

CALLED TO HOLINESS

JESUS SUMMED UP HIS TEACHING in a startling and unambiguous call to His followers: “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). Perfect in purity of heart, perfect in compassion and love, perfect in obedience, perfect in conformity to the will of the Father, perfect in holiness—when we hear these words we can be understandably tempted to discouragement, thinking that perfection for us is impossible. And indeed, left to our own resources, it certainly is—just as impossible as it is for rich people to enter heaven, or for a man and a woman to remain faithful their whole lives in marriage. But with God, all things are possible, even our transformation.

John Paul II—and he himself may be among those recognized as a Doctor one day—in his prophetic interpretation of the events of the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, points out that the Holy Spirit is again bringing to the forefront of the Church’s consciousness the conviction that these words of Jesus are indeed meant for every single one of us. He points out that the Jubilee of the year 2000 was simply the last phase of a period of preparation and renewal that had been going on for forty years, in order to equip the Church for the

challenges of the new millennium.¹

Pope John Paul II speaks of three rediscoveries to which the Holy Spirit has led the Church beginning with the Second Vatican Council, which concluded in 1965. One of these rediscoveries is the rediscovery of the “universal call to holiness.”²

All the Christian faithful, of whatever state or rank, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity. (NMI 30; cf. LG 40)

John Paul further emphasizes that this call to the fullness of holiness is an essential part of being a Christian.

To ask catechumens: “Do you wish to receive Baptism?” means at the same time to ask them: “Do you wish to become holy?” It means to set before them the radical nature of the Sermon on the Mount: “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). . . . The time has come to repropose wholeheartedly to everyone this *high standard of ordinary Christian living*; the whole life of the Christian community and of Christian families must lead in this direction. (NMI 30, 31)

Before we go much further in our examination of the spiritual journey, let’s take an initial look at what “holiness” really means. In the Book of Ephesians we read, “He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph. 1:4). To be holy is not primarily a matter of how many Rosaries we say or how much Christian activity we’re engaged in; it’s a matter of having our heart transformed into a heart of love. It is a matter of fulfilling the great commandments which sum up the whole law and the prophets: to love God and our neighbor, wholeheartedly. Or as Teresa of Avila puts it, holiness is a matter of bringing our wills into union with God’s will.

Thérèse of Lisieux expresses it very similarly: “Perfection consists

in doing His will, in being what He wills us to be . . . who resists His grace in nothing.”³ As she said towards the very end of her life: “I do not desire to die more than to live; it is what He does that I love.”⁴

John Paul II goes on to call the parishes of the third millennium to become schools of prayer and places where “training in holiness” is given.

Our Christian communities must become *genuine “schools” of prayer*, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly “falls in love.” . . . It would be wrong to think that ordinary Christians can be content with a shallow prayer that is unable to fill their whole life.” (NMI 33)

John Paul cites several reasons why this turn to holiness of life and depth in prayer is important. Besides the fact that it is quite simply part and parcel of the Gospel message, he points out that the supportive culture of “Christendom” has virtually disappeared and that Christian life today has to be lived deeply, or else it may not be possible to live it at all. He also points out that in the midst of this world-wide secularization process there is still a hunger for meaning, for spirituality, which is sometimes met by turning to non-Christian religions. It is especially important now for Christian believers to be able to respond to this hunger and “show to what depths the relationship with Christ can lead” (NMI 33, 40).

Recognizing how challenging this call is, John Paul makes clear that it will be difficult to respond adequately without availing ourselves of the wisdom of the mystical tradition of the Church—that body of writings and witness of life that focuses on the process of prayer and stages of growth in the spiritual life. He tells us why the mystical tradition is important and what we can expect it to provide for us.

This great mystical tradition . . . shows how prayer can progress, as a genuine dialogue of love, to the point of rendering the person wholly possessed by the divine Beloved, vibrating at the Spirit's touch, resting filially within the Father's heart. (NMI 33)

These are truly extraordinary words that John Paul uses here, words to which we will need to return in the course of this book. How is this extraordinary depth of union with the Trinity possible? It is indeed the answer to this question that the mystical tradition gives us and that this book will attempt to clearly communicate. John Paul makes clear that this depth of union isn't just for a few unusual people ("mystics") but is a call that every Christian receives from Christ Himself. "This is the lived experience of Christ's promise: 'He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him' (Jn. 14:21)." (NMI 32)

Then John Paul summarizes some of the main wisdom taught by the mystical tradition about the spiritual journey, wisdom that we will pay close attention to in the course of this book.

