

10. Holiness



Holiness is something that is predicated only of God



- God transcends (‘remains beyond’) everything we experience. It is this that we speak of when we say of God: ‘You alone are holy.’ (Revelation 15:4)

The people are told that they may not approach the mountain where God has chosen to reveal himself (Exodus 24:2).

For the same reason the tent of meeting is to be pitched outside the camp (Exodus 33:7-11).

The holy of holies is out of bounds for all but the high priest and even his entry is severely restricted (Leviticus 16:2).

Isaiah 6:1-5

‘I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him ... And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

We are holy to the degree that God, the one who alone is holy, is dwelling in us in a communion of love which is transforming us into an ever more profound participation in the divine life. It is because God, the One who alone is holy, is present uniting us to Himself, that we are living in this divine communion.

‘Jacob woke from his sleep at Bethel and said: Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!’(Genesis 28:16).

Jesus – ‘the Holy One of God’(Mark 1:24, John 6:69).

- When ‘the Word was made flesh and pitched his tent among us’(John 1:14), he revealed that God wanted us to draw close to him.

Jesus is the tent of meeting (John 2:21).

- People had always recognised the immanence of God in creation and in history, but those who experienced Jesus came to see that we are drawn into communion with the Holy One not by withdrawal from the body, from the mind, from thoughts and feelings, but by allowing the Holy One to draw us into the heart of the created world where God will transform us into himself. In the light of the Incarnation, we came to the astonishing insight that God is indeed the 'heart' as well as the 'beyond' of everything.

We are empowered by God's Spirit to live with Jesus
a life of holiness

‘Because you are God's children, God has sent the
Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”
(Galatians 4:6)

‘In Christ Jesus you are all children of God
through faith. Baptised into Christ you have
clothed yourselves with Christ ...
all of you are one in Christ Jesus’(Galatians 3:26-28).

‘We constantly give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you for salvation through the gift of his Spirit who makes you holy’(2Thessalonians 2:13).

‘You were washed, you were made holy, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God ... your bodies are members of Christ ... your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God. You are not your own’(1Corinthians 6:11, 15, 19).

‘My little children, I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you’(Galatians 4:19).

- Jesus astonished us by showing that sinners are invited to enjoy God’s embrace, and so to welcome God’s invitation: ‘you shall be holy, for I am holy.’(Leviticus 11:45).

‘All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying: This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them’(Luke 15:1-2).

- We sinners are called to be in communion with Jesus and so with the Holy One:

‘For their sakes I sanctify [‘make holy’] myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth’(John 17:19).

‘It is by God’s will that we have been made holy through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all’(Hebrews 10:10).

‘Jesus suffered in order to sanctify the people by his own blood’(Hebrews 13:12).

- We are made in God's image for God creates us to be in communion with him. God, 'the fountain of all holiness'(Second Eucharistic Prayer) is constantly pouring the Spirit of love into our hearts, drawing us into his life and so sharing his holiness with us.

‘Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light’(1Peter 2:5, 9).

‘God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple’

(1 Corinthians 3:17).

‘I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters,
by the mercies of God, to present your bodies
as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God,
which is your spiritual worship’(Romans 12:1).

‘God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the
world to be holy and blameless before him in love.’

(Ephesians 1:4).

‘The holiness of the Church is constantly shown forth in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful. And so it must be. It is expressed in many ways by those who, each in his or her own state of life, tend to the perfection of love’(Vatican II LG 39).

‘Just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life’(Romans 6:19, 22).

‘We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also fore-ordained to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he fore-ordained he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.’

(Romans 8:28-30)

- To grow in holiness we must cooperate with grace.

- Since God is love, God's gracious initiative comes to us as an offering, an invitation. Since we are created by God and created precisely for this divine communion, the invitation finds an echo in our longing.

- However, we are free to reject or to accept God's loving invitation.

- The transformation which we call holiness and which is union with God occurs only to the extent that we welcome God's grace and open our minds and hearts and wills and bodies to the transforming action of God's Spirit - the Spirit of love.

