

Gaudete et Exsultate

Some years ago, as I walked to St. Patrick's Cathedral in Melbourne Australia, I passed the beautifully restored garden along the pilgrim's path that has **a fountain, significantly a fountain WITHOUT flowing water because of the drought that has plagued Australia in those years.**

Etched in the fountain are prophetic words from the Australian poet, James McAuley. When faced with the challenge of how to present Christ to those who are indifferent or reject him, James McCauley, who died in 1976, wrote:

Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives.
Cast fire upon the earth: raise up contemplatives
Among us, men who walk within the fire
Of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire
Set pools of silence in this thirsty land.¹

If I could rewrite this poem, as a prayer, for this WUCWO meeting, I would say:

Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives.
Cast fire upon the earth: raise up contemplatives
Among us, **women** who walk within the fire
Of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire
Set pools of silence in this thirsty land.

I find it extraordinary that these words were written in the 1970's and that they speak so powerfully to us today. They place before us both the gift and the responsibility that Christ offers us. It is the powerful Incarnate Word who casts fire upon the Earth. Jesus, the Holy One, draws us into the path of holiness. **You and I become holy only if we let Christ work in our lives. Only then can we spread the fire of his love to those whom we meet because we will be people who walk *within the fire*. Christ is the one who will create pools of silence in this thirsty land, *if only we let him.***

We live in a world where many are thirsty. Many desire that living water that only Christ can give. Many lack that living water that is so necessary for abundant

¹See Peter Coleman, *The Heart of James McCauley* (Bacchus Marsh: Connorcourt, 2006, p. 54.

life. You and I are called to be bearers of that water, but we can only do that in and through Christ. The Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (GE) teaches us how.

“Rejoice and be Glad” (Mt 5:12), “*Gaudete et Exsultate*”.

With these words of Jesus, Pope Francis begins his Apostolic Exhortation on the call to holiness in today’s world. His basic message is “Do not be afraid of holiness”. If you respond fully to this call, you will receive new energy, vitality and joy in your everyday life. At the same time, he reminds us:

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 (*GE* 1).

As women gathered here from every part of the world, who are called to be “carriers of living water to a world that thirsts for peace”, what does Pope Francis say to us **today** through *Gaudete et Exsultate*?

This **brief reflection** begins with an overview of what the Holy Father has written with the aim of **seeing** together what might Pope Francis be saying to WUCWO through *Gaudete et Exsultate*.

A brief overview of “Rejoice and Be Glad”, *Gaudium et Exsultate*

The basic purpose of this document is to remind us that **we are all called to holiness**: not just the canonized saints, including women like St. Catherine of Siena, St. Teresa of Avila (whose feast day we have just celebrated), and St Josephine Bakhita (a great African saint), but also the unknown or forgotten women and men who have lived holy and ordinary lives throughout the centuries. The holy ones are not saints on a pedestal; they include our “own mothers, grandmothers or other loved ones (cf. 2 Tim 1:5)”. Pope Francis invites us to **open our eyes** and **see** the holiness present in them and in “our next-door neighbours, those who, living in our midst, reflect God’s presence.” On this occasion, I also think of the holy members of WUCWO who have paved the way for us to be here right now.

The **first chapter**, “**The Call to Holiness**”, simply describes the ordinary and everyday holiness to which we are all called. In the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis reminds us that holiness is above all a **gift**: an

experience of union with Christ whereby we learn to abide in Jesus and are enfolded into the mysteries of his life, death and resurrection. Holiness is also a **responsibility**: it involves “living our lives with love and . . . bearing witness in everything that we do”, wherever we are, whatever we are doing. (GE14) In synthesis, holiness is about living our ordinary lives with extraordinary love.

What implications do this teaching have for our everyday life? It is a reminder that all of the activities of everyday life are the “raw material” for growth in holiness. Sometimes what we think is peripheral (or even something to be ticked off a mundane list) is in fact our path to holiness. Holiness means that we give loving and leisurely attention to the everyday geographical details of our life and work.² James O’Donohue offers an eloquent expression of the same point in his poem “The Inner History of a Day”,

We seldom notice how each day is a holy place
Where the eucharist of the ordinary happens,
Transforming our broken fragments
Into an eternal continuity that keeps us.³

The people we meet, the struggles we have, the beauty we see around us, the insults—are all means to grow in holiness. Pope Francis also reminds us that we as Catholics do not have a monopoly on holiness. It can be lived “even outside the Catholic church and in different contexts”. (GE 9) It is not up to us “to claim to say where God is not, because God is mysteriously present in the life of every person, in a way that he himself chooses, and we cannot exclude this by our presumed certainties.” (GE 42) **If we open our eyes to really see, then we will not be surprised to find signs and examples of holiness in unexpected places.**

The **second chapter, “Two subtle enemies of holiness”**, identifies two heresies found in the early church that also have contemporary expressions: **Gnosticism and Pelagianism**. Quite simply, contemporary Gnosticism manifests itself when we absolutize our own limited understanding of the mysteries of faith and impose them on others. A sure sign of Gnosticism is when we act as if only those who are capable of fully understanding the depths of Christian doctrines (GE 37). Pelagianism (or semi-Pelagianism) occurs when we try to rely on our own

² Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant. An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Michigan\Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 149-152.

³ See John O’Donohue, “The Inner History of a Day” in *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* (New York: Convergent Books, 2008), p. 161.

power to reach God. A sure sign of this heresy is when I feel superior to others “because I observe certain rules or remain intransigently faithful to a particular Catholic style”. The remedy for both is a deep humility where I acknowledge my limitations and my need for God’s grace.

