

HOLINESS: A ROADMAP TO JOY

Prayer: Colossians 1, 9-14

1. Introduction:

Life as A Journey

Life is a long journey. Once we are born, we are put on a road that leads us to an encounter with God. This journey starts with our birth, passes through our childhood and youth to adult life; and one day, it will stop with our death.

In the Baltimore Catechism, there is an interesting question that summarizes the reason why we have been created and which explains everything that we do here on earth. That question states, "Why did God create us"? The Catechism answers by saying that God created us to know him and to love him in this world; then, to share in his everlasting happiness in heaven.

However, there is a problem, because all that is not easy. There is nothing automatic anyway. As a matter of fact, in order to have access to happiness in heaven we ought to live here on earth a kind of life which is God's manner, a life that is in faithfulness to God's commandments and the respect of our commitments vis-à-vis God and our brothers and sisters. The book of Leviticus puts it in a way that leaves no doubt about the importance of conforming our lives to that of God, of spending our lives on earth in a way that it transpires that of God: "For I, the Lord, am your God; and you shall make and keep yourselves holy; because I am holy. (...) Since I, the Lord, brought you up from the land of Egypt that I might be your God, you shall be holy, because I am holy" (Leviticus 11, 44-45; 20, 7). In the same way, Jesus says, "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5, 48). The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says, in turn, that without holiness nobody can see God (Hebrews 12, 14).

With this word of God in our mind, we clearly understand that it is only when we strive to be holy and to live holy lives that we can have access to God's joy in heaven. All that brings us to these simple, but vital questions: What is holiness? Why shall we be holy? How can someone be holy? My aim in this talk is to provide you with some references in order to help you understand what holiness is and why it is important for us. My aim points also at helping you discern some ways the Church puts at our disposal in order to acquire holiness and foster in us holy lives. My global goal is to bring you, with the help

of the materials I provide you, to come to decision-making in fostering your own personal sanctity.

2. The meaning of holiness

Let us ask this question: What is holiness? The word we translate in English for holiness comes from the Hebrew word “Kadosch”. In the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament, the word “kadosch” means being separated. In that sense, holiness means essentially being separated from the secular or the profane. In second instance, the word holiness means being dedicated to God’s service as Israel was said to be holy because it was the people of God. In a deep sense, holiness means being separated from evil. God is holy, because in him there is no evil. If human beings, as God’s creatures, are holy, it is because of their relation to God who is all holy. A person is holy insofar as that person keeps himself from evil and imitates God’s ways of living and acting.

Holiness is both objective and subjective. Holiness is subjective when it is about the possession of divine grace and the way someone conducts himself morally by the practice of virtues. An individual is holy when he possesses the divine virtues that lead him to conduct himself in God’s manner, in separation from evil. This is how we say of someone that he/she is really holy, which means literally that his/her ways of living and behaving are in God’s likeness.

Holiness is objective in creatures when it refers to their exclusive consecration to the service of God. For instance, a priest is holy by his ordination to the priesthood, a religious by his vows. A sacred place, like a Church, is holy, or the vessels or the vestments used in God’s house are holy by the blessing they receive and the sacred purpose for which they are reserved.

In this distinction, we have to introduce another notion, that of what we call substantial holiness. The substantial holiness is the possession of sanctifying grace. It is present in a person from the moment of baptism and represents the person’s likeness to God. It is an intrinsic goodness that qualifies the individual in the presence of God. It is in that sense that sometimes the New Testament calls the believers holy insofar as they are pleasing to God. We find this perception used in the Letters of St Paul. For instance, 1 Corinthians 1, 2; 1; 16, 20; 2 Corinthians 1, 1; 13, 12; Ephesians 1, 1-5; Philippians 4, 22; Colossians 1, 2, 4; 1 Thessalonians 2, 23-26; etc.

3. Acquiring Holiness

After having explored the dimension of what holiness means, we will now examine the question of how we can acquire holiness. In order to understand the importance of this section, there is something we have to seriously grasp, that is the reason why we have been created. In the first section, I formulated it with the Baltimore Catechism by saying that we have been created in order to know God, to love him and one day to share in his life in heaven. Another way of saying the same thing can be taken from these words of St Paul in Romans 8, 28-30.

These words of St Paul highlight our vocation as Christian as it is designed by God from the beginning of creation and the foundation of the world. According to these words, the goal for which we have been created is to be conformed to the image of Jesus. In fact, God has destined us to be conformed to the image of his Son, who is the first born among his brothers and sisters. Because Christ was set apart to be holy and perfect for the salvation of the world, those who believe in him have to try whatever they can to conform themselves to Christ.

