

## Introduction

I am very happy to have the opportunity to be with the religious in Timor-Leste within the context of the celebration of the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the visit of Pope John Paul II, now a saint, to this country. During his time in Dili, the Pope celebrated the Mass on this soil with thousands of people who had gathered to be with the Successor of Peter, who as he said in his homily, had come “to strengthen his brothers and sisters in the faith, which when lived as Christ intended leads us to be the ‘light and salt’ of the earth.”

That was the reflection then and that is the reflection, which you have chosen for our time together. During the Mass, Saint John Paul II gave three meanings to be the light and salt of the world. First, to be the salt, he says “refers to the spiritual wholeness of every disciple, whose duty it is to enliven and elevate humanity with the assistance of divine grace. To be light refers to “wisdom in action”, a “wisdom that comes from the experience of life as well as the wisdom that gives life.” This is “the wisdom that makes the lives of saints”; this is Christian holiness.

Secondly, “to be salt and light moves us to build up the Church,” the entire Church throughout the world. In other words, it is an outward holiness or sanctity which is intended to be lived in the world, and as such Christians make a difference in our societies and in the whole world.

Thirdly, salt and light reveal themselves through living the Beatitudes, that is, said Saint John Paul II, “one of humble trust in God, of mercy and forgiveness.” Yes, affirmed the Holy Father, “the call to be ‘salt’ and ‘light’ is no easy task. It is nothing less than the call to be fully ‘mature in Christ’ (Col. 1, 28). It is a question of a deep and true spirituality, which is essential in the life of every Christian and especially of those called to consecrated life. In short, John Paul II was speaking of Christian holiness.

The successor to him, Pope Francis, issued on 9 April 2018 a profound reflection on the call to Christian holiness, an Apostolic Exhortation “*Gaudete et Exsultate*, on the call to Christian holiness in today’s world” (GE).

Today, I would like to reflect with you on this beautiful document, which is a true continuation of the message of Saint John Paul II, some 30 years ago.

## **Gaudate et Exsultate**

On 9 April 2018, our Holy Father, Pope Francis, issued an Apostolic Exhortation, “Gaudate et Exsultate”, on the call to Holiness in today’s world”, and in doing so he affirmed that his “modest goal is to re-propose the call to holiness in a practical way for our own time, with all its risks, challenges and opportunities” (GE, 2).

In that one sentence, we discover immediately three important aspects of this document. First, the Holy Father is proposing once again the call to holiness. In other words, he is returning to what is most essential to the Christian character, namely the vocation extended to all the baptized to be holy as the Lord is holy (Mathew 5:48). The Second Vatican Council teaches in *Lumen Gentium* the universal call to holiness, affirming “all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity” (LG, 40). The Holy Father then in this exhortation returns to the primary Christian call.

Secondly, he will propose for reflection a practical understanding of Christian holiness. In other words, the document is not a collection of mere philosophical and theological arguments about holiness, but rather practical ones. In other words, how holiness is manifested and concretely lived, not by a select few, but all in that “great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12: 1), who include “our own mothers, grandmothers and loved ones”, who each day “keep moving forward and proved pleasing to God” (GE, 3).

Thirdly, he wants us to embrace a holiness “for our time”. He invites us to be a holy people, who put into practice the Christian life of “being holy and blameless before the Lord in love” (Eph. 1:4). Like he so profoundly stated in his other Apostolic Exhortations, “The Joy of the Gospel” and “The Joy of Love”, he wants a Christian life that reflects a true and visible response to the needs of our time, a response to the longings of every human being, which only the Gospel is capable of fulfilling.

Consequently, with this Exhortation, Pope Francis “insists primarily on the call to holiness that the Lord addresses to each of us, the call that he also addresses, personally, to you: ‘Be holy, for I am holy’ (Lev. 11:44; cf. 1 Pet. 1:16)” (GE, 10).

## **The fonts of holiness**

In the document, the Holy Father reminds of the source and places of our holiness.

The source of our holiness is our baptism when we became children of God, when grace was poured into us and when we received the life of God, who is the holy one. Consequently, the journey in holiness is to let the grace of our baptism “bear fruit” (GE, 15). Baptism put us into an unbreakable relationship with God, but it also gave us a mission to bring to fulfillment the kingdom of God in this world. Consequently, the path in holiness is “to discern how we can better accomplish the mission entrusted to us at our baptism” (GE, 174).

