

LEARNING FROM A SAINT NEXT DOOR

The Pursuit of Holiness in Thomas Merton and Pope Francis

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THE WELL-KNOWN US Jesuit author James Martin concluded his 2006 bestseller *My Life with the Saints* with the affirmation:

The universal call to holiness is an invitation to be ourselves The invitation to holiness is a lifelong call to draw closer to God, who wants nothing more than to encounter us as the people we are and the saints we are meant to be.¹

This is not an insight unique to him; as he earlier explains, Thomas Merton was a significant influence on his understanding of holiness and identity. But what Martin summarises well is the central conviction that preoccupied Merton over the course of his monastic career. As Merton explains in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, ‘For me to be a saint means to be myself, and the only way to discover who we really are is to discover ourselves in God.’² Sanctity—holiness—is not about becoming something or someone that we are *not*, but instead about striving to be more authentically who it is God created us to be—in our particularity, uniqueness and distinctive context.

On 9 April 2018, more than half a century after Merton wrote about holiness and what it means to be a saint, Pope Francis released a surprise apostolic exhortation ‘on the call to holiness in today’s world’, titled *Gaudete et exsultate* (‘Rejoice and Be Glad’). While he does not mention Merton by name in this document (as he did three years earlier during his address to the joint session of the United States Congress), Pope

¹ James Martin, *My Life with the Saints* (Chicago: Loyola, 2006), 390.

² Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 31.

Francis nevertheless lays out a pattern of Christian holiness that evokes the life and writing of the late US Trappist monk.³ I should like to highlight here how Merton's writings anticipate the nature of Christian discipleship presented in Pope Francis's magisterial teaching, and to suggest that Merton is precisely one of the non-canonical 'saints "next door"' whom Pope Francis describes.⁴

Holiness Is a Universal Call

The bulk of Thomas Merton's writings on holiness were completed before the Second Vatican Council. In this way, his affirmation of a 'universal call to holiness', as Vatican II's *Lumen gentium* ('The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church') would put it, anticipated what would be formalised in that document. Nearly a full decade before the promulgation of *Lumen gentium*, Merton dedicated a lengthy chapter in *No Man Is an Island* to the concept of vocation as a universal attribute.⁵ He begins that essay with the following reflection:

Each one of us has some kind of vocation. We are all called by God to share in His life and in His Kingdom. Each one of us is called to a special place in the Kingdom. If we find that place we will be happy. If we do not find it, we can never be completely happy. For each one of us, there is only one thing necessary: to fulfill our own destiny, according to God's will, to be what God wants us to be.⁶

He goes on to add: 'All vocations are intended by God to manifest His love in the world'.⁷ Wherever we find ourselves, in whatever time, no matter who we are or what we do, each of us has received a call to follow God's will and present the love of God to our sisters and brothers in our particular contexts.

Years later, Merton would pick up this theme in *New Seeds of Contemplation* and *Life and Holiness*, among other places. In the latter book, Merton explicitly uses language that will appear in the conciliar debates

³ See Pope Francis, 'Visit to the Joint Session of the United States Congress' (24 September 2015). Given the limitations of space, I have chosen to focus on Merton's 1963 book *Life and Holiness*, which contains essays originally published in the years 1961 and 1962, and which reflects a period of Merton's thinking on contemplation, faith and sanctity that notably intersects with his so-called 'turn to the world' about this same time.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exultate*, nn.6–8.

⁵ Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955), 131–163.

⁶ Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 131.

⁷ Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 153.

and the final texts.⁸ He writes: ‘Every Christian is therefore called to sanctity and union with Christ’.⁹ Later in *Life and Holiness*, he explains:

The way of Christian perfection begins with a personal summons, addressed to the individual Christian by Christ the Lord, through the Holy Spirit. This summons is a call, a ‘vocation’. Every Christian in one way or other receives this vocation from Christ—the call to follow him.¹⁰

The language we find in *Lumen gentium* reads:

Fortified by so many and such powerful means of salvation, all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord, each in his own way, to that perfect holiness whereby the Father Himself is perfect (n. 11).

Pope Francis takes this particular line from *Lumen gentium* as the starting point in his exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*. In a way that echoes Merton’s own concern that too many people reduce the striving after Christian holiness to an activity reserved for consecrated religious or the ordained ministers of the Church, Pope Francis states bluntly: ‘To be holy does not require being a bishop, a priest or a religious. We are



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⁸ This is not to suggest in a causal sense that Merton directly influenced the formation of *Lumen gentium*. Rather, it shows in a correlative manner that Merton was thinking alongside some of the *periti* of the council and other leading theological voices of the age. It also affirms Merton’s theological and spiritual outlook as entirely orthodox, contrary to what some contemporary or later naysayers might suggest.

