

SEEKING SANCTITY IN OUR CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Hector Scerri

*A monk in his travels once found a precious stone and kept it. One day he met a traveller, and when he opened his bag to share his provisions with him, the traveller saw the pearl and asked the monk to give it to him. The monk did so readily. The traveller departed overjoyed with the unexpected gift of the precious stone that was enough to give him wealth and security for the rest of his life. However, a few days later he came back in search of the monk, found him, gave him back the stone and entreated him: 'Now give me something much more precious than this stone, valuable as it is. Give me that which enabled you to give it to me.'*¹

TALKING ABOUT SANCTITY in our contemporary world, from a Christian perspective, is like talking about the precious stone in the story. Undoubtedly, there are many today who still search for sanctity—and even crave for it, perhaps thinking that this is something reserved for the elite few. But talking about sanctity is closer to that unexpected gesture by the monk, which set the traveller thinking and retracing his path, returning for something more valuable than the pearl. The path to sanctity permeates this story, told by Anthony de Mello. This path is open to men and women of all times and places. Moreover, it is not restricted only to those who believe in Christ.

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, affirms clearly:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere

¹ Carlos G. Valles, *Unencumbered by Baggage: Father Anthony de Mello: A Prophet for Our Times* (Anand, India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1987), 43.

heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation.²

The road to holiness, therefore, is open to *all* men and women of good will. I shall limit myself here, however, to the Judaeo-Christian tradition and some of its perhaps less known contributions to the call to holiness in today's world.

The last hundred years have been graced by the witness to sanctity of many great men and women from diverse backgrounds and with various contributions. Following a variety of paths, they were also successful in showing the way for others. Many names come to mind: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955),³ Dorothy Day (1897–1980),⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945),⁵ Simone Weil (1909–1943),⁶ Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910–1997),⁷ Archbishop Oscar Romero (1917–1980),⁸ Martin Luther King (1929–1968)⁹ and the Tibhirine martyrs (murdered in 1996).¹⁰ But this article will not focus on such outstanding personalities.

Instead, the guiding principle here is that sanctity in the contemporary world is intimately bound to *ordinariness*.¹¹ It is true that

² *Lumen gentium*, 16.

³ Jesuit spiritual writer who focused on science, geology, palaeontology and evolution. His works were published posthumously. Author of *The Phenomenon of Man*, *The Divine Milieu*, *Hymn of the Universe*.

⁴ An outstanding convert to Catholicism, founder of the newspaper *The Catholic Worker* and of several hospitality houses in the United States.

⁵ German Lutheran pastor, widely known for his work *The Cost of Discipleship*, a thought-provoking commentary on the Sermon on the Mount. Executed by the Nazi regime for his opposition to Hitler.

⁶ Raised in an agnostic Jewish family. Later in life, she started to believe in Jesus, but did not receive baptism. Famous for many courageous actions during World War II, and for her self-forgetful gestures in order to assist others.

⁷ Well-known founder of the Missionaries of Charity and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize who is remembered for her tireless endeavours in favour of the poorest of the poor.

⁸ Roman Catholic archbishop of San Salvador in El Salvador, killed for speaking out against organized political violence and grave injustices in his country.

⁹ American civil rights leader and Baptist preacher. Renowned for his determined stance of militant non-violence. Author of *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* and *Strength to Love*.

¹⁰ Seven Trappist monks from Notre Dame de l'Atlas, Tibhirine, Algeria, who were beheaded by Islamic fundamentalists on 21 May 1996, after a long captivity.

¹¹ On the concept of *ordinariness* or *quotidienneté*, see Hector Scerri, 'Fides quaerens intellectum practico-Sociale' in the Writings of Adalbert-G. Hamman (1910–2000): Some Footnotes to the Pro-existential Attitude of the Fathers', *Melita Theologica* 55/1 (2004), 3–13; 'Quotidienneté in the Writings of Adalbert-G. Hamman (1910–2000): The Existential Concern of a Twentieth-Century Patristic Scholar', *Studia Patristica*, 40, *Papers Presented at the Fourteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies Held in Oxford, August 2003*, edited by F. Young, M. Edwards and P. Parvis (Leuven, Paris and Dudley: Peeters, 2006), 331–336.

the twentieth-century Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1904–1984) once wrote that ‘the Christian of the future will be a mystic or he or she will not exist at all’.¹² But, in line with Jesuit spirituality, this is ‘a mysticism of everyday things’.¹³ The holiness upon which I am reflecting here is *the faithful discipleship to which all Christians are called*. This is not something open only to the few. Rather, it is a way of life which can be embraced by all individuals in the ordinary actions of everyday life. It asks for daily humble self-offering, an attitude distant from any false theatricality. The Jesuit priest Luis Espinal (1932–1980), murdered in Bolivia in March 1980, affirmed that ‘life is to be simply offered, without any publicity, as water gushing forth from a spring, as a mother with a child at her breast, as the humble sweat on the brow of a man sowing in the fields’.¹⁴

The Universal Call to Holiness

The call to holiness is open to all. In the book of Leviticus we read that the Lord spoke to Moses and said: ‘You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy’ (19:2). Similar words were uttered by Jesus, the new Moses, in the context of the Sermon of the Mount: ‘Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matthew 5:48). This verse has also been translated: ‘You must therefore set no bounds to your love, just as your heavenly Father sets none to his’.¹⁵ The realm of holiness is boundless.

