that is, how to accomplish it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? The ideal of perfection as one of the main ideals in modern culture is the ideal that separates the body from the spirit and is detached from the true meaning and mission of each person, as well as its uniqueness. The sure results are empty heart, misunderstanding and confusion in life.

Pope Francis in the Apostolic Exhortation »Gaudete et exultate« sets the goal of once again echoing the call to holiness, while trying to embody it in present circumstances, with risks, challenges and opportunities. Because God's calling is addressed to all, as St. Paul points out: »be holy and blameless before him in love.« (Eph. 1:4)— (GE 2). The answer to this call to love is not achievable without the prayer and action of sanctification. The causal relationship between holiness and consecration is confirmed by Pope Francis: »A Christian cannot think of his or her mission on earth without seeing it as a path of holiness, for 'this is the will of God, your sanctification.' (1 Thess. 4:3)« (GE 19). The means of sanctification are very well known in the Christian tradition: prayer, sacraments, various forms of spirituality and spiritual guidance.

Reflecting on holiness involves not only consecration but also perfection. It is not uncommon for holiness to be frequently considered as an unattainable and sometimes unwanted goal for »average« believers. Experiencing holiness as unattainable stems from understanding holiness as an ability to »master« sins and respond positively to the demands of radical perfection. As confirmation for this approach, the call to perfection is motivated by the perfection of God Himself: »Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.« (Mat. 5:48). For Theresa of the Child Jesus: »perfection consists in doing His will and being

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<sup>19</sup> Jean-Luc MARION, *Étantdonné. Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation*, Paris, 2013, 97 and 99.



what He wants us to be.«<sup>20</sup> Jesus's response to the rich young man can also additionally confuse:»If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.« (Mat. 19:21). The link between God's word of perfection and life according to Ralph Martin is achievable if a person possesses the following qualities: »to be perfect in the purity of the heart, perfect in obedience, perfect in alignment with the Father's will, perfect in holiness – when we hear these words, it is understandable that we can fall into the temptation of discouragement, thinking that it is impossible to achieve this perfection«.<sup>21</sup>

Biblical scholar Fabio Rosini believes that the fact that the Word of God has the strength to do, act, achieve what it says, or that it has a performative aspect, is very much ignored.<sup>22</sup> However, the Word of God also has paradigmatic strength because it seeks the other half, which is life. Indeed, when one accepts to associate an event in scripture with a concrete life, the miraculous power is revealed that places the Christian within God's work.<sup>23</sup>

It can be concluded that the call for perfection does not refer to the perfection of the body and beauty of the deceiving and elusive promoted ideals in society. The perfection to which everyone is called to is revealed in giving. God gave His Son for all men and women. The Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms that »The way of perfection passes by way of the Cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle. Spiritual progress entails the asceticism and mortification that gradually lead to living in the peace and joy of the Beatitudes.« (CCC 2015). The fact is that the call to perfection involves giving of oneself and a journey sustained by grace that seeks spiritual commitment and knows painful places of purification (»dark nights«), but also different ways towards unspeakable joy. It is also obvious that the paths of holiness are personal and require a true and proper pedagogy of holiness that can be adapted to individual persons and integrates a wealth of possibilities (Cf. NMI 31-33). This personal journey is always realized in a concrete community gathered in a Eucharistic celebration that makes it impossible to create an elitist atmosphere in which holiness is something that is reserved only to a certain

<sup>20</sup> TEREZIJA OD DJETETA ISUSA, *Povijest jedne duše (Rukopisi A, B, C)*, Zagreb, 2011, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Ralph MARTIN, *The Fulfillment of All Desire. A Guidebook to God Based on the Wisdom of the Saints*, Steubenville, 2006, 1-5.

<sup>22</sup> Rosini cites the sacraments as an example. Indeed, it is one thing to say,»this is my body« as a separate statement, and another thing to say it with the power of the sacramental liturgy.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Rosini FABIO, *L'arte di ricominciare. I sei giorni della creazione e l' inizio del discernimento*, Milano, 2018, 21-22.

category of people. In an excellent way, Krstić summarizes this dynamic of the relationship between elites and the living community of believers: »The time has passed for an understanding of holiness based on a certain kind of elitism in which the Holy Spirit transforms and sanctifies only certain individuals for their extraordinary merits. A saint is one who has power and impeccable moral purity. Such saintly stereotypes in the form of lonely heroes who communicate with the Lord in some desert environment do not rely on eschatology, and certainly not on the experience of living in the Eucharistic community.«<sup>24</sup>