⁹ Merton, *Life and Holiness*, 13.

¹⁰ Merton, *Life and Holiness*, 34.

frequently tempted to think that holiness is only for those who can withdraw from ordinary affairs to spend much time in prayer.’ He unequivocally affirms Merton’s insights, stating: ‘This is not the case. We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves.’ Reiterating the universality of the call to holiness, the Pope ties this vocation to baptism, exhorting Christians to ‘let the grace of your baptism bear fruit in a path of holiness’.¹¹

But what is the holiness that all Christian women and men are called to seek? This is another dimension of sanctity’s universality that Merton and Pope Francis share in common. Both make clear that authentic Christian holiness has absolutely nothing to do with individual perfection or sinlessness. To claim otherwise is to contravene doctrinal statements on the consequences of original sin and our ecclesial status as a Church always already holy and sinful.¹² Merton warns us that we should ‘not therefore delude ourselves with easy and infantile conceptions of holiness’, which are too often reduced to the hagiographic tales of superhuman heroism. He rejects this otherworldly perspective on holiness, and adds,

Hence sanctity is not a matter of being *less* human, but *more* human than other men It follows that a pretended ‘way of perfection’ that simply destroys or frustrates human values precisely because they are human, and in order to set oneself apart from the rest of men as an object of wonder, is doomed to be nothing but a caricature. And such caricaturing of sanctity is indeed a sin against faith in the Incarnation.¹³

Merton puts a great deal of effort into combating this mistaken understanding of holiness as personal perfection. He writes:

That is why it is perhaps advisable to speak of ‘holiness’ rather than ‘perfection’. A ‘holy’ person is one who is sanctified by the presence and action of God in him. He is ‘holy’ because he lives so deeply immersed in the life, the faith, and the charity of the ‘holy Church’.¹⁴

And herein lies the clue about what sanctity and holiness mean: ‘The true saint is not one who has become convinced that he himself is holy’,

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exultate*, nn. 14–15.

¹² See Brian P. Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness: Sin and Sanctity in the Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2018).

¹³ Merton, *Life and Holiness*, 19, 24.

¹⁴ Merton, *Life and Holiness*, 20.

Merton explains, ‘but one who is overwhelmed by the realisation that God, and God alone, is holy’. Sanctity is marked by participation in *God’s holiness*, a welcomed surrender to the transcendent sign of love and peace working through us because of God, and not because of us. In this way, Merton articulates what it means to be a saint.

The saint, then, seeks not his own glory but the glory of God. And in order that God may be glorified in all things, the saint wishes himself to be nothing but a pure instrument of the divine will. He wants himself to be simply a window through which God’s mercy shines on the world.¹⁵

Elsewhere he elaborates on this point, making a sound Trinitarian argument for the participation in God’s holiness as conformity to Christ in the Spirit.¹⁶

This sense of authentic Christian holiness as participation in the singular holiness of God conforms to the ancient Hebrew understanding of sanctity witnessed in the Old Testament. The theologian Elizabeth Johnson has argued for the retrieval of this understanding in her important 1998 book *Friends of God and Prophets*.¹⁷ Like Merton and Johnson, Pope Francis also emphasizes authentic sanctity as participating in God’s holiness, and does so with a particularly Christological valence. He explains:

**Participation in
the singular
holiness of God**

At its core, holiness is experiencing, in union with Christ, the mysteries of his life. It consists in uniting ourselves to the Lord’s death and resurrection in a unique and personal way, constantly dying and rising anew with him.¹⁸

Invoking—without attribution—Merton’s most famous spiritual contribution, the Pope writes: ‘Sooner or later, we have to face our *true selves* and let the Lord enter’.¹⁹

Given that the only real holiness which exists is God’s holiness, the universal call to participate in the life of God necessarily leads to reflection on the Church for, as Pope Francis reiterates in this exhortation and

¹⁵ Merton, *Life and Holiness*, 26.

¹⁶ For example, see Merton, *Life and Holiness*, 58–59 and throughout.

¹⁷ See Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998).

¹⁸ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, n. 20.

