

# HEROIC HOLINESS

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph my father and Lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

We read in Holy Scripture in the Epistle of St. Paul to the Ephesians that we are chosen, that we have been chosen in Jesus Christ as he says, 'Before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and without blemish in his sight in love. He predestined us to be adopted through Jesus Christ as his sons according to the purpose of his will unto the praise of the glory of his grace with which he has favored us in his beloved Son.'

This is the opening paragraph of St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians. He wants to remind them of their call to holiness. We have been chosen in him before the foundation of the world before anything existed. We were already loved by God. Love consists in this not that we have loved God, but that he has loved us first, says St. John. Holiness... our call to holiness is a real gift. There's nothing we have done to deserve it. It's not that, as Blessed Álvaro used to say, that our Lord kind of created us and then kind of scratched his head and said, 'Now what am I going to do with this person? Maybe, yeah maybe I'll call him to holiness or maybe I'll come to do this and carry out this task...' Yeah, it's kind of like an afterthought. Not at all. Our Lord has actually had a plan for us even before he created us. And in fact what that means is that when he does create us that he gives us everything we need in order to reach our end, our final destination.

We are called to holiness. And these words are very strong words because he says he predestined us to be adopted through Jesus Christ as his sons according to the purpose of his will. You know, this is a... the strong word here is predestination. We have been predestined by our Lord to be holy. And you might say well, what does that mean... that I don't have to do anything, that if I'm predestined that means I can do whatever I want and then I'll just end up in holiness at the end because I'm predestined? No, it doesn't work that way. Predestination here doesn't mean that we are taken to our ultimate end without our cooperation. Just the fact that we are called to holiness doesn't mean that we are forced against our will. As St. Augustine said in one of his sermons, 'He who created us without us - because we had, we were not asked to come into this world... we were created,

everything that we have is a gift - he who created us without us will not save us without us.' In other words, our Lord wants our cooperation in order to reach our ultimate end and that requires our freedom, that requires our freedom. We are cooperating in God's plan, but that doesn't mean we're not called to holiness, and we're not destined to holiness just like a train is destined to a certain station. Well, the fact the train is going to go there unless it's derailed of course, there's always that possibility, but with us, we want to cooperate as much as we can in that call to holiness.

Saint Augustine says, 'And shall I dare to say I am holy? If I mean by holy that I sanctify myself and that I need no one to make me holy I would be a liar and full of pride. But if by holy I understand one who is made holy, as we read in Leviticus, you will be holy because I God am holy, then the whole body of Christ down to the last man living at the ends of the earth may dare to say together with its head and under him, I am holy.'

You know, sometimes we think that okay, we're called to holiness. We may confuse that with having been canonized, and we're not canonized yet. There are no saints on earth, Saint Josemaria reminds us of that, and it's true. We don't need to be told by somebody. We don't need to take that on faith. We just look at our own lives if we are sincere in our examination of conscience and we realize we're not holy. But since we are baptized and confirmed, we are called to holiness. And simply even if we are just baptized we're called to holiness and we are given all the wherewithal so that we can make it there.

And yet, when we do get there, we will never dare say that it was because of us just like, and only us, that we were the sole cause of our holiness, or the main cause of our holiness, like Saint Augustine says. You know, if by holy I mean that I become holy by myself. Well, then that's not holiness, but it's really always a gift, always a gift.

God wants all men to be saved, says St. Paul to Timothy. And what this means is that he just doesn't want us to come in through the back door so to speak. It's kind of like... well uff, I made it. I barely made it by a hair into heaven and I snuck in through the back door because I was really bad, and then finally I converted at the last minute and I kind of made it to the purgatory, you know, and I'm content with that. No, he wants us to actually give witness that we can be canonizable saints. That's how... that's how big it is. We want to enter through the front door and not the back door of heaven.

And when we look at the martyrs of the first centuries the early Christians, we see how - and not just the martyrs - but all Christians, and especially the first three centuries when the church was persecuted. We see how it was very real for anyone who took the baptismal commitments that they could have had the possibility of giving their lives for our Lord. And we see that with Saint Agnes - we just celebrated that feast recently - with these teenage girls that we celebrate, you know, that we

mention in the Canon of the Mass and the first Eucharistic prayer... you know, and others...a slave like Felicity, or her slave owner Perpetua, both Christians, who are martyrs, you know and Cecilia, Anastasia, all these women saints who have given their lives and also men saints. Everyone actually is called to holiness and these people were wearing all sorts of conditions of life. They had a great variety of professions... backgrounds... you know, states in life, and they're all equally called to holiness.