As the Vatican II says in its Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium # 2), all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity. All are called to holiness, according to the word of Jesus in Mt 5, 48: "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect". The council continues by saying that "In order to reach this perfection the faithful should use the strength dealt out to them by Christ's gift, so that ... doing the will of the Father in everything, they may wholeheartedly devote themselves to the glory of God and to the service of their neighbor. Thus the holiness of the people of God will grow in fruitful abundance, as is clearly shown in the history of the Church through the life of the saints" (Lumen Gentium # 2).

What the Council wants is to make us aware of our dignity as we are called to perfection. The council wants also to highlight the importance of the sacraments as the means that the Church puts at our disposal in order to acquire, to develop and maintain holiness and perfection.

In light of this teaching it becomes clear that the goal of our spiritual life is to enter into a more intimate union with Christ. This union, which sometimes is called "mystical union", is a participation in the mystery of Christ through the sacraments. God calls us all to this intimate union with him, even if the special graces or extraordinary signs of this mystical life are granted only to some for the sake of manifesting the gratuitous

gift given to all, as in the case of Padre Pio or St Francis of Assisi and many other saints.

However, we have to remember that whatever might be our understanding of holiness, the way of perfection passes by the way of the cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle. Spiritual progress entails the asceticism (renunciation) and mortification that gradually lead to living in the peace and joy of the Beatitudes. This being said, we can now examine the concrete ways that can help us in the path to holiness.

A. Awareness of who We are

It is so amazing and even appalling to realize that people do not know themselves enough. And yet, any progress in spiritual life towards holiness starts always with the awareness of who we are and what are our qualities and our limitations, our strengths and our weaknesses.

This step is very important, because it allows us to see where we stand in our relationship with God and with our fellow humans. It allows us also to see things we can change in our life in order to make it conform to the image of Jesus. The Greek Philosopher Socrates formulated this requirement in a very simple way: "Know yourself". Know yourself so that you make progress in your relationship with God and come to sanctity.

B. Recognition of our sinfulness

If I could ask the question: "Who is Jesus"? I presume the answer will be "Our Savior". But what did he save us from? The answer of the Bible is "from sin".

As a matter of fact, in the Infancy Gospel, when the angel speaks to Joseph to enjoin him to keep Mary because the child she has is from the Holy Spirit, Matthew says, " She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1, 21). When later Jesus was on mission, though criticized by the Pharisees and the scribes, he conducted himself in a way of fulfilling this prophecy from the angel by always forgiving sins.

We have a beautiful scene in the healing of the paralytic: "What is easier to say, 'your sins are forgiven, or to say, 'Stand up and walk" (Mt 9, 5). The first thing Jesus does is to reassure the healed that his sins are forgiven. We have a same situation, but happening in a different context when Jesus

teaches his disciples how to pray. “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us” (Mt 6, 12).

As you can see, Jesus is quite concerned about sin. That is why at the end of his life, he left to the Church the sacrament of confession. “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained” (John 20, 22-23). The consequence to draw from such a perception is that as long as the sins are not forgiven, there is no peace. When forgiveness of sins comes, everything else follows. As long as sins are retained, so are a lot other forms of evil.

All the pain in the world comes from sin and selfishness. If we do not tackle sin and selfishness, we just tackle symptoms and not the root of evil. We can pass all the best laws in the world, we can attack all the structures we like, but if we have not changed the hearts of people, what we do is like pouring water on the feathers of a chicken. It serves no purpose, because it goes directly to the ground. That is why recognition of sin requires the repentance from sin.

C. Repentance

When I am talking about sin, it is not with the intention of provoking guilt in you, but with an idea that we have to recognize the truth of ourselves as human beings, weak and not always consistent in our commitments. That truth leads to the discovery that in spite of all our good will, we do things that are contrary to what God expects from us as his children and disciples of Jesus. Most people think they are good people and holy, because no one says bad things about them. But the problem is about the heart before God. God has complained through the prophet Isaiah that his people honor him with their lips and not with their hearts. That complaint of God is something we have to think of.

There is an author, Anthony De Melo, whose books I often use for meditation (See for instance, *The Way to Love*, Doubleday, New York, 1992). He says that holiness is a way of living that leads us to the ways of God. It is a natural thing that flows from our union with the Lord. It is like breathing as we naturally breathe. Once you start thinking about breathing, you will realize that you will be in trouble with your breath. To pretend to be holy serves no purpose, except to boast before our fellows. We should live naturally in the presence of the Lord and imitate him as often as we can.

If we are truthful to ourselves, the least we can do is to ask forgiveness for our sins and to repent. Nobody can grow in holiness if he/she does not recognize his/her sins and repents. Accept the fact that you have inadequacies and fears, and that you have to grow in the Lord. Then you will change and come close to holiness. Look at the beautiful illustration we have in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18, 10-14). The tax collector recognized the need of God's mercy and acknowledged his sins. The Pharisee, however, justified himself and remained in his sin.