Indeed, in the sacrament of Baptism and subsequently in the sacrament of Confirmation, we receive the Holy Spirit, who “bestows holiness in abundance among God’s holy and faithful people” (GE, 6). The presence of the Holy Spirit is active and dynamic. It was the Holy Spirit who “raised up saints whose attractiveness produced new spiritual vigour and important reforms in the Church” (GE, 12). It is the power of the Holy Spirit who “enables us to do this or that, and holiness, in the end, is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in your life (cf. Gal 5:22-23)” (GE, 15).

We must allow the Spirit to forge in us the personal mystery that can reflect Jesus Christ in today’s world (cf. GE, 23). We must let ourselves be renewed by the Holy Spirit, otherwise we fail in being who we are and we fail to reflect the radiance of our Christian holiness (Cf. GE, 24).

As such, “the measure of our holiness stems from the stature that Christ achieves in us, to the extent that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we model our whole life on that of Christ” (GE, 21). The Holy Spirit guides us (GE, 34) and urges us to carry out the mission given to us (GE, 27). Let us recall this line from the Acts of the Apostles dealing with the apostles’ mission: “when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31).

It is through the Holy Spirit that we are saved, and nothing, as a result of the Spirit dwelling within us, can separate us from the love of the Lord. The Holy Spirit “fills us with his power and frees us from our weakness, our selfishness, our complacency and our pride” (GE, 65).

With the presence of the Holy Spirit, we are able to say with Saint Paul, “the life that I now live is not my own, but Christ living in me” (Gal. 2: 20). Simply put, we cannot live without Christ. Pope Francis explains this reality as follows: “In this way we will know the pleasing and perfect will of the Lord (cf. Rom 12:1-2) and allow him to mould us like a potter (cf. Is 29:16). So often we say that God dwells in us, but it is better to say that we dwell in him, that he enables us to dwell in his light and love. He is our temple; we ask to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of our life (cf.

Ps 27:4). For one day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere” (Ps 84:10). In him is our holiness.”

Lest we think that holiness is a mere personal experience, Pope Francis reminds us that the Holy Spirit created the People of God to which we belong. It is the Holy Spirit who “bestows holiness in abundance among God’s holy and faithful people” (GE, 6). “We are never completely ourselves unless we belong to a people. That is why non one is saved alone, in an isolated individual” (GE, 6).

When we speak about the holy people of God, we are speaking about the “holiness of the militant Church” (GE, 7), the Family of God which, as a communion of believers, forges ahead in bringing the redeeming message of Christ to the world, not only by words, but above all by our actions.

These sources of holiness are baptism, the Holy Spirit and life in and with the Church.

### **Holiness moving to action**

The reality of our being a holy people, a chosen people, a people set apart, leads to act in holiness.

However, before explaining this movement from our life imbued with the Spirit and thus making us sons and daughters towards actions reflecting our adoption, the Holy Father warns us of two temptations which have plagued the Church almost from its beginning, temptations which left unchallenged corrupt what is the meaning of true Christian holiness.

These two errors basically sustained that that one does not really need Christ to be holy. One could become holy through his or her own efforts. Gnosticism, one of the two errors, argued that a person’s perfection (or holiness) is measured by the information or knowledge that they possess, not be the acts of charity which they carry out (see GE, 37). Therefore, it is easy to judge others based on their ability to understand certain teachings and doctrines. These people have “the right answer for every question or doubt”. Faith then is reduced to mere reason or concepts. However, we know that the infinite mystery of God is totally transcendent and can never be totally absorbed by mere intellectual deductions, thus leading to a destruction of “the freshness of the Gospel” (GE, 46). Of course, our faith is reasonable as a human act, but it is never reason that sustains faith, rather the life of God living in us.

The other error is equally dangerous and disturbing. It is pelagianism. It is like a continuation of the other error. If Gnosticism argued that we could

reach holiness or Christian perfection through an accumulation of doctrines and teachings, pelagianism taught that a good life, tried on my own efforts and strengths, would lead to such perfection. These people trusted in their own powers and their human will. By insisting on living that they think is an ideal Christian life, they thought that they would create their own grace and make themselves children of God.

