



Pastoral Letter

*"As he who called you is holy,
Be holy yourselves in every aspect of your conduct"
(I Peter 1: 15)*

Reflections on the Universal Call to Holiness

Lent 2017



Blessed Fra Angelico (1400- 1455): Saints

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Last summer, many of us closely followed the Olympic games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It was a great spectacle broadcast all over the world! After intense and demanding training, often obscure and sometimes painful, athletes gave the best of



themselves in the hope of obtaining the famous gold medal. The desire for glory, to break records, motivated them and produced their countless efforts.

St. Paul's reflection comes to my mind when I look at these athletes: *"Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one."* (1 Cor 9: 24-25) So we can ask ourselves a question: **Are we ready to run for the wreath that does not perish? Are we ready to invest for eternal life?**

It is easy to observe and understand the achievements of others, to be 'armchair

athletes' comfortably seated in front of the television. It is much more difficult to be a competing athlete on the ground, to spend the energy, to sweat, to be injured sometimes, to experience times of glory and times of defeat. We have never seen an 'armchair athlete' ascend to the podium and receive a gold medal. Only athletes on the ground make that journey.

In the same sense, it is easy to declare ourselves to be Christians, to know Christ and his Gospel, to admire Saint Francis of Assisi or Saint Teresa of Calcutta. It is much more demanding to be serious about faith, to really commit to living it every moment. Jesus wants committed disciples on the ground, people who are not *lukewarm* (Rev 3:16). The world also expects Christians to live the Gospel integrally, radically following Jesus. In reality, the world needs saints.

Holiness is actually the wreath, the gold medal that is offered to us: do we truly want it? **Do we want to make the effort required, to work on ourselves, to transform our ways of thinking and acting to really be Christians, that is to say, reflections of Christ?**

- 1- If we want to, we can take advantage of Lent, this privileged time that the Church offers us to live our Christian life more intensely and to energetically commit to becoming better disciples of Jesus, people who allow the light of the Gospel to be more visible through them. Thus we are invited to remove from our lives whatever prevents the light of God from entering. We easily understand that in a region like ours where bad winter weather darkens the windows of our homes and reduces sunlight. We are anxious for spring-cleaning so that the windows can fully let in the sunlight. It's the same for our Christian life: our human frailty and all kinds of influences, more or less good, obscure the presence of the Lord in us. We need to purify ourselves, to work on ourselves in order to become more in the image of Christ. Just as we desire clean air and a world without pollution, so we can

aspire to the true pure air from God, to a genuine world deprived of evil ... in a word, to holiness.

- 2- This year, our Lent may have a particular colour. In fact, it is situated within the framework of the reflection that I started in my Pastoral Letter of last fall: *"Pastoral Visit: Reflections on the Future"*. I extended an invitation in that Letter to reflect on the future of our diocesan Church. I wondered how we could have a Church that responds more completely to the Lord's plan. It seems to me that the first condition is to have a Church full of disciples committed to their faith and wanting to spread it, which means missionaries ... a Church where in each parish and in each person are found the four characteristics with which Saint Luke described the first Christian community: *"devoted to the teaching of the apostles and the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers."* (Acts 2:42)
- 3- The vitality of the Church and her renewal depends on the commitment of each of her members to live in conformity with the Gospel. This is what we call 'holiness'. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Christifideles laici*, Saint John Paul II said: *"The saints have always been the source and origin of renewal in the most difficult moments in the Church's history."* (n. 16, 3) *"Holiness is the hidden source and infallible measure of her apostolic activity and missionary zeal."* (17, 3) (texts cited from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 828).
- 4- Through this Pastoral Letter, I want to offer some reflections on holiness, this gold medal that we should fervently seek, this purity of life that allows the light of Christ to shine through us, this source of renewal for the life of the Church and consequently for our diocese. Obviously, I find myself quite audacious to be writing about holiness, I who am far from having succeeded at it. However, in this regard, I recall the experience of Tertullien, a great Christian writer of the first centuries who had begun to write a treatise on 'patience'. A friend pointed out to him: *"How can you write a book on patience, you who have so little of it?"* With lucidity and humour, Tertullien answered: *"It is not because we are sick that we do not aspire to health."* In the same way, it is not because we are sinners that we cannot aspire to holiness, which is true health. This is the meaning of my reflection: to help the faithful aspire to become better disciples of Jesus, transformed by him. So that my reflection is reliable, I will draw not only from my own limited experience but from three dependable sources: the Word of God, the lives of the saints, the teaching of the Church (Popes, Councils, liturgy, *Catechism*).

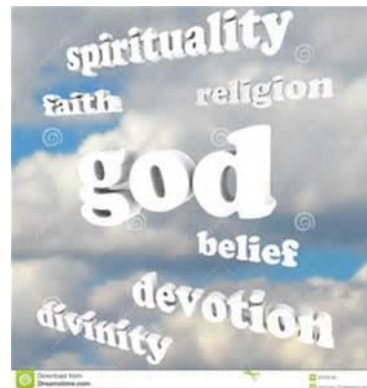


I- Everyone is called to holiness

- 5- God wants us to be saints. Saint Paul magnificently expresses this plan in his Letter to the Ephesians: God, he said, *"has chosen us in him, before the creation of the world, to be holy*

and without blemish before him." (Eph 1: 4) In the first text of the New Testament he writes: *"This is the will of God ... your holiness."* (1 The 4: 3) When Jesus teaches us to say, in the *Our Father*: *"Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"*, we can ask that God's will for sanctification, already in this world, be realized in us and remain for eternity.