The authentic Christian who sincerely walks in the path to holiness soon realises that there is no limit to the quest. There is always something else to be overcome as part of one’s ongoing conversion. Holiness cannot be measured in the way we measure material objects. There is always more to be discovered, more from which to purify oneself, more in which to mature. This has been well articulated by St John of the Cross (1542–1591), who reflects on his spiritual experience:

¹² Karl Rahner, *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality* (London: SCM, 1985), 22.

¹³ See Rahner, *The Practice of Faith*, 62.

¹⁴ My translation of Luis Espinal’s prayer, *Usare la vita*, as quoted in Leonardo Boff, *Una prospettiva di liberazione: la teologia, la chiesa, i poveri* (Torino: Einaudi, 1987), 154: ‘Usare la vita non si fa pomposamente e con falsa teatralità. La vita si dedica semplicemente, senza pubblicità, come acqua di fonte, come la madre che dà il petto al figlio, come l’anile sudore del seminatore.’

¹⁵ This translation appeared in the first printing of the New Jerusalem Bible in 1985. Later copies reverted to the traditional wording.

There is much to fathom in Christ, for he is like an abundant mine with many recesses of treasures, so that however deep men go, they never reach the end or bottom, but rather in every recess find new veins with new riches everywhere.¹⁶

Sanctity entails this continuing effort of seeking and finding. It is an endeavour marked by faithfulness and perseverance, but it is within everyone's reach. St Francis de Sales (1567–1622) explains that holiness is indeed open to all, writing in an age when perfection was understood as a state to which only those who 'left the world' (*fuga mundi*) in order to embrace the priestly or the religious life could aspire. At a time of great turbulence in Christian Europe, he wrote:

Devotion ought to be practised differently by the gentleman, by the workman, by the servant, by the prince For (I ask you, Philothea) would it be fitting for a bishop to desire to be solitary like a Carthusian; and for married people not to lay by any more [that is, secure their patrimony] than Capuchins; if the artisan should be all day in church, like a monk? ... Wherever we are, we may and ought to aspire to the perfect life.¹⁷

These words, of a man who lived four centuries ago, can be readily applied to contemporary life situations. Understanding one's call to holiness in today's society entails being aware of God's presence amid a cacophony of sounds, and responding to what God is asking of one in any situation. It is in this light that one can understand the encouraging words of the Second Vatican Council when it states: 'All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity'.¹⁸

The Prophetic Role of the Christian

The aspiration to holiness can be traced back to our baptismal washing and anointing. Through the ontological change which takes place in baptism, neophytes are conformed to Christ and participate in his triple office, prophetic, priestly and shepherding. In the prophetic role all Christians, irrespective of their vocation or state of life, are invited

¹⁶ St John of the Cross, 'The Spiritual Canticle', stanza 37, commentary, 4, in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, translated by K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1979), 551.

¹⁷ St Francis de Sales, *An Introduction to the Devout Life* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), 26–27.

¹⁸ *Lumen gentium*, 40.

to listen to God's word, which is 'living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword' (Hebrews 4:12). Having encountered this living word, they are incessantly called to let themselves be transformed by it, as proclaimed by Isaiah:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10–11)

Letting their lives to be transformed by the word of scripture, Christians become powerful instruments of God in contemporary society. Faithful to their baptismal call, all Christians are to recall the prophetic dimension of their existence.

Being faithful to one's prophetic role in society is intrinsic to sanctity. Christians are called to holiness not only as they celebrate the liturgy or carry out other sacred actions, but also as they accomplish secular duties, thereby sanctifying their secular spheres of life. Christians are called to holiness as they exercise a diversity of roles in society: in family life, in their political¹⁹ and economic responsibilities,²⁰ in the fields of human rights, the care of the environment, civic duties, and so on.

Men and Women for Others and with Others

Christians are called to exercise a prophetic role in all these different life situations, especially by being attentive to the needs of those who lead an existence on the fringes. Prophets, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, are men and women of the people just as much as men and women of God. Their holiness—and wholeness—leads them to concretise their relationship to God and to their brothers and sisters in all spheres of life. In an insightful text, Elie Wiesel (*b.* 1928) remarks that 'a prophet is forever awake, forever alert; he is never indifferent, least of all to injustice'.²¹ One of the hallmarks of sanctity, throughout the ages

¹⁹ See John Paul II, *E sancti Thomae Mori* (31 October 2000); Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Doctrinal note on some questions regarding the participation of Catholics in political life (24 November 2002).