Pope Francis in his Exhortation reminds us that both errors are truly errors, because salvation and becoming children of God come only from God. He quotes numerous Councils through the centuries which affirmed over and over again that “we are justified not by our own works or efforts, but by the grace of the Lord, who always takes the initiative” (GE, 52). For example the Council of Orange in 529 “taught with firm authority that nothing human can demand, merit or buy the gift of divine grace, and all cooperation with it is prior gift of the same grace” (GE, 53). If you recall from your catechism, this sanctifying grace, which no human being can create or make. It is of God and from God given to us as a free gift.

Our Holy Father touches on these two errors because he wants the Church, he wants us, to embrace the gift that we have received with deep humility, and if we do we will have mercy for all those seeking a sincere life with God, those who fail, those who fail to understand, those who make mistakes, those who doubt. In other words, if we rely on our own intellect or our own strength, and expect others to do the same, then “no room is left for bringing about the potential good that is part of a sincere and genuine journey of growth” in holiness ... “Grace acts in history, (human history); ordinarily it takes hold of us and transforms us progressively” (GE, 50).

Therefore, holiness is process, a journey and an adventure, with its joys and sorrows, its accomplishments and setbacks, its achievements and yes failures and weaknesses and strengths. What is constant is the every presence of the love and mercy of God which surrounds us and touches us each day. Many times, we feel the presence of God, not in our strength, but in our weakness. As St Paul wrote, “when I am weak I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10).

### **Acts of holiness**

By now, it should be clear that Christian holiness begins with God living in me, brought about through our Baptism and faith. That life leads us to a life marked by holiness.

The Holy Father, in this context, speaks about the practical and concrete manifestations of holiness. Of course, he reminds us of all the

“instruments” of holiness, prayer, the liturgy, Eucharistic adoration, etc., but these are means to an end. They strengthen our life in Christ and his life in us, only to lead us to show and live our holiness.

Holiness in life, according to Pope Francis, is “charity lived in faith” (GE, 21). Specifically speaking, what constitutes holiness? To answer that question, our Holy Father states that “nothing is more delighting than turning to Jesus’ words and seeing his way of teaching the truth. Jesus explained with great simplicity what it means to be holy when he gave us the Beatitudes” (GE, 63).

In that regard, he dedicates an entire chapter of the Exhortation on a reflection of the Beatitudes as found in the Gospels of Mathew and Luke (Mt. 5: 3-12 and Lk 6: 20-23). “In the Beatitudes, we find a portrait of the Master, which we are called to reflect in our daily lives” (GE, 63). Consequently, ‘happy’ or ‘blessed’ becomes a synonym for holy” (GE, 64). The Beatitudes are the requirements which the Lord gives for us to be considered a true Christian, or as Pope Francis states they are the Christian’s “identity card” (GE, 63). In this way, to holy as the Lord is holy signifies to live as the Lord lived and to conform to the Beatitudes which reflect the will of Jesus a Christian life.

Together let us listen to what Pope Francis affirmed about each Beatitude:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”. This Beatitude calls the Christian to peer deeply into his/her life and to discover where we find true security. To be poor or poor in spirit means that we find security not in ourselves, not in external rules or regulations, not in earthly temptations and so forth. Rather our security is found in Christ, which gives a freedom. Luke wants to emphasize poverty itself, to live a plain and austere life whose radiance is found in the light of Christ shining in our hearts. To the extent that we are poor in spirit and even poor in the way we live, we reflect Christ, who “made himself poor” (2 Cor. 8:9) (GE, 67-70).

“Being poor of heart; that is holiness” (GE, 70).

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth”. Here the Lord calls us to humility, to avoid judgment, to hesitate in understanding people with prejudice and pride. Humility means to be patient and understanding with reference to others. It means to embrace their limitations and failures with “tenderness and meekness”, instead of with an “air of superiority.” The Pope reminds of these words of St Therese of Lisieux: “Perfect charity consists in putting up with others’ mistakes and not being scandalized by their faults.” Meekness is an extension of the spirit of poverty (GE, 71-74).

“Reacting with meekness and humility: that is holiness” (GE, 74).