- 6- Some among us might think that holiness is reserved for an elite, for a small number of people, for great heroes of faith, for saints who, through canonization, the Church proposes that we admire and imitate. *"By canonizing some of the faithful, i.e., by solemnly proclaiming that they practiced heroic virtue and lived in fidelity to God's grace, the Church recognizes the power of the Spirit of holiness within her and sustains the hope of believers by proposing the saints to them as models and intercessors."* (Catechism n. 828; cf. *Lumen Gentium* n. 40. 48. 51) In fact, holiness is offered to everyone. In his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Saint Francis de Sales teaches clearly about it. He invites all of the faithful to 'devotion', that is to say, to an intense Christian life, in short to holiness: *"When God the Creator made all things, he commanded the plants to bring forth fruit each according to its own kind; he has likewise commanded Christians, who are the living plants of his Church, to bring forth the fruits of devotion, each one in accord with his character, his station and his calling. That devotion must be practiced in different ways by the nobleman and by the working man, by the servant and by the prince, by the widow, by the unmarried and by the married woman... The practice of the devotion must be adapted to the strength, to the occupation and to the duties of each one in particular... It is therefore an error and even a heresy to wish to exclude the exercise of devotion from military divisions, from the artisan's shops, from the court of princes, from family households ... In whatever situations we happen to be, we can and must aspire to the life of perfection."* (text cited from the Office of Readings for his feast January 24)



- 7- In the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, the Second Vatican Council devoted Chapter V to the *"universal call to holiness in the Church."* (n. 39-42) *"It is 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." (n. 40) Thus, at any age, in every state of life (single, married, religious, priest), in every profession, we are called to be saints. When we

look at canonized saints, we are struck by the extraordinary diversity of the faces, as I wanted to illustrate on the cover page with the picture of Fra Angelico. Some, like the Holy Innocents, died at a young age, others at different ages: Saint Agnes (12 years), Saint Dominique Savio (15 years), Saint Therese of the Child Jesus (24 years), Saint Alphonsus of Liguori (90 years). We find saints who are married, who are men and women religious,

martyrs, priests, single or widowed people. There are farmers, shepherds, artisans, heads of state, queens, nurses, teachers, writers of genius like Saint Thomas Aquinas or others who left nothing written. There are many faces of holiness. The celebration of the centennial of the diocese was, I hope, an opportunity to discover or rediscover the faces of holiness among us. If they have not yet been acknowledged by the Church, they are no less real. On All Saints Day the Church celebrates these faces, known by God, that call out to us.

8- **Spiritual Application** :

- a- Meditate on the texts of Saint Paul who reminds us that God wants us to be saints. (cf. n. 5 above)
- b- Each person might wonder: In my present condition, in my profession, in my state in life, do I feel called to become a saint?

II- Holiness is first of all found in God

Holiness belongs to God, he who is the Absolute Good, exempt from all evil. In full pages, the Bible reminds us of this. *"You shall be holy, for I the Lord*

your God am holy." (Lev 19:2) In this regard, I would like to recall a few particularly significant passages.

9- The first is the meeting between God and Moses in the episode of the burning bush. (Ex 3:



2-6) *"There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the LORD saw what he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God."*

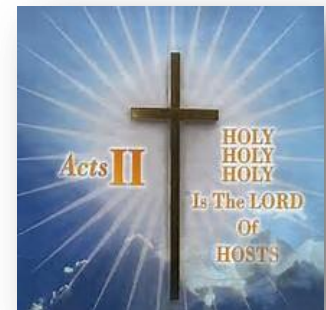
10- This biblical passage offers many aspects for our reflection. To begin with, we notice that it is God who takes the initiative, it is he who takes the first steps toward Moses: God always precedes us. He reveals himself in the fire. Why? Fire attracts our attention ... it fascinates our eyes. Nonetheless we cannot take it into our hands. This applies well to God: he attracts our attention, we seek to know him, to understand him but we cannot grasp him, as we would like to. He escapes us in a certain way. He is always beyond what we can understand. Then God asks Moses to remove his sandals that he depends on for walking. He thereby makes Moses aware of his frailty. In the presence of God, we become aware of two distances, the first between the Creator and his creation, the second, between absolute good and evil. God does not reveal himself to Moses to crush him but to save him

and to save his people. In fact, he wants to pull him away from the evil that is affecting him and wants to enter into a covenant with him and offer him the Promised Land where he will no longer be a slave.

11- The prophet Isaiah had an experience similar to that of Moses. He describes it in the following terms: *"I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."* (Is 6: 1-7) Isaiah in turn discovers the greatness and holiness of God. He listens to the angels praising him. Before this impressive spectacle, he is aware of his own limitations. But what is extraordinary is that God's holiness was communicated to him and rid him of his sin. In fact, just as fire radiates and brings warmth, the holiness of God spreads out and transforms whomever it touches ... it rids them of evil, leaving only good to survive.

