

THE CALL TO HOLINESS

By Jim Seghers

Every now and then one reads a book that is life changing. That occurred to me in 1983 when I read Ralph Martin's work, *A Crisis of Truth: The Attack on Faith, Morality, and Mission in the Catholic Church*. James F. Hitchcock wrote of this book: "Ralph Martin's *A Crisis of Truth* is an astute and penetrating analysis of the present plight of our faith. Plight of faith certainly described me at that time, although I didn't fully realize it. I had fallen for the deceptions of dissenters who were trying to reconstruct Catholicism after their image and likeness.

Ralph has recently written a new book, *The Fulfillment of All Desire*, published by Ignatius Press. Fr. Kieran Kavanaugh writes: "Ralph Martin in this book presents a thorough and excellent account of the entire spiritual life, from the first ascetical steps to the highest mystical union with God. Fr. Benedict Groeschel gives the assessment: "This is a book to keep at your place of prayer for years to come." The first chapter is titled, "Called to Holiness." Except for some comments and biblical citations of my own, I have shamefully plagiarized the entire first chapter without apology. After all, imitation is a high form of flattery, so why say poorly what Ralph has presented so well. For the sake of simplicity the only quotation marks below are assigned to Sacred Scripture, Papal documents, and quotations from the saints.

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, in short, perfect in holiness. When we hear these words we can be understandably tempted to discouragement, thinking that perfection for us is impossible. Indeed, left to our own resources, it certainly is – just as impossible as it is a rich man 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.

Pope John Paul II 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 stated 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

He reminded Christians of the rediscovery brought by the Holy Spirit beginning with the Vatican II:

"All the Christian faithful, of whatever state or rank, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity."²

¹ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Jan. 6, 2001(henceforward cited as NMI).

² NMI 30; see also *Lumen Gentium* 40.

He emphasized 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 Christian community and of Christian families must lead in this direction.”³

Before we advance 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 that sum up the whole law and the prophets: to love God and our neighbor, wholeheartedly. What does “wholeheartedly” mean? Jesus told us at two different times during the Last Supper.

After he washed the Apostle’s feet, Jesus instructed:

“I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:34-35).

Then after the beautiful lesson of the vine and the branches where we are called to “abide” in him, Jesus reiterated:

“This is my commandment: love one another as I love you... This I command you: love one another” (Jn 15:12, 17).

Pope John Paul the Great goes on to call all 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.”⁴

John Paul was well aware that the supportive culture of “Christendom” has virtually disappeared. Therefore the 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 worldwide secularization that rejects God, there is still a hunger for meaning, for spirituality. Thus it is important for Christian believers to be able to respond to this hunger and “show to what depths the relationship with Christ can lead.”⁵

³ NMI 30, 31.

⁴ NMI 33.

⁵ MNI 33, 40.

The lives of the saints demonstrate that this vibrant union with Christ is achieved in prayer.

“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.”⁶

This profound union is open to all Christians. “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)”⁷

The Holy Father identifies four principles that are basic to the proper understanding of the spiritual journey to which we are all called.

1. Intimate union with God of this depth is totally unattainable by our own efforts. We are totally dependent on His grace for progress in the spiritual life. It is a gift that only God can give. Jesus made it very clear, “Without me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5); and “What is impossible for human beings is possible for God” (Lk 18:27). Nevertheless, God is eager to transform us. With His help everything is possible (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 efforts we make help dispose us to receive the gifts of God. If we really desire to achieve something we must be willing to focus on doing those things that will help us reach that 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 this 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. Jesus 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. They need to be healed and transformed in a process that has its necessary painful moments. It is important not to be discouraged by these painful moments of our transformation but to accept 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. Finally, we need to know that all the effort and hurting is worth it! *Infinitely* worth it. St. Paul wrote, “For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil 3:8). The pain of the journey will appear in retrospect to have been infinitesimal, compared to the superabundant happiness for which we were being prepared.

⁶ MNI 33.

⁷ MNI 32.

“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, and our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Cor 3:16-18).

Intimate union with God is possible in this life for everyone who will surrender to it and work toward it with God’s grace.

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. After all we may already feel challenged by the difficult demands of our busy life. However, when the 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... *then* we will be in a better position to respond.

What really holds us back from a wholehearted response to the call of Jesus and the repeated urging of the Holy 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. The very things we falsely judge as obstacles are the very means God gives us to draw us to surrender more deeply on Him.

“Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:2).

The source of all our unhappiness and misery is sin and its effects. 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 authentically 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.

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. If we want to enter heaven we must be made ready for the awesome sight of God. Holiness isn’t an “option.” There are only saints in heaven. Total transformation is not an “option” for the few zealots interested in that sort of thing. It is essential for all 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 this union; we were created for this union; we ache for this union; we were redeemed for this eternal union. The sooner we’re transformed the happier and the more “fulfilled” we will be – yes, even now.

In this surrendering process the Holy Spirit aids us to contemplate the face of Jesus,⁸ so that little by little we are transformed into Jesus. This is how we are prepared for the beatific vision, the ecstatic experience of our eternal dwelling in the knowing and loving of the Blessed Trinity, a participation in Love itself.

⁸ MNI 15.