And we see somehow how these martyrs who were strong because they were given that strength by God to bear witness. In fact, the very word martyr means witness. They inspired many other people to live a life of holiness, of self-denial, of service, of charity, and they continue to do so in our own day, but once Christianity became mainstream, once Christianity was legalized and it was not persecuted and in fact, at some point, it may have even been mandated, of course that shouldn't have been, but the secular power in late Antiquity certainly wanted to use the Christian faith as a point of unity in the empire and so it was even mandated and everything else was kind of outlawed... that a lot of people started coming into the faith, but without really having the same commitment that the early Christians had. And there was a lot of decadence and a lot of just, you know, lukewarmness among Christians. And what ended up happening is that the Holy Spirit once again inspired a kind of movement to heroic holiness, and that's where we get the saints like Saint Benedict, who gave witness by leaving the world, by leaving the decadent world, and actually leading a life of austere self-denial, you know, and he became of course a monk and to this day the Benedictine monks of have given a lot of fruit in the history of the church and we see how they have inspired so many people to live a heroic life, you know. But a lot of these Christians who wanted to, you know, take their faith more seriously, they were known as the athletes of God because they wanted to exercise themselves in the struggle. And in fact the word struggle or exercise in Greek is *ascesis* - or that's where we get the word ascetical - ascetical struggle was kind of like this exercise of the soul so that we - you know, if we have a comfortable life that we take it upon... freely upon ourselves to do exercises of let's say self self-denial and living temperance or giving up something freely, kind of like what we do in Lent, but these people back then, they did it as a lifestyle. And they left the world so that the world could receive their witness of life and that helped many people to examine their conscience and even change.

However, as this kind of happened, it was... it just happened. There was nothing explicitly said, but over time that if you wanted to take your faith seriously there was kind of like a tacit kind of understanding that while you had to do something special in order to be a serious Christian, you know, like become a priest, or become a monk, or a nun or you know later on join a religious order or a congregation or something like that or do something of that nature... take a vow and give up the world. And we know that there have been many saints who have done that, but slowly but surely this idea that holiness, our personal holiness, or that ordinary people are called to holiness

just as much as these others who are doing something explicitly and publicly for the Church, giving public witness in their... in and through their lifestyle was kind of forgotten, you know. And that, fast forward to the 20th century when we have St. Josemaria, we see that the message of the universal call to holiness was even deemed heretical. He was even called a heretic when he reminded everyone that everyone is called to holiness because of their baptism. Something had happened, you know, from ancient times to recent times that this call to holiness, to personal holiness, had kind of been forgotten. And the Second Vatican Council actually reminds us of the fact there was kind of an awareness that we are all called to holiness and that we should be just as heroic in and through our ordinary circumstances as those early martyrs or those early Christians who were simply normal people just giving witness of their faith. Even if perhaps we are not persecuted, and of course all the more if there is persecution, that we that we pray for the grace to be able to bear witness to that.

When we turn to the ancient world, we see that there's a document called *The Letter to Diognetus*. It's an ancient text that precisely is so up to date in the 21st century today and it reads like this in one of its chapters, 'For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country nor language nor the customs which they observe for they neither inhabit cities of their own nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men nor do they like some proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as Barbarian cities according to the lot of each of them as determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners as citizens, they share in all things with others and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry as do all others. They beget children but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh.'

This is a beautiful example of how Christians were ordinary people. They did not dress differently. They did not live in a kind of commune that was like... or a country that was, you know, a confessional state or something like that and everybody had to be Christian, or they didn't wear anything that gave them away as disciples of the Lord. Actually, our Lord is the one that gives us the sign by which we will be known... it was not the t-shirt that says 'I am a Christian' or 'I'm a Catholic' or 'I'm trying to be holy' or anything like that. It's our love. Actually, he says that, you know, in this will all know that you are my disciples. Indeed, if you have love for one another. This is the sign of the Christian... the way we serve one another, the way we love God, but not just theoretically but in practice by loving our neighbor, that's how we should be known. And if we are known by this sign then we don't need any other sign and the external sign - if you want an external sign - go ahead,

but it's superfluous. And in fact, those external signs don't mean anything if our behavior is not marked by this love of Christ, you know, so we have to realize that what's important is true love, not just a kind of announcement that we are so committed to love.