12- The Church always goes back to this song of the Angels at the heart of every mass ... she praises the three times Holy God. This triple mention proclaims the holiness of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We can meditate on this song that expresses the union of the Church on the earth with the one in heaven in the holiness and glory of God:

*Holy ! Holy ! Holy ! Lord God of Hosts!
Heaven and earth are full of your glory!
Hosanna in the highest !
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord !
Hosanna in the highest !*



13- Who is the one who comes in the name of the Lord? Of course it is his own Son Jesus. In him, the holiness of God is communicated to us in a total and definitive manner, as Saint John says in his Gospel: *"And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us... From his fullness we have all received ... Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.. No has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father's side, has revealed him."* (Jn 1: 14. 16-18) Before his birth, the angel Gabriel announced the holiness of his Son to the Virgin Mary: *"The child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God."* (Lk 1: 35; Mt 1: 20) In his presence, the Apostles had a similar feeling to the one that Moses and Isaiah experienced: *"Simon Peter fell at the knees of Jesus and said: 'Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.'* (Lk 5: 8) The demons perceived his holiness with great insight: *"I know who you are: the Holy One of God."* (Mk 1: 24)

14- Jesus himself is very aware of his holiness. *"Can any of you charge me with sin?"* he asks. (Jn 8: 46) Nonetheless, his mission as Saviour consists precisely of pulling humanity out of the evil that touches it and communicating the holiness that bursts out from God like an abundant spring: *"Rivers of living water will flow from within him."* (Jn 7: 38) He clearly expresses it in the solemn prayer he addresses to the Father at the Last Supper (Jn 17: 1-26): *"He may give eternal life to all you gave him."* (v. 2); *"Holy Father, keep them in your name that you have given me."* (v. 11); *"Consecrate them in the truth; your word is truth... I consecrate myself for them, so that they also may be consecrated in truth."* (v. 17. 19).



15- In this way Jesus presents himself as the one sent from God, the one in whom the holiness of God is present since he is the Son, the one who communicates it to the world, since he is the Saviour. Here is the great news: We are sanctified in Jesus. He gives us the Spirit of holiness that stays within us. The Second Vatican Council summarized his mission:

"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 consumator of this holiness of life: "Be you therefore perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Mt 5: 48)

they are really made holy. Then too, by God's gift, they must hold on to and complete in their lives this holiness they have received.

Indeed He sent the Holy Spirit upon all men that He might move them inwardly to love God with their whole heart and their whole soul, with all their mind and all their strength (Mk 12: 3)) and that they might love each other as Christ loves them.(cfr. Jn 13: 34; 15:12)



They are warned by the Apostle to live "as saints", (Eph 5: 3) and to put on "as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved a heart of mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, patience", (Col : 12) and to possess the fruit of the Spirit in holiness. (cfr. Gal 5: 22; Rom 6: 22) Since truly we all offend in many things (cfr. James 3:2), we all need God's mercies continually and we all must daily pray: "Forgive us our debts. "(Mt : 12)(LG40)

The followers of Christ are called by God, not because of their works, but according to His own purpose and grace. They are justified in the Lord Jesus, because in the baptism of faith they truly become sons of God and sharers in the divine nature. In this way

16- Spiritual Application: Meditate on the text from the Council:

Jesus is the master who we should listen to: his teaching is sure, since he is God. He is the model that we should follow: we are assured that his path leads to true life. (Jn 14: 6)

Jesus is at the starting point and at the point of arrival. He is the Alpha and the Omega. He is the one who walks beside us as he did with the disciples of Emmaus. (Lk 24: 15)

He gives us his Spirit who acts within us ... if we are attentive to him we have light to discover what must be done and the strength to move into action.

Sanctification is received at Baptism like a seed. It is our responsibility to make that seed grow through a life transformed, full of mercy, goodness, humility, gentleness, patience ...

Sin is waiting for us but it does not have the last word.

III- **The holiness of God is communicated to us through the sacraments**

17- The holiness of God is first and foremost communicated to us through Baptism that makes us children of the Father, members of the Body of Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit. This is why Saint Paul by no means hesitates to give the first Christians the title of saints: *“Paul ... to the Church of God that is in Corinth, to you who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy,”* (I Cor 1: 1-2); *“to the holy ones who are in Ephesus”* (Ep 1: 1); *“to all the holy ones in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi”* (Phil 1: 1) (Col 1: 1). The fundamental idea is the same ... anywhere on earth whether it be (Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi), Christ sanctifies his disciples, whom he joined to his Body through Baptism and to whom he has given the gift of his Spirit.



18- We cannot maintain divine life in us without the help of the sacraments. *“The seven sacraments are the signs and instruments by which the Holy Spirit spreads the grace of Christ the head throughout the Church which is his Body, the Church.”* (Catechism n. 774) *“Seated at the right hand of the Father and pouring out the Holy Spirit on his Body which is the Church, Christ now acts through the sacraments he instituted to communicate his grace. The sacraments are perceptible signs (words and actions) accessible to our human nature. By the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit they make present efficaciously the grace that they signify.”* (ibid. n. 1084)

19- Thus it is unthinkable to be able to attain holiness without the sacraments. On the one hand, it is pretentious to think that we can obtain the life of God without God himself, as

Adam and Eve wanted to do at the beginning of humanity. In addition, it is ungrateful and contemptuous of Christ who chose this way for us to share his life. Sacramental life is absolutely necessary to make the holiness, deposited as a seed at Baptism, grow within us. Just as we take care of our physical lives in many ways (food, activities, air), in the same way we should leave to God the possibility of making his life grow within us through the sacraments.