The third chapter, “In the light of the Master”, contains the central message of *Gaudete et Exsultate*, namely that holiness is meant to be concrete and practical: quite simply, it means following in Jesus’ footsteps by living the beatitudes, each of us doing so in his or her own unique way.

The Beatitudes are the qualities or characteristics of those who live holiness. To put it bluntly, the Beatitudes are our Christian “identity card”:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matt 5:5-11)

If you want to know what holiness is, read, or rather *live* the Beatitudes.

In this chapter, Pope Francis also repeats the great criterion by which we will be judged by the Lord: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (vv. Matt 25: 35-36). “Whatever you did to the least of these brothers and sisters, you did to me.” Today, you and I are are challenged to ask: **What exactly have we done for Jesus who is truly present in those who are the most vulnerable and poor of our society? What are we doing for Jesus who is present in them? What will we do for Jesus?**

The fourth chapter, “Signs of Holiness in Today’s World”, suggests five spiritual attitudes found in those who are living holiness in our contemporary society. Briefly, these include (1) perseverance, patience and meekness; (2) joy in faith and a sense of humour; (3) boldness and courage in witnessing to Jesus, (4) communal joy and (5) constant prayer. These are the concrete signs of people becoming more Christ-like in their daily lives. Though time does not permit me to focus in detail on each, I do think that the fourth spiritual attitude, namely the joy of living in community, or the “mystique” of living together (to quote *Evangelii Gaudium* 87) is something that can speak perhaps to us gathered here today. In fact, in *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis writes of the “mingling and encounter, embrace and supporting one another, of stepping into the flood tide which while, chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage.” (EG 87)

The final chapter, “Spiritual Combat, Vigilance and Discernment” acknowledges that the pursuit of holiness includes a spiritual battle where we find ourselves fighting *both forces outside ourselves* like the cultures of individualism and materialism *and forces within*. This is why discernment is so important for Christian spirituality: it is only by being vigilant and discerning that we can be sure that we are following the path of Jesus. Evil is real, the devil exists, and Pope Francis invites us to join ourselves with the Blessed Virgin Mary in this spiritual battle.

What might Pope Francis be saying to WUCWO today through *Gaudete et Exsultate*?

I now come to my second point, namely, what might Pope Francis be saying to WUCWO today through *Gaudete et Exsultate*? In a certain sense, **only you can answer this question through your own discernment**. I hope it is not too presumptuous though if I make a suggestion.

The voice and the insights of women are important for the Church today perhaps more than ever. In this context, it is significant **how many times and at what length** these voices are heard in *Gaudete et Exsultate*. I think there is a message in this for us too. The message is **not** that women have a monopoly on holiness! It does remind us though that **all of us have our particular gifts given by the Lord for the upbuilding of the Church and society**. In *Gaudete et*

Exsultate, holy women are “up front and visible” and so should we be.⁴ We need to be bold, joyful, and persistent in carrying out our mission, with confidence in God’s help.

For more than one hundred years (from 1910), WUCWO has been promoting the “presence, participation and co-responsibility of Catholic women in society and in the Church, in order to enable them to fulfil their mission of evangelization and to work for human development.” (Mission Statement). **I think that this apostolic exhortation is an invitation to keep doing just that, but it is also a challenge not to be afraid to be open to new risks and new ways.**

WUCWO has a long tradition of concrete action—advocating for those who are fragile or on the peripheries of society. In recent years, you have truly made the priorities of Pope Francis your own. **The questions perhaps to ask are these: What more is the Lord asking now at this moment in history? Am I afraid of where he might be calling? Are we afraid? In what areas do we lack the inner freedom to completely open up to the work of holiness that God wants to do in us and through us?** We are invited to take risks, to go to the peripheries. If we take seriously the words of Pope Francis, this is where *Gaudete et Exsultate* will lead us.

Finally, what are we to “do”, what actions can we take?

In a certain sense, also the answer to this question will come from you as you deliberate together in your assembly. You will decide what it is that God calls you to do at this particular moment in history. One thing is sure: the needs of the world and Church are great. Most especially, we are all aware that in the Church right now there is so much scandal, heart-breaking news and disappointment regarding the behaviour of some in leadership. We must not be afraid to face the truth of the situation and also to do our part to remedy it.

Once when Catherine of Siena was praying, she complained to God about all the problems in the Church and the world. If you think we have problems in the Twenty-first century, just take a look at what was happening in the Fourteenth!

⁴ Rita Ferrone, “There are also Women There” in *Commonweal*, April 10, 2018 (<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/there-are-also-women-there> accessed September 10, 2018).

Catherine begged God the Father that Jesus would come again to bring healing. As she listened in silence, she heard God speak to her heart. In the form of a prayer, she tells us what she heard Him say:

True,
your Son is not about to come again
except in majesty, to judge . . .
But, as I see it, you are calling your servants christs,
and by means of them
you want to relieve the world of death and restore it to life.
How?
You want these servants of yours
to walk courageously along the Word's way,
with concern and blazing desire,
working for your honor and the salvation of souls, ...
Oh best of remedy-givers!
Give us then these christs,
who will live in continual watching
and tears and prayers for the world's salvation.
You call them your christs
because they are conformed with your only-begotten Son.⁵

You and I are called to be another Christ in the Church and the world today. We can do this joyfully, boldly and confidently if we embrace God's call to holiness.

I end where I began, with a prayer:

Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives.
Cast fire upon the earth: raise up contemplatives
Among us, **women** who walk within the fire
Of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire
Set pools of silence in this thirsty land.

Dr. Donna Orsuto
Co-Founder and Director
Lay Center at Foyer Unitas

⁵ *Prayers of Catherine of Siena*, prayer 19, translated by Suzanne Noffke.