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” Pope Francis begins his reflection on this Beatitude by reminding us that “the world has no desire to mourn; it would rather disregard painful situations, cover them up or hide” ... but the cross can never be alone” (GE, 75). The blessedness of those who mourn indicates that they who suffer share in the suffering of Jesus and are comforted not by the world but by God. At the same time, Christians are called “to mourn” for those who suffer, that is, to enter into their lives with compassion, “by coming to the aid of those who suffer, understanding their anguish and bringing relief” (GE, 76). We see the life of Jesus when we enter into the life of others, and “weep with those who weep” (Rm. 12:15). Let us never forget that Jesus performed his miracles of healing, of feeding and even of raising his friend from the dead, not to show his power or might, but to show his compassion. He was never afraid to touch the wounds of those with the worse of diseases. In every case as such, he searched out the lost and the marginalized. This is the way of Jesus, and this is the way of the Church.

“Knowing how to mourn with others: that is holiness” (GE, 76).

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled”

When we think of being hungry or thirsty, we think of basic human needs for survival. To yearn for justice is to yearn for a basic human necessity, for it represents a certain balance between mine and yours. When we consider the many injustices of today’s world, we can only cry out for justice. The holiness of Christian life with regards to justice “comes about in people’s lives when they themselves are just in their decisions; it is expressed in their pursuit of justice for the poor and the weak” ... “towards those who are most vulnerable: ‘Seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow’ (Is 1:17)” (GE, 79).

“Hungering and thirsting for righteousness: that is holiness” (GE, 76)

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy”. Here we arrive at the Beatitude which I am sure that the Holy Father considers essential to Christian life. You will recall that he gave the Church the gift of the Jubilee of Mercy, a whole year in which we not only meditated upon mercy, but made commitments to put it into practice.

Here in the Exhortation, Pope Francis reminds us that “mercy has two aspects. It involves giving, helping and serving others, but it also includes forgiveness and understanding. Matthew sums it up in one golden rule: ‘In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you’ (Mt. 7:12).

Mercy implies “giving and forgiving”, that is, “reproducing in our lives some small measure of God’s perfection, which gives and forgives superabundantly” (GE, 81).

It is opportune for us at this moment to recall the words of Christ found in Luke’s Gospel: “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you” (6:36-38). Luke then adds something not to be overlooked: “The measure you give will be the measure you get back”. In that regard, the Holy Father affirms that “the yardstick for understanding and forgiving others will measure the forgiveness we receive. The yardstick we use for giving will measure what we receive. We should never forget this” (GE, 82). How many times should we forgive, seventy times seventy.

Pope Francis, then states, that “we need to think of ourselves as an army of the forgiven” (GE, 82), which in turn should know how to forgive. Concretely speaking, His Holiness recalls that the Catechism reminds us that this law is to be applied “in every case”, especially when we are “confronted by situations that make moral judgments less assured and decision difficult” (GE, 80).

The Church as an institution and each member of the Church must live forgiveness to the full.

“Seeing and acting in mercy: that is holiness” (GE, 82).

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God”

“This Beatitude”, says the Holy Father, “speaks of those whose hearts are simple, pure and undefiled, a heart capable of love, a heart admitting nothing that might harm, weaken or endanger that love” (GE, 83).

In the Bible the heart is the seat of decisions and from there comes our real intentions. That is what God speaks to the heart (Hos. 2:16), looks into the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7). It is in the heart that he writes his law, that is what he intends for us (cf. Jer. 31:33). That is why he wants to give us a new heart (cf. Ezek. 36:26).

After referring to those biblical verses, the Holy Father affirms: “Certainly there can be no love without works of love, but this Beatitude reminds us that the Lord expects a commitment to our brothers and sisters that comes from the heart. For ‘if I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have no love, I gain nothing’ (1 Cor 13:3). In Matthew’s Gospel too, we see that what proceeds from the heart is what defiles a person (cf. 15:18), for from the heart come murder, theft, false witness,



and other evil deeds (cf. 15:19). From the heart's intentions come the desires and the deepest decisions that determine our actions" (GE, 85).

A pure heart is one that is capable of loving God and neighbor and as a result is able to see God. "In his hymn to charity, Saint Paul says that 'now we see in a mirror, dimly' (1 Cor 13:12), but to the extent that truth and love prevail, we will then be able to see 'face to face'. Jesus promises that those who are pure in heart 'will see God'" (GE, 86).

"Keeping a heart free of all that tarnishes love: that is holiness" (GE, 86).