20- One image can help us to understand the role of the sacraments. We possess many electrical appliances for various uses (lighting, heating, air-conditioning, televisions, stoves, microwaves). Thanks to the transmission network, each of them functions insofar as they receive energy provided by the power plant. If the plant fails, the appliances no longer work; if the transmission network is disrupted, the appliances no longer work; if we don't plug in the appliances, they no longer work. Also, electrical energy is one, but its effects are different in every appliance ... depending on the case, electricity becomes heat, music, image, a meal. Christian life goes somewhat like that. Christ can be compared to the power plant: spiritual energy, the holiness that God offers, is found in him. This energy continues on to us through the Holy Spirit who transmits it to us through the sacraments. In the diversity of people and vocations, this divine energy allows us to fully realize who we are. For God's part, we are assured that energy is always offered. There is never a breakdown. For our part, it is up to us to accept this energy or not, to activate it or not. The person who does not press the 'on' button of his appliance cannot complain that it doesn't work. In the same way, the person who doesn't open up to the action of God cannot criticize God for his or her own shortcomings. Let us now look at each of the sacraments

21- The sacrament of Confirmation strengthens the gift of Baptism ... it provides the maturity to witness to the faith. *"[The baptized] are more perfectly bound to the Church and are enriched with a special strength of the Holy Spirit. Hence they are, as true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed."* (Catechism, n. 1285) The Holy Spirit communicates the fruits of his presence: *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."* (Gal 5: 22-23; cf. Catechism n. 1832)



22- The sacrament of Reconciliation frees us from the evil that slips into our lives. I reflected deeper into its role in my Lent 2015 Pastoral Letter *"Repent and believe in the Gospel"*.

23- The Eucharist is the main instrument of our sanctification. I focused on this in two pastoral letters: *"This Is My Body Given for You"* (June 13, 2014) and *"Do This in Memory of Me"* (March 27, 2016). I simply want to mention an important element here, in connection with our present reflection. In Eucharistic Prayer II, right after the 'Sanctus', the Church speaks to the Father in the following terms:



« You are indeed Holy, O Lord,
the fount of all holiness.
Make holy, therefore, these gifts, we pray
by sending down your Spirit upon them like the dewfall,
that they may become for us
the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ ».

The Church recognizes that God alone is holy, truly holy.

He does not keep his holiness for himself. He wants to communicate it. He is then the source and origin of holiness.

He does this in a very particular way in the Eucharist ... the Holy Spirit transforms the bread and the wine so that they become the Body and Blood of Christ. When we receive them in communion, it is this power of sanctification that touches us, that really becomes 'for' us.

- 24- With the Anointing of the Sick, the Lord comes to meet people afflicted by illness. He accompanies them in this time of difficulty. It is *"a particular gift of the Holy Spirit. The first grace of this sacrament is one of strengthening, peace and courage to overcome the difficulties that go with the condition of serious illness or the frailty of old age. This grace is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who renews trust and faith in God and strengthens against the temptations of the evil one, the temptation to discouragement and anguish in the face of death."* (Catechism n. 1520) This sacrament unites us to the passion of Christ. (n. 1521) It shines on the Church (n. 1522) and prepares for the final passage. (n. 1523)



- 25- The Sacrament of Matrimony constitutes an important place for the presence of God. The Second Vatican Council reminds us: *"Married couples and Christian parents should follow their own proper path (to holiness) by faithful love. They should sustain one another in grace throughout the entire length of their lives. They should embue their offspring, lovingly welcomed as God's gift, with Christian doctrine and the evangelical virtues. In this manner, they offer all men the example of unwearying and generous love; in this way they build up the brotherhood of charity; in so doing, they stand as the witnesses and cooperators in the fruitfulness of Holy Mother Church; by such lives, they are a sign and a participation in that very love, with which Christ loved His Bride and for which He delivered Himself up for her."* (LG 41; cf. Catechism n. 1641) Christ is present to the spouses: He *"gives them the strength to take up their crosses and so follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another's burdens, to "be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ... and to love one another with supernatural, tender, and fruitful love."* (Catechism n. 1642)



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27- As for women and men religious, the vows that they have pronounced are rooted in the Baptism that they radically live. *“The religious state is thus one way of experiencing a*



“more intimate” consecration, rooted in Baptism and dedicated totally to God. In the consecrated life, Christ's faithful, moved by the Holy Spirit, propose to follow Christ more nearly, to give themselves to God who is loved above all and, pursuing the perfection of charity in the service of the Kingdom, to signify and proclaim in the Church the glory of the world to come.” (*Catechism* n. 916) *“The consecrated*

life is seen as a special sign of the mystery of redemption. To follow and imitate Christ more nearly and to manifest more clearly his self-emptying is to be more deeply present to one's contemporaries, in the heart of Christ. For those who are on this “narrower” path encourage their brethren by their example, and bear striking witness that the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes.” (*Catechism* n. 932)

28- Thus the sacraments remain indispensable for sanctification. Some are only received once (Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Orders), but their permanent effect can be constantly activated. Matrimony also preserves the same permanence during the earthly life. In each state of life, at every age, the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist can be received regularly. Little by little they transform the faithful who receive them with conviction.

29- Spiritual Application:

I wonder what importance I give to the sacraments in my personal life.

How do I experience the requirements of my baptism and my confirmation? Can people see in me a true disciple of Christ?