- Especially significant for this intimacy are times of prayer when our mind and heart are turned to God in loving attentiveness.

- It is in prayer that we say Yes to the communion which God is offering us. It is in prayer that we open our souls to receive God's offer of himself. It is in prayer that we grow in holiness – a holiness that is expressed in every aspect of our lives.

- Prayer is making space for God's transforming action in our lives. Prayer is giving ourselves, like a child, into his hands. He will lead us along the path of holiness, for he will take us ever more closely to his heart.

Endeavour and discipline are needed if we are to remain attentive to grace and to allow God's grace to transform us, but we must be careful to be attentive to grace so that our endeavour and discipline is indeed in response to grace and not coming from our own ego.

The spring of divine life (the spring of holiness) issues from the Heart of God alone.

We need to allow God the vine-grower to prune away whatever is dead wood.

We need to cooperate as God the gardener clears away whatever is blocking the spring or hindering the flow of water.

We need to keep responding to grace by cooperating in keeping the channels open and clear.

We need to allow the water of life to penetrate the soil of our lives.

A holy person is not a humanly perfect person. A holy person is one who has allowed him or herself to be transformed by communion in love with God – a communion initiated and sustained by God.

Herein lies the challenge of becoming holy. We have to learn that we cannot initiate holiness. No amount of control exercised by ourselves can produce or achieve holiness. God is holy. God is utterly transcendent, utterly beyond anything we can initiate. God, however, can and does directly act in our lives.

We have to allow the self-as-initiator to be 'lost'. 'Those who lose their life for my sake will find it'(Matthew 10:39). We have to let go control.

We have to become like a little child and allow to happen whatever God wants to happen as a result of His love. 'Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it'(Mark 10:15).

This self-denial is a denial or negating of the self (the ego): 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves'(Mark 8:34), but it is not a denial or negating by the self. It is allowing God to initiate rather than the self. It is allowing grace to transform. It is accepting to be loved and to love only insofar as loving flows from the transformation. This requires attentive discipline of our natural tendency to take control. We must resist the temptation to want to 'possess' or 'achieve' holiness.

This is what it means to be ‘poor in spirit’(Matthew 5:3). This is what it means to be detached, to be humble. This is what it means to be a child of God. This is what it means to cry out in childlike trust ‘Abba!’ – a cry that can be made only because the Spirit of Jesus has been poured into our hearts.

Saying Yes to God's gracious offer to transform us into himself through divine communion, we allow God to penetrate to the heart of our lives, and in so doing discover that God has drawn us to penetrate to the heart of his life.

Jesus is the mediator who shows us how to walk this journey. Through giving us his love, the Spirit of love which he shares with the Father, he draws us to his heart and so to the heart of God. The journey of becoming holy is a journey of being transformed into Jesus: 'All are called to union with Christ, who is the light of the world, from whom we go forth, through whom we live, and towards whom our whole life is directed'(Vatican II, LG n.3).

‘It is no longer I who live,
it is Christ who lives in me.
And the life I now live in the flesh
I live by the faith of the Son of God,
loving me and giving himself for me’(Galatians 2:20).

Teresa of Avila (d.1582) insists that the path to holiness and so the journey of prayer is to be in the company of Jesus:

‘It is for you to look at him. He never takes his eyes off you’(Way 26,3).

‘Prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us’(Life 8.5).

Therese of Lisieux

‘Holiness does not consist in this or that practice. It consists in a disposition of the heart which makes us humble and little in the arms of God, well aware of our feebleness, but boldly confident in the Father's goodness.’

Therese of Lisieux

‘After earth’s exile, I hope to go and enjoy you in the fatherland, but I do not want to lay up merits for heaven. I want to work for love of you alone ... In the evening of this life, I shall appear before you with empty hands, for I do not ask you, Lord, to count what I have done. All our justice is blemished in your eyes. I wish to be clothed, then, in your justice and to receive from your love the eternal possession of yourself.’