

Dear friends in Christ, a few days ago I had the opportunity to speak to our confirmandi -students who are preparing to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation in the coming month. During their final lesson of preparation, the theme centered on the need to work our spiritual “muscles”, or what Christians generally call the exercise of “growing in virtue.” Just as we gradually build up our physical strength and endurance through exercise, so the exercise of spiritual virtues makes us strong enough to withstand temptation and avoid the development of sinful habits (also called “vices”). The Church, as you may recall, distinguishes different kinds of virtues. The four cardinal virtues –prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance –are considered human virtues because they influence our conduct with others and are developed through practice (like good habits). While the three theological virtues –faith, hope, and charity –are infused in our souls at Baptism and allow us to relate to God now and to live with him forever. Every one of us is called to live a heroic virtue, that is, to live a virtuous, holy life. To live a Christian life is not easy because choosing to do good is hard work. Even cooperating with God’s grace is not easy. It takes hard work and sacrifice.

In her extensive teachings, the Church also uses another name to describe this exercise of “growing in virtue”, or what she calls, “The Universal Call to Holiness and Apostolate.” Simply put, all people are called to be holy based

on Jesus’ words, “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). The call to holiness is mentioned on numerous occasions. Saint Pope John Paul II in his apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, stated that **holiness is not only a state but a task**, whereby Christians should strive for a full Christian life, imitating Christ, God the Son, who gave his life for God the Father and for his neighbor. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church taught: “...all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity....They must devote themselves with all their being to the glory of God and the service of their neighbor” (cf. Chapter V, *Lumen Gentium*). Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI preached: “At the end of this series of Catechises, therefore, I would like to offer some thoughts on what holiness is. What does it mean to be holy? Who is called to be holy? We are often led to think that holiness is a goal reserved for a few elect. St Paul, instead, speaks of God’s great plan and says: “even as he (God) chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph 1:4). **And he was speaking about all of us....**” (cf. General Audience of Wednesday, 13 April 2011).

Just a few days ago, Pope Francis released his latest apostolic exhortation, titled *Gaudete et Exsultate*, or “Rejoice and be glad,” and interestingly his focus was also on the universal call to holiness. Francis explains in the introduction the rationale for his third exhortation: “My 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.” Within forty-four short pages, Francis reiterates the fact that the call to holiness is the mission of every Christian. He offers many practical advices on how to answer the call to holiness in a world filled with distractions, consumerism and hedonism. He places a great emphasis on prayer and worship and the need to live the Beatitudes in our life, and to perform acts of love and mercy towards one’s neighbors, especially the poor. Although living the call is difficult, the Pope reminds us that, “The Lord asks everything of us, and in return he offers us true life, the happiness for which we were created. He wants us to be saints and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence.” I invite you to not only read Francis’ latest exhortation, but more importantly, to remember that every one of us is called to live a call to holiness –to live a regimental exercise of “growing in virtue.” This call, which is rooted in our Baptism, can only be achieved by cooperating with the love and grace that comes from God.

Pax Christi, Fr. Thomas