

I was recently rereading the document of the Second Vatican Council on the nature and mission of the Church. It includes a brief chapter entitled, “The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church.” While recognizing the contribution of sisters, priests and others living in religious orders and congregations under the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, the council fathers wanted to underline their conviction that through the union with Christ and the Holy Spirit that is ours in baptism, we are already holy in the depths of our being and are called to nurture that holiness and to lead a life the corresponds to it.

In the biblical tradition, holiness is attributed primarily to God and secondarily to people and things dedicated to him. What is known as the Holiness Code in the OT book of Leviticus begins, “Be holy for the Lord your God is holy.” Jesus echoed that thought when he said, “Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful.”

In a vision, the prophet Isaiah saw two cherubim chanting before God, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts,” a phrase that we repeat at every Mass at the beginning of the Eucharistic prayer. The second such prayer prolongs that thought as it declares, “You are indeed holy, O Lord, the fount of all holiness, make holy therefore these gifts.”

Holiness or sanctity involves what might be called a mystical as well as a moral dimension. The word “mystical” in this context underlines the unique relationship that holiness has with God. It involves a sharing in his life. To grow in holiness from this point of view entails a deepening of our sense of God and of his gifts to us. Various forms of prayer including the liturgy, the saying of fixed prayers, meditation, and the silent listening for the voice of God in our hearts are all part of such a process.

There are different ways of evoking what is involved in the moral dimension of holiness. Fundamental for a Christian are the teaching and example of Jesus. Central to both is love, love of God and love of neighbour. At the last supper Jesus said, “This is my commandment that you should love one another as I loved you.

Today’s gospel contains Matthew’s account of the beatitudes, a series of sayings which sum up many of the virtues, attitudes and actions that mark the lives of saints. Those who are poor in spirit know how dependent they are on God and seek from him the help and inspiration they need to be holy. Other beatitudes suggest that meekness, mercy, and a willingness to work in one way or another for justice and peace are part of a holy life.

The letters of Paul are full of references to the kind of things that mark the life of genuine disciples of Christ. In his letter to the Colossians, he writes: “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another ... Above all clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

I have met many people over the years who from the outside have lived very ordinary lives but who, in my judgment, were saints, people of faith and love, of courage and fidelity. I can’t help but think of my own father in that way.

If all of us are called to a life of holiness, a life that reflects and bears witness to the life and teaching of Jesus, the better known saints, those who have been formally recognized as such, have a special role in our lives and in the life of the church. I am thinking of people like Francis of Assisi, Dominic, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Ignatius of Loyola, Cardinal Newman, Teresa of Avila and Therese of Lisieux. Throughout history, these and other canonized saints have had an enormous influence on the church and on individual believers like ourselves. Some of them were great theologians, others were founders or reformers of religious communities, all in one way or another embodied to a remarkable degree some particular aspect of the Gospel.

We have been able to witness over the last several years a wonderful example of how a saint from centuries ago is able to speak to and inspire a person living today. I am thinking of the relationship between Francis of Assisi and Pope Francis. The parallels are striking. St Francis was known for his poverty and detachment as well as for his love of the poor and those in need and for his care for the earth and all that lives on.

From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has been known for his poverty and simplicity, his great love of and concern for the poor and the sick, for refugees and prisoners. Two of the pope's encyclicals begin with and are known by phrases from St Francis' writings, Laudato si, "Praise be my Lord," his encyclical on climate change and the environment, and Fratelli tutti, "brothers and sisters all," a summary of much of his social teaching up to this point. To underline his debt to St Francis, Fratelli tutti was signed by the pope and released in Assisi.

Although there are many things in our world which are at odds with the Christian vision of holiness, that vision is still very much alive. It is something for which the human heart longs, something for which we have been made.