How do I live out the commitments of marriage, of priesthood or religious life, depending on the case? How these permanent sources regularly revitalize myself ?

The place of the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist as regular means for my sanctification.

I meditate on a thought from Saint Poemen, monk of the desert, died in 451, cited in the *Magnificat* of August 2016:

*"The nature of water is soft, the nature of stone is hard.
A goatskin suspended above a stone,
Makes water fall drop by drop, piercing the stone.
So it is with the Word of God.
It is tender and the heart of man is hard.
But the Word of God can pierce it."*

IV- Holiness as Conformity to Christ

30- Holiness fundamentally consists of imitating Christ. Saint Paul recalled it in the excerpt that I used as the title of the present letter: *"Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct."* (1 Peter 1: 15) Saint John of the Cross proposed the same vision: *"Do nothing nor say any notable word that Christ would not have done or said were He in the state I am, as old as I, and with the same kind of health."* (The Degrees of Perfection, 3)

31- Christ constitutes an unsurpassable model for our lives. All of the saints worked to imitate him. It was said of Saint Francis of Assisi that, in his poverty, his joy, his freedom, his universal love, he was one who most resembled Christ. He was even the first to receive on his body the marks of the Passion of Jesus that we call the stigmata. Over the last five centuries, a great number of the faithful have been inspired by the *Imitation of Christ*, a book reprinted many times that has constituted the bedside reading of many saints like Saint Therese of the Child Jesus.

32- To begin with, the imitation of Christ requires a contemplative eye: one must in fact know the life of Christ in order to be imbued with his attitudes. Following that, his attitudes have to be translated into a different context, which is why the question must be asked about what he would do in my condition. Let us take an example. When I see Jesus seated on a donkey as he enters Jerusalem that does not mean that I should now use a donkey as a

means of transport. In fact, Jesus used an animal that was accessible to many simple people; he chose a humble means ... the same humility and modesty that I should seek in my personal situation. The Holy Spirit is necessary to concretely imitate Christ. His gifts illuminate intelligence in order to show us the good to do and these gifts act in the heart to infuse the strength required to move into action. Thanks to the Holy Spirit, the imitation of Christ is possible at every age, in every condition. The child, the adolescent, adults, married or single, priests, consecrated persons, all can imitate Christ where they are in their daily lives.

33- Meditation on the Passion of Christ constitutes an inspiring place for sanctification. For example, Saint Thomas Aquinas learned there the virtues of Christ that inspire behaviour. Here is his enlightening text:



The passion of Christ completely suffices to fashion our lives. Whoever wishes to live perfectly should do nothing but disdain what Christ disdained on the cross and desire what he desired, for the cross exemplifies every virtue.

If you seek the example of love: “Greater love than this no man has, than to lay down his life for his friends.” Such a man was Christ on the cross. And he gave his life for us, that it should not be difficult to bear whatever hardships arise for his sake.

If you seek patience, you will find no better example than the cross. Great patience occurs in two ways: either when one patiently suffers much, or when one suffers things which one is able to avoid and yet does not avoid. Christ endured much on the cross, and did so patiently, because “when he suffered he did not threaten; he was led like a sheep to the slaughter and he did not open his mouth.” Therefore Christ’s patience on the



cross was great. “In patience let us run for the prize set before us, looking upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith who, for the joy set before him, bore his cross and despised the shame.”

If you seek an example of humility, look upon the crucified one, for God wished to be judged by Pontius Pilate and to die .

If you seek an example of obedience, follow him who became obedient to the Father even unto death. “For just as by the disobedience of one man, namely Adam, many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one man, many were made righteous.”

If you seek an example of despising earthly things, follow him who is the “King of the Kings and the Lord of Lords”, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Upon the cross, he was stripped, mocked, spat upon, struck, crowned with thorns, and given only vinegar and gall to drink.

Do not be attached, therefore, to clothing and riches, because “they divided my garments among themselves”; nor to honours, for he experienced harsh words

and scourging. Nor to greatness of rank, for “weaving a crown of thorns they placed it on my head.” Nor to anything delightful, for

“in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.” (Saint Thomas Aquinas : Office of Readings on his feast day, January 28).

34- Other authors describe with evocative comparisons the effects of the absence of Christ on human life.

“When a house has no master living in, it becomes dark, vile and contemptible, choked with filth and disgusting refuse. So too is a soul which has lost its master, who once rejoiced with the angels. The soul is darkened.

darkness, buffeted by the waves of passion, storm-tossed at the mercy of evil spirits, its end is destruction.



Woe to the path that is not walked on, or along which the voices of men are not heard, for then it becomes the haunt of wild animals. Woe to the soul if the Lord does not walk within it to banish with his voice the spiritual beasts of sin. Woe to the house where no master dwells, to the field where no farmer works, to the pilotless ship, storm-tossed and sinking. Woe to the soul without Christ as its true pilot; drifting in the

Woe to the soul that does not have Christ to cultivate it with care to produce the good fruit of the Spirit; instead of fruit it produces only what is fit for burning. Woe to the soul that does not have Christ dwelling in it; deserted and foul with the filth of the passion, it becomes a haven for all the vices.” (Homily from the 4th century, Office of Readings, Wednesday, 34th week)

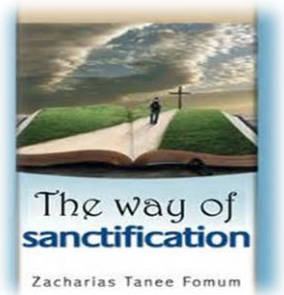
Thus Christ takes care of us like a homeowner looks after his house. He is the farmer who watches over his field to make the good grain grow. He is the steady pilot who steers the ship of our souls to the port of eternity.

