

92. Holiness in the World

92.1 The universal call to holiness

All Sacred Scripture is a calling to holiness, to the fullness of charity, but Jesus makes it quite explicit in the Gospel of today's Mass: *You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*¹ And Christ is not addressing his words to the Apostles or to just a few of his followers, but to everyone. Saint Matthew makes the point at the conclusion of these discourses that *the crowds were astonished at his teaching.*² Jesus does not demand sanctity of an exclusive coterie of disciples who accompany him everywhere, but of all who approach him: *the multitudes*, among whom were mothers of families, labourers, and skilled craftsmen who would stop to hear him after work, children, tax-collectors, beggars and cripples...The Lord calls people to follow him without distinction of state, race or condition, Christ speaks to us, to each one in particular, to our neighbours, work-mates or friends in the office or in the Faculty and to those who pass us and each other in the street: *Be perfect...* he says, and grants us the means and the appropriate graces that will make perfection possible. This is not just advice for the master, but an imperative command. *All in the Church, whether they belong to the Hierarchy or cared for by it, are called to holiness, according to the Apostle's saying: 'For this is the will of God, your sanctification' (1 Thess 4:3).*³ *All Christians, in any state or walk of life, are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love.*⁴ In the doctrine of Christ there is no invitation to mediocrity, but a clear call to heroism, to love and to cheerful sacrifice.

Love is within reach of a child, of the invalid who has been confined to a hospital bed for a lengthy period, of the businessman, of the doctor who hardly has a minute to spare...because sanctity is a matter of love, and of the effort we make to reach the Master with the help of grace. We have to give a new meaning to life, together with all its joys and exhilarations, its pains and woes. Sanctity requires a fight against conformity, against lukewarmness, against an easy-going worldly attitude. It demands heroism – not in extraordinary situations that we are unlikely to encounter, but in continual fidelity to our task in the unremarkable duties of each day.

The liturgical readings today refer to Saint Cyprian, who exhorted the Christians of the third century: *Beloved brethren, we ought to know and remember that since we call God our Father, we have to behave like his children, so that He will be pleased with us...Let us behave as befits those who are God's temple...He has said it: 'Be perfect, because I am perfect.' So we pray, beseeching him that we who were sanctified in Baptism may persevere in that initial sanctification, asking this, moreover, for each day.*⁵ Today we implore this of God: Lord, grant us a lively desire for sanctity, that we may be exemplary in our duty of loving you more each day. Help us to spread your doctrine everywhere...

¹ Matt 5:4-8

² Cf Matt 7:28

³ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, 39

⁴ *Ibid*, 40

⁵ *Divine Office*, Tuesday of the Eleventh Week, Second Reading

92.2 Becoming saints wherever we find ourselves.

Our Lord is not happy with a lukewarm life and a half-hearted dedication. *Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes that it may bear more fruit.*⁶ And so the Master purifies his own, permitting them to experience trials and contradictions. *If the goldsmith hammers the gold repeatedly, it is to take off the impurities in it; if the precious metal is abraded again and again it is to make it shine. 'The heated kiln tries the potter's vessel; man is tested in tribulation.'*⁷ All the pain God allows, whether it be of body or of mind, serves to purify the soul so that it may yield more fruit. It is the mystery of suffering that we have to see it always as a grace from Heaven.

All times are good times for entering into the depths of sanctity; all circumstances are opportune for loving God more; for our interior life feeds, as plants do, on the stuff of the circumstances in which we are immersed. Growth is the work of the Holy Spirit. Plants do not choose the ground in which they are nourished; the sower lets the seeds fall to the earth, where they prosper, converting the useful elements in the soil, with the help of rainwater, into the substance of the maturing grain. And so what is sown ripens and reaches up and grows strong.