¹⁹ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, n. 29, emphasis added.

elsewhere, Christianity always implies community—the community of believers, the communion of saints. Or, as Merton says, ‘The whole Christian life is then an interrelationship between members of a body unified by supernatural charity, that is by the action of the Holy Spirit, making us all one in Christ’.²⁰

Sanctity Is Particular

There is a telling passage in *Life and Holiness* about saints and the particularity of holiness, which is often overlooked in our narratives about exemplary Christian models of living. Merton writes:

The popular idea of a ‘saint’ is, of course, quite naturally based on the sanctity which is presented for our veneration, in heroic men and women, by the Church. There is nothing surprising in the fact that the saints quickly become stereotyped in the mind of the average Christian, and everyone, on reflection, will easily admit that the stereotype tends to be unreal. The conventions of hagiography have usually accentuated the unreality of the picture, and pious art has, in most cases, successfully completed the work. In this way, the Christian who devotes himself to the pursuit of holiness unconsciously tends to reproduce in himself some features of the popular stereotyped image. Or rather, since it is fortunately difficult to succeed in this enterprise, he imagines himself in some sense obliged to follow the pattern, as if it were really a model proposed for his imitation by the Church instead of a purely conventional and popular caricature of a mysterious reality—the Christlikeness of the saints.²¹

Merton goes out of his way to deconstruct the false narrative of cookie-cutter sanctity too often depicted in the rote ‘lives of the saints’ that are nothing more than misleading caricatures. Since holiness is participation in the life of God, and each child, woman and man experiences God in distinctive times and places, Merton asserts, ‘It is in the ordinary duties and labors of life that the Christian can and should develop his spiritual union with God’. Later he adds:

Each one becomes [holy], not by realizing one uniform standard of universal perfection in his own life, but by responding to the call and the love of God, addressed to him within the limitations and circumstances of his own particular vocation.²²

²⁰ Merton, *Life and Holiness*, 40.

²¹ Merton, *Life and Holiness*, 22.

²² Merton, *Life and Holiness*, 9, 29.

In this way, Merton's reflections on the 'true' and 'false' selves offer a profound gift to those discerning how best to understanding the pursuit of Christian holiness. As inspiring and important as the 'lives of the saints' are, they do not offer a how-to guide for Christian living in every context. This is where attention to our prayer life and ongoing and deepening discovery of who we are in God is the foundation for Christian holiness. Pope Francis spends a fair amount of time addressing this topic. He writes:

We should not grow discouraged before examples of holiness that appear unattainable. There are some testimonies that may prove helpful and inspiring, but that we are not meant to copy, for that could even lead us astray from the one specific path that the Lord has in mind for us. The important thing is that each believer discern his or her own path, that they bring out the very best of themselves, the most personal gifts God has placed in their hearts, rather than hopelessly trying to imitate something not meant for them.²³

In so many ways, this is much more easily said than done, a fact that both Merton and Pope Francis acknowledge. A life pursuing Christian holiness, then, requires discernment, prayer and action rather than unreflective repetition of hagiographic stereotypes. Pope Francis states directly that participation in the life of Christ, that is God's holiness, ought to lead to concrete actions—actions that do not necessarily relate to the miraculous or incredible. He says: 'This holiness to which the Lord calls you will grow through small gestures'.²⁴ Reiterating *Lumen gentium's* teaching and Merton's insistence on the particularity of sanctity, Pope Francis explains that how we live our lives, interact with those around us and choose to spend our time, energy and resources all contribute to a life of Christian holiness in keeping with the tradition.

There Are False Forms of Holiness

Another aspect of a theology of holiness shared by both Merton and Francis is the reality of false forms of holiness. I have already mentioned the problematic of romanticising caricatures of heroic sanctity and personal perfection. Additionally, both Merton and Francis are concerned about limitations on the scope of who qualifies as *potentially* holy—namely, ordained ministers and consecrated religious alone. Merton

²³ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, n. 11.

²⁴ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, n. 16.



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anticipates, and Pope Francis reiterates, Vatican II's affirmation that *all women and men* are called to holiness, regardless of their state of life, social location, education or context.

While these are indeed illustrations of what we might call 'false forms of holiness', at least by omission if not by description, there are two other kinds that troubled both Merton in the 1960s and Pope Francis today. The first was the reduction of faith to propositional claims. This is an intellectualising of faith that Pope Francis calls 'contemporary gnosticism'.²⁵ He warns about the tendency to mistake what one knows (or thinks one knows) *about* faith claims *for* authentic Christian faith. He explains that people who do this think holiness is about having all the right answers, memorising catechetical statements, having the most compelling apologetic response in an argument. He says:

A healthy humble use of reason in order to reflect on the theological and moral teaching of the Gospel is one thing. It is another to reduce Jesus' teaching to a cold and harsh logic that seeks to dominate everything.²⁶

While Merton does not address this particular form of false holiness directly in *Life and Holiness*, he does spend a fair amount of time on it in *New Seeds of Contemplation* in his chapter on 'faith'. He writes: 'Too

²⁵ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, nn. 36–46.