V- Sanctification as Transformation of Life

35- The acquisition of holiness is a process that we call ‘sanctification’, the gradual transformation of a person under the influence of the grace of God. Saint Paul describes it this way in his Letter to the Romans: *“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. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”* (Rom 12: 1-2)

36- God wants our sanctification. He manifests his will in this regard in the ten commandments. (Exodus 20:1-17) Three among them concern God and seven, the neighbour. (*Catechism*, second part: n. 2052-2559) During a discussion with the Pharisees, Jesus summarized them in the dual commandment to love God and neighbour. *“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”* (Mt 22: 36-40) In his discourse about the last judgment, Jesus reminds us that we will be judged on love. (Mt 25: 31-46) At the Last Supper, he again declares: *“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”* (Jn 13: 34) He remains the model and the source of authentic love. Since then it is not surprising that the Church affirms: *“Charity is the soul of the holiness to which all are called: it governs, shapes, and perfects all the means of sanctification.”* (*Catechism* N. 826, citation from LG 42)

37- The whole person should be sanctified, transformed. Saint Paul underlines it: *“May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless.”* (I The 5: 23) The Church expresses the same reality in the Penitential Act at the beginning of mass. She invites us to recognize the possibility of sinning ‘*in thought, in word, through deed and through omission*’. She urges us to verify if we have integrated the Gospel into all of our life. Let us look at this more closely.



38- Thought (soul, mind) is the starting point ... it is here that good or bad plans are formed. Jesus describes this reality with the word ‘heart’: *“For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.”* (Mk 7: 21-22) The Church translates: *“The heart is the seat of moral personality ... The struggle against carnal covetousness entails purifying the heart and practicing temperance.”* (*Catechism* n. 2517) If our thoughts take God into account, our choices will be good. If God does not occupy our thoughts, we will open the door to the destruction of ourselves and others.

39- Our words also have great importance. As Jesus says: *“For from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks.”* (Lk 6: 45) Our words show love or not for God and our brothers and sisters. Saint James writes that although the tongue is small, it can have devastating effects. *“The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits...No one can tame the tongue... With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.”* (James 3: 5. 8-10) The disciple of Jesus should speak so that his words are in praise of God, a stimulant, a consolation, support for his brothers and sisters and not lies, slander, calumny, homicide.

40- Our actions can be good or bad: obviously we must avoid committing forbidden acts such as the ones we know through God's commandments (do not kill, nor steal, nor lie, nor commit adultery ...). Nonetheless, the disciple of Jesus is not content to not do what is bad. He should seek to do what is good. The sin of omission is precisely not doing the good that is within our reach: to not be of service to someone who asks for it, to not give alms to the person in need, to turn eyes away from a person in distress, to not forgive an offense, to demonstrate no gratuitousness in human relationships ... The parable of the Good Samaritan that I meditated on in my Fall 2015 Pastoral Letter and that Pope Francis developed during the Jubilee of Mercy, urges us to open our eyes, our hearts, our hands, in order to address the misery of others and to rescue them through the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. (*Catechism*, n. 2447)

41- Thus authentic holiness consists of allowing God to permeate our whole being, mind, soul, body, thoughts, words, actions so that he is present in everything and everywhere, conforming to what the prophet Isaiah said: *"The earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."* (Is 11: 9) God fills us to such a point that, as we say at mass, we do everything *through him, with him and in him*.



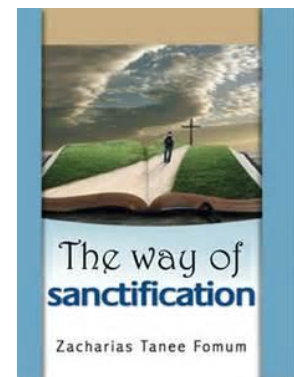
42- The integration of our whole being into God, the permanent response to his invitations, is not something easy, spontaneous. In fact, it requires an effort that we call spiritual combat. Jesus prepared us for this in the *Our Father*, when he invites us to say: *"Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil."* (see the commentary in the *Catechism* n. 2846. 2849. 2852). He knows that the Adversary wants to pull us away from God. Then we need to reattach ourselves to God more strongly, to receive his strength, by leaning on Jesus who declared: *"I have conquered the world"* (Jn 16: 33) ... the world signifying here resistance to God. Saint Paul describes spiritual combat and his weapons: *"Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."* (Ep 6:10-17)

43- The Letter to the Hebrews even asks us *"in the struggle against sin, to resist to the point of shedding blood"* (Heb 12: 4; cf. I Peter 4: 1-6). First of all, we must flee from mortal sin.

“Mortal sin destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God's law; it turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and his beatitude, by preferring an inferior good to him.” (Catechism, n. 1855) It requires three conditions: a grave matter committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent. (n. 1857-1859) We must seek to avoid venial sin (n. 1862) that “weakens charity; it manifests a disordered affection for created goods; it impedes the soul's progress in the exercise of the virtues and the practice of the moral good ... Deliberate and unrepented venial sin disposes us little by little to commit mortal sin.” (n. 1863) The Sacrament of Reconciliation is necessary to return to grace after having committed mortal sin. It is very helpful in providing strength for the battle against venial sins.