With even greater reason will we grow in strength, because it is our Father God who has chosen the terrain and gives us the graces necessary for us to bear fruit. The plot of earth where Our Lord has planted us is the particular family of which we are part, and not any other. We grow up among those who form our initial immediate environment, with all their virtues and failings and idiosyncrasies. The rich mould we are rooted in is our work, which we must love so that it will sanctify not only us, but also our colleagues, our classmates, our neighbours... The earth from those nutrients we have to produce fruits of holiness is our country, our own country, our city, our town, the prevailing social or political system, our own condition of life and no other. It is there, in that environment, in the midst of the world where the Lord says we can and must live all the Christian values, developing them with all the demands they make on us and not allowing them to be stunted or to wither. God calls people to holiness in every circumstance: in war and in peace, in sickness and in health, when we think we have triumphed and when we face unexpected defeat, when we have plenty of time and when time is at a premium, so that we seem barely to manage to do what we must. Our Lord wants us to be saints at all times. Those who do not rely on grace, and habitually see things with a completely human outlook, are saying constantly: this now, is not the right time for sanctity...later...perhaps...

Let us not think that in another place, in another situation we would be ready to follow Our Lord more closely and carry out a more fruitful apostolate. Let us leave that mystical wishful thinking to one side. The fruits of sanctity Our Lord expects are those produced in and from the environment in which we find ourselves, here and now: tiredness, sickness, family, the job, one's colleagues, one's fellow students... *Leave behind false idealisms, fantasies, and what I usually call mystical wishful*

⁶ John 15:2

⁷ St Peter Damian, *Letters*, 8,6

*thinking. If only I hadn't married...If only I hadn't this profession...If only I were healthier...If only I were young...If only I were old...! Instead, turn seriously to the most material and immediate reality, which is where our Lord is...⁸ This is the environment in which our love of God should grow and develop, using *precisely* those opportunities we find at hand. Let us not allow them to slip away, for it is in them that Jesus is waiting for us.*

92.3 All circumstances are good to help us grown in holiness and carry out a fruitful apostolate

If we contemplate life in a merely human way, could it not seem that there are any number of moments or situations which are surely less propitious for growth in sanctity or for carrying out a fruitful apostolate? Think of journeys, examinations, times of excessive pressure of work, exhaustion, disheartenment...; or what about tough environments, delicate professional decisions to be made in a paganised atmosphere, slanderous campaigns...? None the less, those are familiar moments in every ordinary life: modest successes and occasional setbacks, feelings of well-being and bouts of indifferent health, joys and sorrows and slight to serious worries; years of prosperity and perhaps other times of economic distress...Our Lord is expecting us to turn all these occasions into opportunities for sanctity and apostolate.

In these moments we will give more attention to and put more effort into personal daily prayer – we can always find time: love is ingenious at finding time if need be – into our visits to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, into our relations with Our Lady...for these very occurrences are the ones in which we need more help. We shall obtain the assistance we need in prayer and in the Sacraments. Then it is that virtues are strengthened and the whole interior life matures.

Nor should we wait for special circumstances in order to on with our apostolate. Any day, any time is good. If the first Christians had waited for more propitious occasions they would have converted very few to the faith. This task will always call for audacity and a spirit of sacrifice. *It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops.*⁹ Effort and the exercise of human virtues are necessary. Apostolate demands constancy in a special way. The Apostle Saint James says: *Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives the early and the late rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.*¹⁰ And with constancy should go the generosity to sow lavishly, freely, even though we may not ourselves see the results. Someone else may harvest what we have sown.

Let us ask the Blessed Virgin for an effective zeal for sanctity in the circumstances in which we find ourselves *now*. Let us not await the *more opportune* moment; there isn't one. This is the most favourable moment, *the acceptable time* to love God with all our heart, with all our being...

⁸ *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá, 116*

⁹ 2 Tim 2:6

¹⁰ James 5:7-8

**Taken from the book, “In Conversation with God” by Francis Fernandez, Scepter Publishers
Inc, Princeton, NJ, 2000**

‘Hablar con Dios” Francis Fernandez, Ediciones Palabra, Madrid, 1986