### 2.3. *»The middle class of holiness«*

There may be many theories about what holiness is, different and mindful interpretations nevertheless, Jesus explained very simply what it means to be holy. It is not impossible to approach the phenomenon of holiness informatively, to complete a course or even to study spirituality, while at the same time absent from personal and active participation of mind and heart. Without a genuine desire to transform information about holiness into living holiness, it is unlikely to create the strength to make serious decisions and respond consciously to the general call to holiness. This answer allows the Word to become flesh and resonate in every pore of Christian existence. The Catechism of the Catholic Church clearly warns of this dimension: »The Word has become a body for us to be a model of holiness: »Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me;« (Mat. 11:29). »I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.« (Joh. 14:6). The way most often evokes movement, journey and travel, which has a certain dynamic but also involves effort. He is the Way, if he is the mediator who reveals the Father. That is why holiness is a dynamic, not a static reality.

The ID card for Christians are the Beatitudes because they outline the figure of the Master whom the Christians should show in the concreteness of their everyday life. Everything would be simpler if holiness could be secured by a certain number of rosaries, fundraisers and parish engagement. It is not uncommon that the care for holiness is being shifted to others believing that they are in a better position to answer the call, and sometimes holiness is postponed for another time in life. Just not today and right away. Some see holiness as an ordinary horizon for others, which Pope Francis strongly criticizes: »We are frequently tempted to think that holiness is only for those who can with-

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<sup>24</sup> Zoran KRSTIĆ, *Kršćanska svetost kao objava Božje svetosti*, 374.

draw from ordinary affairs to spend much time in prayer. That is not the case. We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves.« (GE 14) According to Pope Francis it is the way of holiness of the »next-door neighbours.« All those who live close by and are a reflection of God's presence. He also uses a second phrase »the middle class of holiness« (Cf. GE 7). The reflection of St. John Henry Newman, who was one of the first Christian thinkers to explicitly explore the link between faith, life, reality, heart, conscience and imagination, can certainly be helpful. Thanks to his imagination, he made the Gospel of Christ credible today. He did so with life and writings in which Gospel-imaginative holiness manifests itself. Instead of »the clichéd, romantic heroic virtues of 19th-century holiness, he showed us that holiness today can and must be reimagined in the light of Easter.« In the light of unconditional love, because the Risen Christ shares His life with the life of every human being.

The question of holiness is always a question of desire and a way to follow Christ and build a relationship with Him. Although it seems simple, it is not really, because the path of holiness requires spiritual accompaniment and spiritual reading. Any serious attempt at personal spiritual growth involves the spiritual guidance of priests and the impetus to inspire an individual with the lives of the saints. No matter how seriously a person adheres to the saints, it is soon revealed that the path of holiness of a saint cannot be easily understood, which can lead to discouragement because of their extraordinary virtues and perfect devotion to God. Along the way, one can feel like a dwarf in front of a spiritual giant whose words nevertheless go far above their head, far beyond the horizon of the possibility of inner understanding and insight. Martin describes this dynamic as follows: »It is also possible that certain teachings of saints, ... at the beginning can reject someone as being unachievable, disturbing, unreasonable, unbalanced, or even untrue—which looks a lot like the reaction of many to Jesus' teachings.« In relation to the saints, it is necessary to observe their life in its entirety and their inner journey of consecration, the part in which something of Jesus Christ is outlined. It is a problem of inner insight that reshapes all that one has experienced, felt, wanted, what one longs for and strives for in order to transform into the depths of knowledge of immeasurable beauty and significance of every moment and surrender to God. St. Newman has always focused on the holiness and blessing that await those who, with the help of grace, prepare their hearts and consciences to welcome God and listen to His voice. Some qualities of such holiness are manifested in the love of God and neighbour, and are recognized in submission, patience and gentleness, joy,

sense of humour, boldness and fervour, community and permanence in prayer. In this sense, four principles can be of benefit as the basis for a correct understanding of the spiritual journey without which there is no holiness expressed by St. John Paul II:

Union with God to this depth is completely unattainable by human efforts: it is a gift that only God can give. Progress in spiritual life is completely dependent on His grace. God is the way and the destination.

Yet human effort is sorely needed. The saints call it man's availability for union. Someone's efforts help him receive God's gifts. And of course, God's grace that opens up spaces of incredible possibilities and longings. »From there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul.« (Deu. 4:29).

It is important to assess what is needed before accepting a task if it is to be successfully completed. In order to be able to unite deeply with God, it is necessary for a big change to happen in people; they have to purify themselves, to transform and heal all wounds and painful moments, as well as personal sins: »It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God.« (Act. 14:22).