It is a journey totally sustained by grace, which nonetheless demands an intense spiritual commitment and is no stranger to painful purifications (the "dark night"). But it leads, in various possible ways, to the ineffable joy experienced by the mystics as "nuptial union." How can we forget here, among the many shining examples, the teachings of Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila? (NMI 32)

These four principles that John Paul identifies are basic to a proper understanding of the spiritual journey.

1. Union with God of this depth is totally unattainable by our own efforts; it is a gift that only God can give; we are totally dependent on His grace for progress in the spiritual life. Yet we know also that God is eager to give this grace and bring us to deep union.

Without Him, we can do nothing, but with Him all things are possible (cf. Jn. 14:4–5, Lk. 18:27, Phil. 4:13). Without God, successfully completing the journey is impossible, but with Him, in a sense, we are already there. He is truly both the Way and the destination; and our lives are right now, hidden with Christ, in God (Col. 3:3).

2. At the same time our effort is indispensable. Our effort is not sufficient to bring about such union, but it is necessary. The saints speak of disposing ourselves for union. The efforts we make help dispose us to receive the gifts of God. If we really value something we must be willing to focus on doing those things that will help us reach the goal. And yet without God's grace we cannot even know what's possible, or desire it, or have the strength to make any efforts towards it. It's God's grace that enables us to live the necessary "intense spiritual commitment."

"You will seek the LORD your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deut. 4:29).

3. As the Gospel tells us, it's important to assess what's required before undertaking a task (before starting to build a tower, or entering into a battle in war) if we want to successfully complete it. Much has to change in us in order to make us capable of deep union with God. The wounds of both original sin and our personal sins are deep and need to be healed and transformed in a process that has its necessarily painful moments. The pain of purification is called by John of the Cross the "dark night." It is important not to be surprised by the painful moments of our transformation but to know that they're a necessary and blessed part of the whole process.

"Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

4. And finally, we need to know that all the effort and pain is worth it! *Infinitely* worth it. The pain of the journey will appear in ret-

respect to have been light, compared to the weight of glory that we were being prepared for (see 2 Cor. 4:16–18).

Deep union (the “nuptial union” or “spiritual marriage” or “transforming union”) is possible even in this life. Teresa of Avila tells us that there’s no reason that someone who reaches a basic stability in living a Catholic life (“mansion” three in her classification system) can’t proceed all the way to “spiritual marriage” in this life (“mansion” seven).⁵

All of these principles will be explored in-depth in later chapters. Now we need to recognize the significance of the “rediscovery” of the universal call to holiness and determine our own response to the call.

We all probably know in some way that we’re called to holiness but perhaps struggle to respond. Feeling the challenge of the call and yet seeing the obstacles, it is easy to rationalize delaying or compromising and avoid a wholehearted and immediate response.

It is not uncommon, for example, to “pass the buck” to others whom we deem in a better position to respond wholeheartedly. Those of us who are Catholic lay people often look at our busy lives and sluggish hearts and suppose that priests and nuns are in a better position to respond to the call. After all, we may think to ourselves, that’s what we pay them for! We may think that when our kids are grown, or when we retire, or after a business crisis passes, or when we don’t have to care for ailing parents, or when we get a better job, or when we get married, or . . . that *then* we’ll be in a better position to respond.

Unfortunately, being a priest or nun doesn’t eliminate temptations to also “pass the buck.” With the reduction in numbers, it is understandably easy for priests and nuns to feel overwhelmed by their responsibilities and have such a busy pace of life that they might suppose that it’s the cloistered orders who are truly in a good position to respond wholeheartedly to the call to holiness.

But even in cloistered orders, it’s possible to rationalize and “pass the buck.” What with caring for guests, overseeing building reno-

vations, attending monastic conferences, or making cheese, bread, or jams, it's possible to suppose that it's the hermit who really can respond wholeheartedly.