²⁶ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, n. 39.

often our notion of faith is falsified by our emphasis on the statements *about* God which faith believes, and by our forgetfulness of the fact that faith is a communion with God's own light and truth'. He highlights the dangerous effect that results from this amnesia about authentic faith, noting that:

If instead of resting in God by faith, we rest simply in the proposition or the formula, it is no wonder that faith does not lead to contemplation Faith goes beyond words and formulas and brings us the light of God Himself.²⁷

Holiness is not measured by how much one knows or how often one wins an argument or theological dispute (however such a showdown is adjudicated), and yet in an age of increased fear and polarisation, when communications technology and scientific discovery pervasively affect culture and experience, a gnostic or intellectual reduction of the faith can seem secure and appealing. But it is not reflective of Christian holiness.

The second form of false holiness is a restrictive or legalistic view of Christian faith, or what Pope Francis describes as 'contemporary Pelagianism'.²⁸ In his *Life and Holiness*, Merton contrasts Christian charity—truly a sign of active participation in the life and holiness of God—with forgetfulness about the real purpose of the Church's organizational discipline, rituals, teaching authority and hierarchy. He explains: 'If we forget that the laws and organization of the Church are there only to preserve the inner life of charity, we will tend to make the observance of law an end in itself'.²⁹ Sadly, for many today, this is what it means to strive for holiness.

Pope Francis likens this sort of attitude and behaviour to the various forms of the ancient Pelagian heresy, which basically describes a radical sense of self-sufficiency that precludes the need for grace or the work of God in our lives. If Christian holiness is signified by participation in the holiness of God in Christ through the Spirit, then one can see the immediate problem. And yet, so many self-identified Christians become so obsessed with rules and procedures, rubrics and canonical norms, that they miss the whole point of the faith. Merton says that for these

²⁷ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 128, 129.

²⁸ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, nn.49–62.

²⁹ Merton, *Life and Holiness*, 43.

sorts of people, ‘the Christian life becomes externalized’, and such a person ‘may eventually become so absorbed in the externals of law and of organization that he loses a real sense of the importance of charity in the Christian life’.³⁰ Pope Francis affirms this sentiment of Merton, writing: ‘Some Christians spend their time and energy on these things, rather than letting themselves be led by the Spirit in the way of love’.³¹

A Saint Next Door

It is rare to find such congruence between a modern magisterial document and the insights of anybody writing sixty years earlier. But in terms of their theology of holiness, Merton and Pope Francis are on precisely the same page. In conclusion, I wish only to draw attention to one logical consequence of the insights that both Merton and Francis offer; namely, that if authentic Christian holiness is a universal call, always particularly situated, and does not fall into the trap of false holiness, then there are far more ‘saints’ than we typically count in the Church’s liturgical calendar.

Pope Francis opened his exhortation acknowledging the under-considered truth that there have been countless women and men of faith over the centuries whom we might rightly call ‘the saints “next door”’. These are not people who draw the attention of the Church universal; often they are not affiliated with wealthy religious orders nor do they have prelates lobbying on their behalf. They are the ordinary, everyday, largely anonymous women and men who strive to live their faith in love, thereby signifying participation in the divine life—that is God’s holiness—to those they encounter. They are neighbours, friends, fellow parishioners, family members, mentors, teachers—and strangers. They reveal the compassionate face of God without fanfare and without the acclaim they might otherwise deserve, but their lives and work bespeak the truth Christ’s life, death and resurrection sought to reveal to us. These are people who are our companions on the pilgrim journey of faith; they are members of the great ‘cloud of witnesses’ the Letter to the Hebrews (12:1) describes; they are our models for what it means to walk in the footprints of Jesus Christ and to take the gospel seriously.

And I believe that Thomas Merton is just one such saint next door. This is not to claim that he should be formally canonized (I am

³⁰ Merton, *Life and Holiness*, 43.

³¹ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, n. 57.

of several minds about that possibility and not quite sure where I stand in the debate). But it is to claim that we do not need such ecclesiastical affirmation to venerate his life and legacy, and be inspired by his words and deeds. Thomas Merton was, in Elizabeth Johnson's borrowing from the Book of Wisdom, a true 'friend of God and a prophet'. In this way he is already a saint, someone whose whole humanity was and is on display; someone who struggled to make sense of the gospel call in his particular location and time and context—and someone who continues to call us to discern likewise through the struggle, so that each of us may participate too in the holiness of God and share in the divine life.

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