It is important to know that all the hard work and suffering is worth it. It pays immensely for eternity.<sup>25</sup>

The way of holiness must be rooted in the holiness of the Church itself, that is, without the ecclesial foundation, holiness can hardly be understood in the Church and in the society of the third millennium.

### **3. Holiness does not exist without the Church and examples**

Christians profess every day to believe in a single, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church. Holiness is a constant aspiration of the Church, but also a visible sign of life and union with Christ. »To profess the Church as holy means to point to her as *the Bride of Christ*, for whom he gave himself precisely in order to make her holy (Cf. Eph.5:25-26). This as it were objective gift of holiness is offered to all the baptized.« (NMI 30). In fact, the holiness of the Church stems from God's self-commitment in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit (Cf. LG 39). From the Church a Christian »learns the example of holiness and recognizes its model and source in the all-holy Virgin Mary; he discerns it in the authentic witness of those who live it; he discovers it in the spiritual tradition and long history

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Ralph MARTIN, *The Fulfillment of All Desire*, 4-5.

of the saints who have gone before him and whom the liturgy celebrates in the rhythms of the sanctoral cycle.« (CCC 2030). The holiness of the Church abides on »two foundations: its origin is sacred since it is God the Father, Christ, and the Spirit; The Church calls for consecration and has the means to bring to conversion thanks to the gift of the Spirit, the reading of Scripture, the sacramental celebration, and the ethical practice.«<sup>26</sup> The Church's existence has meaning if it remains firmly united in Christ, that is, in community, in his Word, in the Eucharist and in prayer.<sup>27</sup> »Lived holiness is the best apology of the existence of the Church and its witness of the credibility of God's love in Christ. Therefore, the greatest sign of the presence of the Spirit of Christ in the life of the Church is certainly the holiness manifested in the life of Christians who, at all times in history, provided a new testimony of the Gospel.«<sup>28</sup>

The modern man has little difficulty learning holiness from the Church because he is »well and timely informed« about its crises, the wounded by the sins, and the inconsistencies of its believers. This damages the relationship between holiness and sin in the Church, which also affects her credibility and mission in today's world. »Her credibility is all the greater because the holiness bestowed on her by Christ permeates her members who 'must, with God's help, live and maintain and perfect the holiness they have received'«. <sup>29</sup> Perhaps more than ever, the words of St. Pope Paul VI apply that the modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses,<sup>30</sup> and the saints are always witnesses, they have always been the source and origin of renewal in the most difficult moments in the Church's history. (Cf. CCC 828)

In this sense, there is a danger of forgetting that the Church is a living organism that grows, develops and spreads throughout the sanctity of Christians themselves. To the extent that Christians devote themselves, they become witnesses of Christ in society. The Church needs to rediscover her holiness understood as a fundamental sense of belonging to the One who is *par excel-*

<sup>26</sup> Anđelko DOMAZET, Vjerodostojnost Crkve i kategorija svetosti, in: *Obnovljeni život* 69 (2014) 4, 478.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. POPE FRANCIS, *Catechesis on prayer – 16. The prayer of the nascent Church*, General audience (25 XI. 2020), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201125\\_udienza-generale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20201125_udienza-generale.html). (Accessed: 7. XII. 2021).

<sup>28</sup> Anđelko DOMAZET, Vjerodostojnost Crkve i kategorija svetosti, 479.

<sup>29</sup> HRVATSKA BISKUPSKA KONFERENCIJA, *Na svetost pozvani. Pastoralne smjernice na početku trećeg tisućljeća* (15.VIII. 2002), Zagreb, 2002, no. 9 (Hereinafter: NSP).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. POPE PAUL VI, *Evangeliumiuntiandi. Apostolic Exhortation* (8.XII.1975), No. 41, [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangeliumiuntiandi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangeliumiuntiandi.html) (Accessed: 14.XII.2021).