But even being a hermit doesn't guarantee such a response. After all, hermits need to work out a rule of life, have meetings with superiors to review it, make sure their medical insurance is covering them properly, deal with internal and external distractions and temptations, and maybe even contribute to a newsletter for hermits!

What really holds us back from a wholehearted response to the call of Jesus, of Vatican II, of the repeated urgings of the Spirit, is not really the external circumstances of our lives, but the interior sluggishness of our hearts. We need to be clear that there will never be a better time or a better set of circumstances than now to respond wholeheartedly to the call to holiness. Who knows how much longer we'll be alive on this earth? We don't know how long we'll live or what the future holds. Now is the acceptable time. The very things we think are obstacles are the very means God is giving us to draw us to depend more deeply on Him.

Or sometimes what holds us back from responding wholeheartedly in our present circumstances is believing that we don't have to focus too much on that right now, because sooner or later any purification needed will be taken care of in purgatory. There are a few problems with this way of thinking.

It's true that sometimes we don't hit the goal we're aiming at, and it's good to have a backup. If we aim for heaven at the moment of our death, and indeed die in friendship with Christ but haven't been transformed enough to be ready for the sight of God, purgatory is a wonderful blessing. But if we aim for purgatory and miss, there really isn't a good backup available.

The source of all our unhappiness and misery is sin and its effects, and the sooner the purification of sin and its effects can take place in our life, the happier we will be and the better able to truly

love others. Only then will we be able to enter into the purpose God has for our life. Truly, in this case, better sooner than later.

And finally, it's important to realize that there is only one choice; either to undergo complete transformation and enter heaven, or be eternally separated from God in hell. There are only two ultimate destinations, and if we want to enter heaven we must be made ready for the sight of God. Holiness isn't an "option." There are only saints in heaven; total transformation is not an "option" for those interested in that sort of thing, but is essential for those who want to spend eternity with God.

Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. (Heb. 12:14)

The whole purpose of our creation, the whole purpose of our redemption is so that we may be fully united with God in every aspect of our being. We exist for union; we were created for union; we were redeemed for eternal union. The sooner we're transformed the happier and the more "fulfilled" we'll be. The only way to the fulfillment of all desire is to undertake and complete the journey to God.

In the Old Testament it was clear that to actually see God in our untransformed human condition was to be destroyed.

Then Moses said, "Do let me see your glory!" He answered, "I will make all my beauty pass before you, and in your presence I will pronounce my name, "LORD"; I who show favors to whom I will, I who grant mercy to whom I will. But my face you cannot see, for no man sees me and still lives." (Ex. 33:18–20, NAB)

It is only Jesus who sees the face of the Father, and it is through Jesus that we can be made ready to share in His vision of the Father. It is through our union with Jesus, our contemplation of His "face," that we are, little by little, transformed and made ready for the

beatific vision, which is so much more than what we commonly understand as “seeing”; it is indeed a participation in the ecstatic knowing and loving of the Trinity, a participation in Love itself.

When Pope John Paul considered what was the most important legacy of the Jubilee year 2000 that should be carried forward into the new millennium, this is what he said: “But if we ask what is the core of the great legacy it leaves us, I would not hesitate to describe it as the *contemplation of the face of Christ*” (NMI 15).

Bernard of Clairvaux expands our vision of what it means to contemplate the face of Christ by pointing out that we “look upon the Son in the Father and the Father in the Son.”⁶ Bernard also wholeheartedly encourages us to undertake the journey.

Come then, follow, seek him; do not let that unapproachable brightness and glory hold you back from seeking him or make you despair of finding him. “If you can believe all things are possible to him who believes” (Mk. 9:22). “The Word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (Rom. 10:8). Believe, and you have found him. Believing is having found. The faithful know that Christ dwells in their hearts by faith (Eph. 3:17). What could be nearer? Therefore seek him confidently, seek him faithfully, “The Lord is good to the soul who seeks him” (Lam. 3:25). Seek him in your prayers, follow him in your actions, find him in faith.⁷

And, of course, this wholehearted seeking of the Lord, this contemplation of Christ, is a central part of the message of Scripture.

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:18)

This Scripture text is a powerful summary of the process of transformation, which we will now begin to examine in some detail.