

‘Rejoice and be glad’

Last Monday saw the publication of Pope Francis’ new Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (‘Rejoice and be glad’ (*Mt* 5:12)), with the theme, ‘On the call to holiness in today’s world’. I won’t say this is of ‘special interest’ to legionaries since part of the whole point of the document is to re-emphasise the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that *all* the baptised are called to holiness – not just priests, religious, and members of groups like the Legion. So, it should be ‘of special interest’ to all followers of Christ to understand more deeply how to live out the whole purpose for which they’ve been put on this earth.

Still, this doctrine is hopefully something legionaries already have a heightened awareness of, because the sanctification of each legionary is already so explicitly at the heart of the Legion’s purpose, which is ‘the glory of God through the holiness of its members...’ (*Handbook* p. 11; cf. pp. 45, 67, 203-209) Today and in the coming months we’ll explore the riches of what God is offering us through these teachings of the Holy Father.

Nothing can replace our own personal reflective reading of the text, already available online. There’s so much in it that’s deep and beautiful and challenging. And, it is quite a bit shorter than some of Pope Francis’ other documents.

In the opening paragraph the Holy Father gives us a basic motivation for following this path of holiness: ‘The Lord asks everything of us, and in return he offers us true life, the happiness for which we were created. He wants us to be saints and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence.’ (1)

Gaudete et Exsultate has five chapters: Chapter 1, ‘The Call to Holiness’; Chapter 2, ‘Two Subtle Enemies of Holiness’; Chapter 3, ‘In the Light of the Master’; Chapter 4, ‘Signs of Holiness in Today’s World’; and Chapter 5, ‘Spiritual Combat, Vigilance and Discernment’. To give an idea of the whole, I’ll first say a little about Chapters Two to Five, and then start looking in more depth at the first chapter.

In Chapter 2, the Pope cautions against new forms of the ancient heresies of Gnosticism and Pelagianism, that can slip even into seemingly Catholic spirituality. They’re really both ways of trying to keep everything under our own human control, instead of truly abandoning control of mind and heart to God, to the mysteries of his truth and his grace.

Chapter 3 opens with a reflection on each one of the Beatitudes. Then the Pope speaks of the works of mercy from Chapter 25 of Matthew’s Gospel, and how our living of these is a test of the authenticity of our prayer.

Chapter 4 highlights some signs of genuine holiness: perseverance, patience and meekness; joy and a sense of humour; boldness and passion; connection with community; and constant prayer.

And finally, in Chapter 5, ‘Spiritual Combat, Vigilance and Discernment’, the Pope repeats his past insistence on the Catholic teaching that the devil is real, not just a symbol. The path to holiness involves battle and vigilance against his deceptions, as well as spiritual discernment of what comes from God and leads to him, and what is opposite to that.

So in the first chapter, 'The Call to Holiness', the Pope speaks first about the witnesses to holiness who support us on the way: the canonised but also the uncanonised – those he calls the saints next door, whom we meet in our everyday lives. Holiness, he says, is the most attractive face of the Church.

But the Lord calls *each one* – calls you personally – to holiness. The Pope quotes Vatican II: 'All the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord – each in his or her own way – to that perfect holiness by which the Father himself is perfect'. (*Lumen Gentium* 11) (10)

And he emphasises that each one of us is planned by God as a *unique path* to holiness. That leads to this insight: 'We should not grow discouraged before examples of holiness that appear unattainable. There are some testimonies that may prove helpful and inspiring, but that we are not meant to copy, for that could even lead us astray from the one specific path that the Lord has in mind for us. The important thing is that each believer discern his or her own path, that they bring out the very best of themselves, the most personal gifts that God has placed in their hearts (cf. *1 Cor* 12:7), rather than hopelessly trying to imitate something not meant for them.' (11)

'We are frequently tempted to think that holiness is only for those who can withdraw from ordinary affairs to spend much time in prayer.' But in reality, '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.' (14)

In his classic style, Pope Francis gives a simple example to make clear to everyone that holiness is something truly attainable in each person's daily life, step by step. So he writes: 'This holiness to which the Lord calls you will grow through small gestures. Here is an example: a woman goes shopping, she meets a neighbour and they begin to speak, and the gossip starts. But she says in her heart: "No, I will not speak badly of anyone". This is a step forward in holiness. Later, at home, one of her children wants to talk to her about his hopes and dreams, and even though she is tired, she sits down and listens with patience and love. That is another sacrifice that brings holiness. Later she experiences some anxiety, but recalling the love of the Virgin Mary, she takes her rosary and prays with faith. Yet another path of holiness. Later still, she goes out onto the street, encounters a poor person and stops to say a kind word to him. One more step.' (16)

One temptation is to put off our full commitment to holiness to some future time when circumstances seem more optimal. The Holy Father gives this example to tell us, do it now, be holy and do God's will in the circumstances of *today*. He writes: 'When Cardinal François-Xavier Nguyễn van Thuân was imprisoned, he refused to waste time waiting for the day he would be set free. Instead, he chose "to live the present moment, filling it to the brim with love". He decided: "I will seize the occasions that present themselves every day; I will accomplish ordinary actions in an extraordinary way".' (17)

'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)' (18)