That is why repentance is not only the recognition of sin, but truly a determination to change by counting on God's grace, an intense desire for God in everything we do. We desire too many things besides God. That is why we are not holy. Most of the saints in the history of the Church wanted nothing but God. Let me read you this prayer of St Anselm (1033-1109): "O Lord, our God, give us the grace to desire you with all our heart, so that desiring you we may seek and find you, and finding you we may love you, and loving you we may hate those things which have separated us from you".

D. Living the Sacraments...

If we want to maintain a holy life, we have to live the sacraments. All the sacraments are important, because they are a sign of grace through which Jesus heals us, feeds us, comforts us and remains close to us. Jesus is present in each one of them in a particular way in order to give us life and help us in our journey. Vatican Council II in the document on Sacred Liturgy says this about the sacraments. "By his power he is present in the sacraments so that when anybody baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes. He is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are in the church. Lastly, he is present when the church prays and sings, for he has promised "where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18, 20). (Sacrosanctum Concilium 37).

Most importantly, the sacraments of Eucharist and Confession are of great value in the search for holiness. The Eucharist is the center of the life of the Church and of the Christian. In the Eucharist, Jesus is all present under the species of bread and wine. It is a big mystery, in which we participate in the life of Christ and Christ participates in ours in order to make us holy.

In the Eucharist, there is an intimate union with Jesus that nothing else can give us and whose reception can lead us but to sanctity if we receive Jesus with a purified heart and clean heart. When we look at the way Jesus talks about the Eucharist, there is no doubt that he gives himself totally to us in the bread and wine and wants to be united with us. For instance, in John 6, there is a big emphasis on Jesus as the bread of life. It would be interesting for your meditation to deepen what Jesus says here. Let me repeat only verses: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread I will give is my flesh for the life of the world". (John 6, 51). Further, he says, "For my flesh is true food and, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in and I in him" (6, 55-56).

What all this means is that the Eucharist is a real presence of Jesus in our midst. By eating the bread he gives and by drinking the cup he gives, we partake in the body and the blood of the Lord. We are united in such a way that he is in us and we are in him. The union that comes from the eating and the drinking of his body and blood makes us shining of his presence that dwells in us as we receive the Holy Communion so that we are holy as he is whole in us.

Another sacrament of great importance is the sacrament of confession. First of all, let me say that there is a tendency in our culture today of minimizing and not taking seriously this sacrament.

I remember a couple of years ago; I was talking to teens in a Parish in Brussels about confession. A parent stood up and said: "Father, we do not want our children to feel guilty for anything. It has a bad impact on them; let them be free to choose what is good for them". My reaction was very simple: At home when your child has done something wrong, do you tell him/her to apologize and to realize that what he/she has done is not right. Do not you see the difference between that apology and the sacrament of confession? Why would it be legitimate that your child presents you the apology and you think we cannot do the same thing with God?

Moreover, I realize that in the buses and trains, there were a lot of advertisements about the importance of talking to a psychologist, even in anonymity, in order to get rid of problems and feel relieved. If a psychologist can bring us relief about a problem we have in our heart, how much more

the word of God pronounced by a priest in the sacrament of confession, in the name of Jesus, can heal us?

We need to hear from the priest and in the name of the Church and in persona Christi these words: "I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, of the Son and the Holy Spirit". The way to holiness goes hand in hand with the importance of accepting our responsibility when we have sinned and ask God forgiveness in the sacrament of confession. There is no holiness without the sacrament of confession and repentance.

Let me finish with a story. When I was in Loveland at St John's, there was a gentleman who came almost every two days to the sacrament of confession. Another friend of mine was so astonished and wondered why people go to confession so often. It means that they are big sinners. I can tell you that this gentleman did not come to confession because he was a big sinner, but rather because he was a saint. I can tell that his heart was all pure and clean. He wanted to be in peace with the Lord he loved so much. There was nothing in him of scrupulosity or stubbornness of dwelling in sins. What mattered to him was union with Jesus through the sacrament of reconciliation. All the great saints of the Church have gone through the same process of always keeping themselves pure of heart and mind. They have put the sacrament of confession to good use for their sanctity.

Conclusion

Let me summarize everything by saying that we are on a journey toward our encounter with God. On this journey we are called to the joy of heaven and union with our Lord, Jesus. We become saints in so far as, aware of our limitations and sins, we strive to repent and make amends. Counting on God's grace, we do all our best to avoid sins and to abide closely in the Lord by keeping ourselves pure of heart, mind and body, and imitate our Lord in everything we do. On the way to holiness, we need the support of the sacraments of the Church. We need all the spiritual means the Church puts at our disposal like adoration, meditation, and spiritual reading, etc. We should never be discouraged to start again and again. God loves us and wants us to change and to become better and better; he wants us to be holy.

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Last Updated: August 2, 2010