Holiness is therefore this gift that comes with the gift of the love of God and what we have to do in order to be holy is to struggle to get out of the way. That's the first thing and that's through the virtue of humility. When we are humble in our struggle and we try to open ourselves up to God, then our Lord gives us the gift, and that's what makes us holy. It's his gift, not what we do primarily. Holiness in the Bible - the word holy means separated - you can see that in the Book of Numbers how, well, our Lord separates an entire tribe - the Priestly tribe of the Levites so that they take care of the Priestly service. Then they are holy. They're dedicated to God completely and they... and also vessels and the, you know, sacrifices - that those things that are holy are totally dedicated to God, they are not to be used for profane use and somehow the word holiness has this idea of separation and dedication to the Lord and it is opposed to a profane use.

And so, at first sight the idea that holiness and the world are, you know, that we should be holy in the world... that sounds like a contradiction. And in fact, that was the mentality that I think Saint Josemaria was coming up against, that if you want to be holy, well, you have to be separated and dedicated totally to our Lord. How could you be in the world, like a banker or a Hollywood actress or a politician, you know, or whatever, and then be holy. I mean who's holy in those realms, you know, that's kind of like the mentality. And no, St. Josemaria said no, precisely, you know a religious, like a monk or a priest or bishop or somebody like that, they cannot be a Hollywood star. They cannot be in Wall Street. They cannot be in politics. They should stay out of politics. But what about the laity? The laity, they're called the holiness, but they have a responsibility to be- to sanctify those areas in the world. And that's, you know, that's a liberating thing because we don't have to, in order to be holy, in order to live our faith. We don't have to give up these things. What we have to do is purify those things and offer sacrifices, internal sacrifices, so that those things that are evil not in themselves but they've been tainted by sin of the people that have carried them out, those activities that we actually give witness of the fact that yes, I could be a Hollywood actor or actress and actually be pure and give witness of Christ. And that doesn't mean I make, you know, Jesus of Nazareth movies or something like that or Moses movies. No, I could make a great work of art that is not explicitly Christian but that is absolutely imbued with the spirit of professionalism and exalts some human value that inspires others to do some great thing, you know, or to simply contemplate beauty and in some way. That in itself is Christian.

And how, why is that? Well, because Jesus became a man. He incarnated every reality by becoming a man. He incarnated every stage of life, even carpentry. I don't think he was making altars or holy images or anything like that. He made tables, he made chairs. He made... he fixed doors, you know,

and that was... they were not for just for synagogues or whatever. No, but the fact that he was doing it with love with his father God - in union with his father God - then all those doors, all those nails that he drove into the wood, you know, the things that he cut with a saw - everything - all that is now somehow sanctified and purified and elevated to the level of sacrifice and gift so that we can do the same. He gave us an example of how to do that, you know. That's why holiness is not just being separated as in like physically separated, but dedicated to our Lord in order to have this mission of elevation and purification of everything that we do. That's what the original vocation of man was, of man and woman with Adam and Eve. It was till the garden and keep it. In other words, do something to it - transform it, but not just like a beaver making a dam because that's not transformative. It is transformative physically, but it's not transformative at the theological level. But when we put love into it in union with God then we do transform it and make it actually a sacrifice to God. And that becomes something holy, that becomes something that we can offer up as long as it is not evil.

So, all of a sudden everything we do, every ordinary thing that we do, if we look at it with supernatural colored glasses, can be a little step on our path to holiness and that's our mission. And when we do that as St. Josemaria used to say we sanctify ourselves, we sanctify the work that we do and we sanctify others because this being dedicated to God in everything that we do is not just for ourselves. It's not just for our holiness, it's for the holiness of others as well. Every person who is dedicated to God necessarily has this aspect of mission, you know.

Let's go back to the early Christians. There's a great quotation from Origen, this early ecclesiastical writer. He writes a work called *Contra Celsum*, against Celsum, who was a heretic, and so he basically... he says in one of his works here, in one of the books of this work that the early Christians were so zealous that the- that the pagan philosopher Celsus could accuse them of taking advantage of their professions as shoemakers, teachers, scrub ladies in order to sow the seed of the Gospel in private houses and in the whole of society, you know. So Origen is giving witness of the fact that this guy Celsus is accusing Christians of using, you know, their professions as ordinary people... shoemakers, teachers, scrub ladies in order to sow the seed of the Gospel in private houses and in the whole of society. Wow. Well, that's precisely right. He noticed Celsus has noticed something and even though he was against Christians he knows exactly what we ought to do, actually is use every occasion, every opportunity to spread the seed of the Gospel. That's a beautiful thing. That's something we ought to do, you know.

