

Holiness and Joy

*Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.
God, the Lord, is my strength. ~ Habakkuk 3:18-19*

JESUS TELLS us that we “*must be perfect, as [our] Heavenly*

Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). Many people think that achieving this perfection, attaining true holiness, takes the happiness out of life, and that those who actively pursue sanctity are wet blankets who are hard to live with. These beliefs are exactly the opposite of the truth. Holiness is the wellspring of freedom, peace, and a deep inner joy.

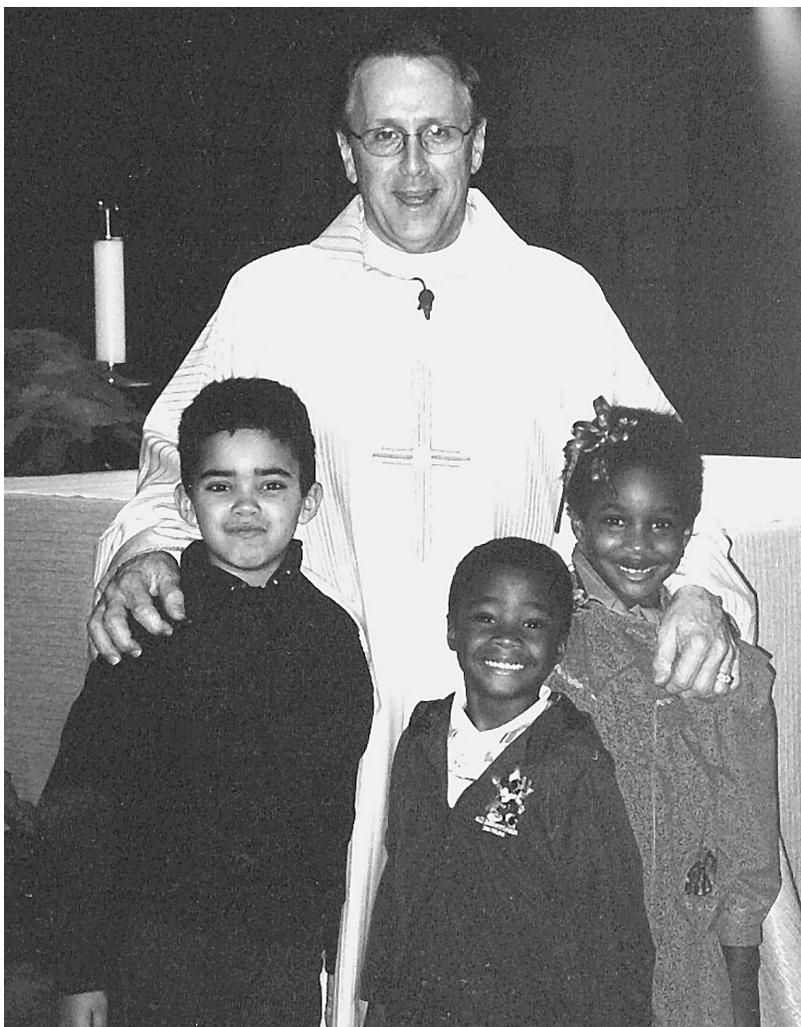
When we see our lives in real terms, as God sees things, we realize that we are transient — here today, gone tomorrow. We are here on earth to live a good life, but the purpose of this good life is to gain an eternal reward. We know from observation that people who live as though there is no tomorrow are not truly free, at peace, or happy. Fleeting pleasure and self-gratification, in a world destined to perish, cannot compare to an eternity of peace and joy with our God.

The way we seek happiness makes all the

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difference. Our nature, wounded by sin, makes us likely to succumb to the temptation to put emphasis upon things that contribute little to our real purpose for living. Yet Jesus plainly tells us, “*seek first [the] Kingdom [of God] and his righteousness*” (Mt 6:33). Without fail, this gives us an abiding and intense joy: “*Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy*” (1 Pt 1:8).

But what about the pain, suffering, and grief that life brings? A life of holiness can have sorrow, trials, and tribulations. Yet this is also true of those who do not seek holiness. Jesus teaches us that we must “*take up [our] cross and follow [him]*” (Mk 8:34). This is not an option; holiness comes by way of the cross, and those who are closest to Jesus do not get a “pass” from the slings and arrows of life. In fact, the effort to become holy requires the deliberate sacrifice of earthly things, transient things. Yet sacrifice and self-denial need not mean sadness. Jesus also



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said: *“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full”* (Jn 15:11). In human terms, a cross is not itself a delight; it means trial and grief. But it is, nevertheless, the source of joy: *“[Y]ou will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy”* (Jn 16:20). To explain this, Jesus speaks of a mother’s birth pangs that turn to joy when her child is finally born (see Jn 16:21).

Those intent on sanctity know how to understand their troubles and keep their eyes on their goal. Knowing that they are doing the right things, they feel a keen sense of freedom and their souls are possessed of peace. The Scriptures tell us to *“serve the Lord with gladness”* (Ps 100:2). The true Christian disciple also finds joy in bringing others to the love and service of God, for joy cannot be hidden, but must be shared: *“For I greatly rejoiced when some of the brethren arrived and testified to the truth of your life, as indeed you do follow the truth. No greater joy can I have than this, to hear that my children follow the truth”* (3 Jn vv 3-4).

Why, then, is there such a widespread notion that holy people — “living saints” — are sour killjoys? Sadly, many so-called “saints” are actually self-righteous, sanctimonious people convinced of their own virtue and of their superiority to everyone around them. Self-righteousness is another name for pride, the kind of pride that Jesus condemned when he told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee prayed: *“God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adul-*

terers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get” (Lk 18:11-12). These people give a bad name to sanctity and do great evil by giving others a false view of what true holiness is and thereby discouraging them from seeking it. In the same parable, Jesus tells us that *“the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to Heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’”* (Lk 18:13). Holiness requires knowing that one is a sinner and begging God daily for mercy.

It is not difficult to know when one has encountered a saint. The saint is the person who makes us think longingly, “I want whatever he, or she, has.” This is joy — true joy — and every holy person has it.
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