lence saint (Cf. NMI 30). It is therefore necessary to inspire in all the faithful a true longing for holiness, a deep desire for conversion and personal renewal in a context of ever more intense prayer and of solidarity with one's neighbour, especially the most needy.<sup>31</sup> Holiness is beautiful and demanding because it assumes the responsibility of every Christian not only for himself but for the entire ecclesial community. It is thus evident to everyone, that 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 a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society. (Cf. LG 40). How credible and prophetic the Church will be depends on the individual willingness of Christians to respond to the universal call to holiness. St. John Paul II asserts that the fullness of holiness is an essential part of being a Christian and he points out without hesitation that holiness is a perspective in which to place all pastoral work. Therefore, it is not a new program because this program has always existed as it derives from the Gospel and living tradition. Holiness is a high measure of regular Christian life because the whole life of the community and family must go in this direction (Cf. NMI 29-30). Domazet makes this exemplary character of holiness clear: »The phenomenon of holiness in the Catholic Church provides an opportunity to see in the lives of the saints the possibilities of realizing the personal following of Jesus Christ. The saints testify that there can be no one else in our place, that we are 'irreplaceable' before God and in our mission in the world.«<sup>32</sup> »That is why the world needs and expects from us the simplicity of life, the spirit of prayer, love for all, especially for the little ones and the poor, surrendering and modesty, self-loathing and renunciation. Without the mark of such holiness, our word is unlikely to find its way into the hearts of the people of our time, while with it, it will become the light of hope and the yeast of the true change of the world« (CTH 99). Raising awareness of one's role in the Church and the world for a Christian is also an opening to the concrete historical realization of the path of holiness in everyday life. And Pope Francis calls for holiness, trying to instil it in our time, with all its risks, challenges and opportunities.<sup>33</sup> Emphasizing that holiness does not make us less human because it is an encounter between our weakness and the power of God's grace.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente. Apostolic Letter on Preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000* (10.XI.1994), No. 42, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1994/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19941110\\_tertio-millennio-adveniente.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19941110_tertio-millennio-adveniente.html) (Accessed: 13.XII.2021).

<sup>32</sup> Anđelko DOMAZET, *Vjerodostojnost Crkve i kategorija svetosti*, 480.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. GE, No. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. GE, No. 34.

#### 4. Personal »yes« to holiness

The diversity or pluralism of lifestyle offerings requires one to reflect and commit oneself, without negligible pressure and strength of the group in which one moves.<sup>35</sup> Everyone brings to life choices that define the direction and way of life. St. Ignatius points out that there are conditions for a good and healthy choice, which are the time and object of choice. A time that can also be understood as the inner state of the spirit. It is a subjective view of any time of spiritual struggle, or a peaceful time in which one ponders what God asks of man, or the time of God's great grace in the mission of life.

When we have to make our personal choices, it is not a question about choosing between good or bad things, but in the spirit of the Gospel, it is necessary to choose what helps a person to love more, or what allows an individual to make a progress on the path of love.

The chosen path is something radically personal that requires an effort of each individual to discover the area of activity into which God invites him to realize his own path of holiness. This requires a journey towards the roots of life and the realization of personal holiness in concrete choices. »In this way, led by God's grace, we shape by many small gestures the holiness God has willed for us, not as men and women sufficient unto ourselves but rather as 'good stewards of the manifold grace of God' (1 Pet. 4:10).« (GE 18). And in this regard, there is an immediate temptation that diminishes the desire for holiness that the Creator has written into people's hearts. It starts from the idea and the temptation itself to consider holiness abstractly. Holiness is the aspiration to focus oneself entirely on God. Christian holiness is one because it is realized by union with Christ, but it is also different because it is realized in concrete and living people and cannot be abstract.<sup>36</sup> The Epistle to the Ephesians states: »...just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will,...« (Eph. 1:4-5) The essence of holiness lies in transforming the heart into the heart of love or in loving God and neighbour with all our heart. Which, of course, is not possible if someone is not as ready, as Theresa was ready, to combine his will with God's, which is also holiness.

As a young preacher, St. Newman defined holiness as a set of things: »to love, to fear and obey God, to be just, honest, meek, pure hearts, to forgive,

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Stjepan KUŠAR, *Obične stvari i slobodni Bog*, Zagreb, 2015, 78.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Diego FARES, On Being Saints, in: *La Civiltà Cattolica* 3 (2019) 12, 58.

heavenly, self-absorbed, humble, ... be so religious, so unearthly... become a 'new creature' ... be separated from sin, hate the works of the world, body, and devil; enjoy carrying out God's commandments; do things the way He would have us do; live as usual as in the eyes of the future world, as if we had broken the bonds of this life, and we were already dead.« Then he asked an urgent, existential question: »Why can't we save ourselves if we don't possess such a frame and temperament of mind?«<sup>37</sup> The idea looms that it is important for holiness to be achieved through love, not through other extraordinary qualities.

It is Pope Francis's call to try to embody holiness in present circumstances, with risks, challenges and opportunities. The dangers and limitations present in today's culture are: »a sense of anxiety, sometimes violent, that distracts and debilitates; negativity and sullenness; the self-content bred by consumerism; individualism; and all those forms of ersatz spirituality – having nothing to do with God« (GE 111).