44- Thus the Church teaches that *“the way of perfection passes by way of the Cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual combat.” (Catechism n. 2015; 2516) This is understandable if we recall the image of Olympic competition that I evoked at the beginning of my Letter ... the athlete cannot continue to a gold medal without effort and sacrifice, without taking his own weaknesses into account. For his part, the disciple of Jesus knows that his nature is weakened by original sin, the roots of which we call ‘capital sins’ that are present in each person (Catechism n. 1866): “Ignorance of the fact that man has a wounded nature inclined to evil gives rise to serious errors in the areas of education, politics, social action and morals.” (Catechism n. 407) To begin with, spiritual combat situates itself inside of each of us, weakened, fragile. “Finding himself in the midst of the battlefield man has to struggle to do what is right, and it is at great cost to himself, and aided by God's grace, that he succeeds in achieving his own inner integrity.” (Catechism n. 409, citation from *Gaudium et Spes* no. 37 § 2).*

45- Now I would like to focus on the place where we should realize our sanctification: we should acquire holiness in our daily life, in what we call the duty of state. *“All the faithful of Christ are invited to strive for the holiness and perfection of their own proper state.” (Lumen Gentium n. 42). We are a single person or married, a minister of the Church, a man or woman religious; we are such and such an age and have such and such health; we exercise such and such a profession. We seek holiness within these elements: to become a holy spouse, holy parents, a holy priest or deacon or bishop, a holy woman or man religious, a holy student, a holy nurse, a holy truck driver, a holy lawyer. Holiness has even effects on the simple human level: “By this holiness as such a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society.” (LG 40)*



46- In this line I'm thinking about a story that I read somewhere that may provide some perspective. Three men were working at a construction site. Someone asked them to

describe their work. The first replies: "I carve stones." The second says: "I am the breadwinner for my wife and children." The third declares: "I am building a cathedral for my God." The three were doing the same work. The first focuses on the physical description ... carving stones, with such and such an instrument, for a certain number of hours at a certain salary. The second, who did the same work, puts a little more heart into it. He sees the social dimension of his work: he is inhabited by love for his wife and children. At times of fatigue, he can draw new energy from this love. The third undoubtedly assumes the words of the other two but he also sees a spiritual dimension, the presence of God.

47- This little story can help us to understand concretely how to experience holiness in daily life, in the duty of state. Each one has his work: a specific task to carry out, a number of hours to work, a contract to respect. At this level, the disciple of Jesus demonstrates competence and justice, doing what is expected of him. He can also put more heart into it: establish ties with other people, treat them like brothers and sisters, make his contribution and respect theirs. Finally, he can provide a spiritual dimension: be aware of fulfilling the mission that God entrusted to humanity (*dominate the earth and subdue it*), in the joy of preparing the new world.

48- **Spiritual Application:**

- a. Be aware of the Lord's invitation to permeate all of my being, all of my life: my family, my work, my leisure, with his presence.
- b. Accept spiritual combat.
- c. By recalling the seven capital sins (pride, greed, impurity, envy, gluttony, anger, sloth), identify the one that troubles me the most. What means am I taking so that it does not prevail over me?
- d. Experience my duty of state in the presence of God: as a single or married person, priest or religious, in my profession, at my age, with my health, my material conditions.
- e. Exercise my profession with a Christian spirit.

VI- I believe in the communion of saints

49- We all know the 'I believe in God'. As Catholics we know that the saints occupy a fundamental place in the faith. They illustrate the beauty and effects of it. On their feast days, the Preface of the mass clearly proclaims: "*By their way of life you offer us an example, by communion with them you give us companionship, by their intercession sure*

support.” The saints demonstrate that indeed it is possible to attain holiness. Then we can allow ourselves to be inspired by their example. From now on they live forever in God. We are united to them because we are members of the same family. They are our brothers and sisters who have succeeded. We can count on their support because they pray for us who are still in the struggle and effort. The Preface continues in the same vein: *“So that encouraged by so great a cloud of witnesses, we may run as victors in the race before us and win the imperishable crown of glory.”* We are in the race at the stadium, in times of struggle and effort. They encourage us in pursuit of the gold medal that they have obtained!

50- At each mass, we express our communion with the saints. At the beginning in the *“I confess to almighty God”*, we ask for their intercession to escape the weight of sin. At the Sanctus, we unite ourselves to them and to the angels to sing the glory of the three times holy God. During the Eucharistic Prayer, we mention some of them in a more explicit way: the Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph, the apostles, the martyrs, the saints of the day. Over the course of the liturgical year, the Church honours them, in general, on the anniversary of their death called ‘dies natalis’, the day of their definitive birth to heaven. Every day the book of Martyrology offers many figures of saints, of every age, from every social condition, race, epoch.