The next Beatitude affirms: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" and "makes us think of the many endless situations of war in our world" (GE, 87). However, the Holy Father brings conflict closer to home, because "we ourselves are often a cause of conflict or at least of misunderstanding" (GE, 87). Here Pope Francis is very concrete: "For example, I may hear something about someone and I go off and repeat it. I may even embellish it the second time around and keep spreading it... And the more harm it does, the more satisfaction I seem to derive from it. The world of gossip, inhabited by negative and destructive people, does not bring peace. Such people are really the enemies of peace; in no way are they "blessed" (GE, 87).

The Lord exhorts Christians to work for peace, to build friendships in society and to pursue whatever creates peace. This promotion of peace is extended to all people and excludes no one, "but embraces even those who are a bit odd, troublesome or difficult, demanding, different, beaten down by life or simply uninterested. It is hard work (and we) must 'face conflict head on, resolve it and make it a link in the chain of a new process'. We need to be artisans of peace, for building peace is a craft that demands serenity, creativity, sensitivity and skill" (GE, 89).

"Sowing peace all around us: that is holiness" (GE, 89).

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"

In reference to this Beatitude, the Holy Father tells us that "in living the Gospel, we cannot expect everything to be easy" (GE, 92) and "whatever weariness and pain we may experience in living the commandment of love and following the way of justice, the cross remains the source of our growth and sanctification. We must never forget that when the New Testament tells us that we will have to endure suffering for the Gospel's sake, it speaks precisely of persecution (cf. Acts 5:41; Phil.1:29; Col. 1:24; 2 Tim.1:12; 1 Pet. 2:20, 4:14-16; Rev. 2:10)" (GE, 92). We are dealing here with living the Gospel, with all its costs.

“Accepting daily the path of the Gospel, even though it may cause us problems: that is holiness” (GE, 93).

Yes, the Beatitudes are the path of living Christian holiness. I am sure that you will remember that on the Feast of All Saints, November 1, the Gospel is the reading of the Beatitudes taken from Matthew. On that day, we celebrate the countless men and women, including those who were not canonized, but are now with God. We celebrate their sainthood, their being with God, their seeing God face to face, their living in heaven. The Gospel reminds us how they lived their life on earth; they lived the Beatitudes which we have reflected upon.

“Holiness, then, is not about swooning in mystic rapture” says Pope Francis (GE, 96). Rather, our holiness, our own being with God, will be judged not on how many rosaries we prayed, not on how many Masses we attended, not on how many prayers we recited, but, here again I refer to the Exhortation, on how we lived what is described in the twenty-fifth chapter of Mathew’s Gospel. Here Jesus expands on the Beatitudes. “If we seek the holiness pleasing to God’s eyes, this text offers us one clear criterion on which we will be judged. ‘I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me’ (vv. 35-36)” (GE, 95).

In this context, Pope Francis, appealing to his Apostolic Authority affirms: “Given these uncompromising demands of Jesus, it is my duty to ask Christians to acknowledge and accept them in a spirit of genuine openness, *sine glossa*. In other words, without any “ifs or buts” that could lessen their force. Our Lord made it very clear that holiness cannot be understood or lived apart from these demands, for mercy is ‘the beating heart of the Gospel’” (GE, 97).

### **Signs of holiness in today’s world**

In the final chapter of the Exhortation, Pope Francis lists signs of holiness in today’s world. They are 1) perseverance, patience and meekness; 2) joy and a sense of humor; 3) boldness and passion; 4) in community and 5) in constant prayer.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Holy Father, in presenting his call to rediscover holiness in today’s world is concrete, practical and rather down-to-earth. It flows

from his previous Exhortations, “The Joy of the Gospel” and “The Joy of Love”.

In “The Joy of Love”, he affirmed: “It is reductive simply to consider whether or not an individual’s actions correspond to a general law or rule (if someone is holy or not, my addition), because that is not enough to discern and ensure full fidelity to God in the concrete life of a human being” (AL, 304).

In “The Joy of the Gospel”, he explained his vision of the Church, the holy people of God: I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give them something to eat” (Mk 6:37)” (EG, 49).

The *Osservatore Romano* (edition in English of 13 April 2018) editorialized the Exhortation this way: “Holy, yes, but not superhuman or perfect. Simply ordinary people who are unafraid to set their sights higher and each day to allow themselves to be loved and liberated by God, transforming their lives into an ongoing mission in service to others.”

As religious, you have committed yourself to a life of “perfect charity”, and the spirituality of the beatitudes is the basis for your life as followers of the Lord and the charism of your community.