

The Universal Call to Holiness

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While ministering with a talented iconographer, I suggested that, in preparation for the Solemnity of All Saints, the children be taught how to “write” an icon (the term iconographers use for creating an icon) of their favorite saint or the saint of their baptismal name. We arranged the children’s icons around the worship space. During the homily at all of the liturgies, the priest celebrant invited the assembly to look at the icons, and reminded them that we are all called to become saints. While icons are windows into the holy lives of the saints, they are also mirrors. By meditating before an icon, the invitation to holiness is reflected back to us. We are invited to take to heart the meaning of the icon (particularly the ways that saint lived his or her life in obedience to Christ), and to put that holiness into action by living it. For instance, when meditating before the icon of the Resurrection of Christ, I am always reminded to ask God’s help to strengthen me to help others be lifted from their difficult situations, just as Christ lifts Adam and Eve and all those bound in chains of sin and death shown in the icon.

Lumen Gentium, a document from the Second Vatican Council, stated that all of the baptized are called to holiness: “all in the church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness” (39). The preeminent model of holiness, *Lumen Gentium* (LG) stresses, is Christ Jesus. His life and ministry portray holiness in action. Moreover, this document, also known as the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, notes that Christ gives his Spirit to people in order that they be strengthened in God’s holiness. Holiness, then, is a gift from God. Holiness, the Constitution suggests, is found in “compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness and patience” (LG, 40, citing Colossians 3:12). These are traits Christ modeled perfectly and the characteristics the saints mirrored.

Holiness, the Constitution reminds us, is lived in our everyday situations: in the home, at work, and in our various communities. At root, holiness is loving God and one’s neighbor (40). As the Constitution states: “All, however, according



to their own gifts and duties must steadfastly advance along the way of a living faith, which arouses hope and works through love” (41). Of course, each of us possesses gifts, and it would be hoped that the gifts are utilized for the good of the Church and society. I think of the gifts of hospitality and kindness of a gentleman who works at the local soup kitchen. He embodies these gifts. For him, they are natural, but not everyone has these gifts. This passage from the Constitution suggests that each of us is called to act upon the gift of faith. This is living faith, a faith that becomes external in action and love for others. The Constitution states, the “true disciples of Christ are noted both for love of God and love of their neighbor” (42).

The Constitution uses the image of self-emptying (*kenosis*) to portray holiness. If the goal is to grow in holiness, one must be emptied of all that is contrary to compassion, humility, and lowliness. God emptied himself to become human. Think of it: God enters intimately into the human situation and experiences what humans are capable of, even to the extent of being crucified. God humbles himself to become human, so that humans might become holy (to paraphrase the early Church theologian Athanasius). This was the ultimate act of love: not simply being humbled, but laying down his very life for another (42). This self-emptying in love for others is not simply imitating Christ: it is the Spirit’s activity engaging us and working through us. In this sense, each person becomes a sign of God’s love and holiness in the midst of life.

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