The challenge of accepting the call to holiness does not diminish the awareness of all subjective obstacles and it is not rare to delay and to justify one's own compromises that distance the individual from a serious journey. All living conditions and all times are most appropriate because all obstacles that are felt and lived »are only the means that God gives us to attract us to rely more deeply on him«.<sup>38</sup> Each saint is one mission: he is the Father's plan to contemplate and embody at a certain point in history some aspect of the Gospel. That is why holiness is not one of the »options« in life but the exclusive path. Consequently, God also wants Christians who will be saints in the totality of their lives.<sup>39</sup> The qualities by which we will recognize them in the world are: constancy, patience and gentleness; joy and sense of humour; daring and zeal; community and constancy in prayer.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

The article has outlined the main characteristics of holiness of great importance for the life of every Christian in the third millennium. On the one hand, the

<sup>37</sup> Cf. John Henry NEWMAN, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, <http://www.newmanfriendsinternational.org/pensieri-di-john-henry-newman-1801-1890-sulla-santita/>; <http://www.newmanfriendsinternational.org/category/pensieri-di-newman/sermoni/>; <http://www.newmanfriendsinternational.org/le-attivita-terrestri-come-fonte-di-santita/>; <http://www.newmanfriendsinternational.org/?s=santita> (Accessed: 30. VIII. 2021).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Ralph MARTIN, *The Fulfillment of All Desire*, 6-9.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Diego FARES, *On Being Saints*, 60.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. GE, No. 112-157.



concept of giftedness is crucial as a term by which the concept of holiness in its biblical-historical context can be adequately understood. On the other hand, giftedness allows a Christian to adequately confront the phenomena of perfection and progress that are strongly present in modern culture. The initiative is God's and there can be no one else in the place of every Christian because everyone is »irreplaceable« in their mission to the world. Holiness is not perfection, nor is personal achievement realized by the exercise of commandments and regulations. Holiness is God's gift of entering into a relationship with Him and there is no growth in holiness without renunciation and without spiritual fight.

Every Christian is called to holiness and every Christian gives an answer to God by living in a concrete space and time. The measure of holiness is love, which is why Christians are called to live and act with love by giving testimony in everyday affairs, where they are. Christians are called to strive for a »middle class of holiness« that reflects God's presence in the world, a reflection of the Father's perfect giving of the Son on the cross for all people. That is why Christian holiness is one in union with Christ, but it is also different in each individual. Challenges and obstacles in the way of holiness are only an opportunity and means for God to draw every man even stronger to Himself and enable him to achieve the fulness of communion.

## Sažetak

### SUVREMENI POGLED NA KRŠĆANSKU SVETOST

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*U modernom vremenu shvaćanje svetosti često je zasjenjeno poimanjima postignuća na različitim područjima ljudske egzistencije, te bi svetost mogla biti shvaćena kao samo ljudsko zalaganje na moralnom području. Zato se unutar kršćanske tradicije govori o pozivu na svetost a ne samo na moralno savršenstvo, gdje svetost počiva prije svega na činjenici Božjeg izabranja, kojem kršćanin odgovara promjenom konkretnog života. U ovome radu istaknut će se nekoliko glavnih obilježja svetosti kao modela kršćanske egzistencije važnih za Crkvu u trećem tisućljeću. Najprije će se iznijeti biblijsko-teološki prikaz svetosti kao orijentir razumijevanja svetosti u Crkvi i u teologiji. Zatim će se prikazati temeljna dimenzija svetosti, a to je princip darovanosti koji je u određenoj*

*suprotnosti prema sveprisutnom principu postignuća i savršenstava. U trećem dijelu će se istaknuti egzemplarni karakter svetosti koja ima sposobnost da privlači druge te na taj način u životu Crkve ostvaruje njezin glavni karakter svetosti koja dolazi od samoga Boga. Kršćani u svojem odgovoru Bogu pronalaze uzor među svecima koji su prihvatili razna sredstva posvećenja unutar Crkve te dali Bogu odgovor na njegov poziv na svetost. Na kraju će se naznačiti važnost osobnog odgovora na poziv na svetost. Cilj kršćanske svetosti jest sjedinjenje s Bogom, a na putu do tog sjedinjenja potreban je i trud svakog pojedinca koji se ponajprije očituje u prihvaćanju Božjih darova i njegove milosti. Moralni i sveti život nije ponajprije pustolovina duhovnih velikana prokušanih moralnih vrlina i kreposti, gdje te vrline i kreposti jesu samo plod vlastitog nastojanja i humanističkih stremljenja, već je svetost odgovor Bogu na njegovu veliku ljubav koju je iskazao u povijesti spasenja i u životima ljudi.*

*Ključne riječi: svetost, poziv, savršenstvo, sveti, dar.*