51- Among the saints, the Church of course grants a primordial place to the Blessed Virgin, the Mother of God. From high on the cross, Jesus gave her to us as Mother (Jn 19: 27) ... following Saint John, we are invited to bring her to our homes. (ibid.) The Church recognizes in her the *“splendour of an entirely unique holiness.”* (Catechism n. 492) *“The Virgin Mary is the Church's model of faith and charity. Thus she is a “preeminent and . . . wholly unique member of the Church”; indeed, she is the “exemplary realization” (typus) of the Church.”* (Catechism n. 967) It is therefore not surprising that she occupies an important place in the liturgical calendar. The Church underlines her Immaculate Conception (December 8), her Nativity (September 8), her Holy Name (September 12), her Presentation in the Temple (November 21), her Divine Motherhood (January 1st), her charity (Visitation: May 31), her sufferings (Our Lady of Sorrows: September 15), her Immaculate Heart (June), her Assumption (August 15) ; Mary Queen (August 22). Other feast days recall the graces that her intercession obtains for us in connection with her request at the Wedding Feast of Cana (Jn 2: 1-12) : Our Lady of Lourdes (February 11), Our Lady of Fatima (May 13) ; Our Lady of Mount Carmel (July 16); Our Lady of the Rosary (October 7). Every Saturday is a Marian day. The month of May is consecrated to her as well as October that



honours the rosary. In fact, with its joyful, sorrowful, glorious and luminous mysteries, the rosary brings us into the mystery of Jesus with the eyes and heart of Mary “*reflecting on them in her heart*” as Saint Luke tells us. (Lk 2: 19. 51) Innumerable churches are erected in her honour. Many nations have a national Marian shrine (in Canada it is at Cap de la Madeleine). Each church has its statue of the Blessed Virgin. Many women bear her name.

52- Thus we are invited to honour the Blessed Virgin, Mother of God, all holy, our Mother. Saint Joseph also occupies an important place, he who was Mary’s spouse and adoptive father of the Child Jesus. We are also inspired by the apostles, martyrs, pastors, virgins, canonized spouses. We also don’t forget the people around us, not yet canonized, whose example of authentic Christian life calls out to us.



53- We also honour our patron saints: to begin with, Saint Joseph (patron of the Universal Church and of the Church in Canada) and the Holy Canadian Martyrs (secondary patrons of Canada); Saint Anthony of Padua (patron of the diocese), the patrons of our parishes and the saints whose name they bear. “*Patron saint provides a model of charity; we are assured of his intercession. .. Parents, sponsors, and the pastor are to see that a name is not given which is foreign to Christian sentiment.*” (Catechism n. 2156 ; cf Canon 855). I knew people who, at the time of their Confirmation, added the name of a saint whom they wanted to inspire their life to their usual given name.



54- The current parishes of the diocese offer the following figures for our veneration: to begin with: *Holy Trinity* (Englehart); then, our Lord Jesus Christ: *Holy Name of Jesus* (Kirkland Lake), *Très Saint Rédempteur* (Holtyre), *Sacré Coeur de Jésus* (New Liskeard), *Sacred Heart of Jesus* (Timmins), *Nativity of Our Lord* (Elk Lake), *Sainte-Croix* (Haileybury). The Blessed Virgin is also well honoured: *Immaculée-Conception* (Val-Gagné), *Assomption de la Bienheureuse Vierge Marie* (Kirkland Lake), *Marie Reine du Monde* (Matheson), *Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours* (Belle-Vallée), *Our Mother of Perpetual Help* (New Liskeard), *Notre-Dame-du-Lac* (Larder Lake), *Notre-Dame de la Paix* (Timmins), *Our Lady Queen of Poland* (Timmins). Other members of the human family of Jesus are also evident: *saint Joseph* (Timmins), *Saint Anne* (Iroquois Falls), *Saint Joachim* (South Porcupine), *saint Jean Baptiste* (Earlton); an Apostle: *saint Pierre* (Virginiatown). We also find a deacon, *saint Laurent* (Ramore), two priests (*Saint Anthony of Padua* : Cathedral of the diocese and *saint Dominique* (Timmins), priests and laity (*les saints Martyrs Canadiens* : Iroquois Falls), a bishop, *Saint Patrick* (Cobalt).

55- We are invited to develop a spiritual intimacy with a saint, to know his or her life so that we are inspired by it, to make them our companions on the journey. Again we say with the Church in Preface II of Saints: *“You make your Church fruitful with strength ever new ... Their great example lends us courage, their fervent prayers sustain us in all we do.”*



56- **Spiritual Application:**

- a. Know and enter into God’s plan for us: become holy in Christ, through him and with him, thanks to his Spirit of holiness.
- b. Meditate on the words of Saint John of the Cross: *“O my soul, created to enjoy such exquisite gifts, what are you doing, where is your life going? How wretched is the blindness of Adam’s children, if indeed we are blind to such a brilliant light and deaf to so insistent a voice.”* (*Spiritual Canticle*, cited in the Office of Readings Friday 18)
- c. Accentuate our prayer life ... go back to my Pastoral Letter of Lent 2013 which recalls the importance and varied forms of prayer.
- d. Draw our sanctification from its source ... the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, Matrimony, Holy Orders, Reconciliation, Eucharist, Anointing of the Sick.
- e. Imitate Christ in our daily life, in our duty of state.
- f. Allow ourselves to be inspired by and count on the intercession of the Blessed Virgin and patron saints.

* * *

The saints constitute the true face of the Church, one, catholic and apostolic.

May we become this face here and now, to build the Church of tomorrow.

Serge Poitras

✠ Serge Poitras
Bishop of Timmins

January 21, 2017, Feast of Saint Agnes, martyred in 305, at the age of 12.