And so, this is our mission. We have a great mission in the world, right. Pope Benedict speaks of Saint Augustine in one of his audiences and he says that Nietzsche, the philosopher Nietzsche of the 19th century- the late 19th century- and he said... he said that he could not stand Saint Augustine. He said the man seemed so plebeian and ordinary. Nietzsche, he continues, Pope Benedict is making

a valid point about Augustine but it is precisely here that we find the saints, real Christian greatness. He could have been an aristocrat of the mind but for the sake of Christ and for the sake of his fellow men in whom he saw Christ approaching him, he abandoned the ivory tower of the intellectual in order to be holy, a man among men, a servant of the servants of God. For the sake of Christ who was not ashamed to lay aside his divine glory and became a man like us, Augustine relinquished all his higher education and learned to speak God's word ever more simply and plainly to his people. For the sake of Christ, he became increasingly an ordinary man among ordinary men and the servant of all. In the process, he became truly a saint.

So here it's not that Augustine is leaving the world, it's just that he is adjusting his highfalutin speech so that when he does speak the Word of God, and in this case he's a bishop, he doesn't draw attention to himself. So it's really a way of being humble and so that his audience also can understand. You know, they say that when Augustine preached he was so rhetorically sophisticated that he hated it when people clapped in his homilies because in his sermons sometimes he would say something beautifully and people would just clap and then you know, he was kind of disturbed by that. Of course, he wanted to be humble. He wanted to disappear. He wanted the Word of God to shine through and not his own rhetoric or his own brilliance. And so, humility is the way he became a saint.

Pope Benedict continues, Christian holiness does not consist in being somehow superhuman or in having outstanding talents or a stature that someone else does not have. Christian holiness is simply the obedience that makes us available where God calls us to be. The obedience that does not rely on our own greatness, but allows our God to bestow his greatness on us and knows that only in service and self-surrender can we truly find ourselves.

This is what holiness is about, letting God do in us and not trying to usurp, you know, the action of God in our lives. So it's not about us doing anything as much as us getting out of the way so that God can do everything. This is an existing for and am not existing apart from others, you know. It's a mission that we have to help others also on their way to holiness.

I remember one time that I was at the DMV, at the Department of Motor Vehicles, trying to renew my license and since it was a renewal I didn't have to go through the exam or anything like that, I just had to take an eye test and that's it. But the lady behind the counter asked me, Father is all your information still the same from your current license? And I looked at it, and of course with my name is still the same, and my address is still the same, and my height is still the same and all that stuff. But then I looked at the weight and I said well truth be told I told her everything is updated except my weight and she laughed and she said, what's your new weight? And I looked at it again. And I said, you know what, I kind of like that weight that was there five years ago. And I told her I

said well, let's just leave it there. You know, let's leave it the same. And she said, oh Father, but that would be lying. I'm glad I had a good comeback to her... I said well, I'll make it a promise. Not a lie. How's that? I promise to make it true. And she said, Father fine, but make it true. I guess I still have to go on a diet in order to make it true.

But anyway, the point is that our holiness is kind of like this. We are called to holiness. We are called to have that ideal weight, I suppose. But you know, the fact that we are struggling to be holy may seem to us that we're hypocrites because we're not there yet, even though people may think we're holy or we look holy or you know, whatever. We're not. But if we make it a promise and not a lie, that means we're promising to struggle, we're promising to go on that supernatural diet that's going to make us holy slowly, very slowly. And hopefully at the end of our lives we will be purified enough to be able to, you know, enter heaven and our Lord will be there, Our Lady will be there too. And even if we have sins, we are in- the key would be to be sorry for those sins and to let our Lord and our Lady pull us up into heaven. Well, and give us that gift.

Let us turn to Our Lady, our mother, who's always going to be there at the end of our lives reminding God of everything that we have done well in his favor and in holiness so that, and in his love, so that we too can share his life eternally.

I thank you my God for the good resolutions, affections, and Inspirations which you have communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help to put them into effect, my Immaculate Mother, Saint Joseph my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.



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