²⁰ See National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1986).

²¹ Elie Wiesel, *Five Biblical Portraits* (London: U. of Notre Dame P, 1981), 38–39.



Toyohiko Kagawa

his social concern, and his poetry, which throws light on the radical options he made in life:

'He cannot save himself'—
 Long ago
 The crowds
 Reviled a Man
 Who came
 To save them.
 And I,
 Who fain would follow Him,
 Am spent.
 For I can see
 No hope
 For the slums ...
 But oh,
 The pity, the pity!
 My people
 Must stay
 In the city;
 So this six-foot shack
 That shelters me
 Is the only place
 Where I want to be.²²

²² Toyohiko Kagawa, *Song from the Slums* (London: SCM, 1935), 21.

and likewise today, has been this *pro-existential* attitude. Rather than referring to well-known and iconic individuals who bear witness to this I will focus instead on a Japanese author and preacher, Toyohiko Kagawa (1880–1960), to illustrate what I mean. He lived in the slums of Kobe in order to minister to the poor and marginalised. Later in life he lived in Tokyo, where he provided shelter each night to as many as thirty homeless people in his house. Kagawa was acclaimed internationally for his evangelism,

In what can be described as a pastoral-spiritual programme for the Church at the beginning of the third millennium, Pope John Paul II (1920–2005) reflected upon the inextricable connection between contemplating the face of Christ and seeing him in the suffering people of all times and places. He writes:

If we have truly started anew from the contemplation of Christ, we must learn to see him especially in the faces of those with whom he wished to be identified: 'I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me ...' (Matthew 25:35–37). This Gospel text is not a simple invitation to charity: it is a page of Christology which sheds a ray of light on the mystery of Christ. By these words, no less than by the orthodoxy of her doctrine, the Church measures her fidelity as the Bride of Christ.²³

Sanctity in the Judaeo-Christian tradition involves a lifestyle marked by selfless altruism and wholehearted service. The archetype of this lifestyle is found in the thirteenth chapter of John's Gospel, when Jesus washes his disciples' feet. Jesus underlines the vital connection between knowing what should be done and actually doing it: 'So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.' (John 13:14–17) Authentic Christian discipleship entails a consistent engagement in *diakonia*. This means being *men and women for others*, a phrase coined by the Jesuit Superior General Pedro Arrupe (1907–1991). His successor, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach (b.1928), slightly modified the phrase by affirming that Christians are called to become *men and women with others*.

This attitude and its providential consequences have always been essential ingredients in the making of saints. Reading the Acts of the Apostles one encounters the striking witness of the first followers of Christ, and the way that such witness led Jews and Gentiles to embrace Christianity. Both the famous apologist St Justin (c.100–165), and the father of Latin theology, Tertullian (c.160–c.220), became Christians after being impressed by the witness borne by the faithful. Going through the treasury of patristic texts produced during the first seven

²³ John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte* (6 January 2001), n. 49.

centuries of Christianity, one is bound to recognise that the 'stuff of sainthood' is not only in dogma and devotion but also, and more tangibly, in service and self-sacrifice. These remain at the very heart of the experience of sanctity when it is encountered by contemporary men and women.

Christians are sanctified and, in turn, sanctify society by being constantly mindful of their responsibility for their brothers and sisters. Archbishop Desmond Tutu (b. 1931) once asserted that,

... an authentic Christian spirituality is utterly subversive to any system that would treat a man or woman as anything less than a child of God. It has nothing to do with ideology or politics. Every praying Christian, every person who has an encounter with God, must have a passionate concern for his or her brother and sister, his or her neighbour. To treat any of these as if he were less than the child of God is to deny the validity of one's spiritual experience.²⁴

From this and from countless other witnesses one can conclude that sanctity and love are inextricably bound together. It is love which conquers darkness and death in all the corners of the earth. In his first encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI affirms that 'love is the light—and in the end, the only light—that can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage needed to keep living and working'.²⁵

Sanctity in Today's World

This article has sought to explore how sanctity is a path which can be successfully followed by anyone. The holiness attained by the men and women of the third millennium, perhaps more than ever before, is a holiness brought into being in *the ordinariness of everyday life*. Going as far back in time as the Acts of the Apostles, the Epistle to Diognetus (c. 180/190), or the social sermons of St John Chrysostom (c. 345–407), but also being critically aware of contemporary experience, one cannot fail to notice one common factor. Understanding sanctity and sincerely embracing it entails *being with God* and *being with one's brothers and sisters*, loving them and serving them in the ordinary tasks of life.

²⁴ Desmond Tutu, *The Words of Desmond Tutu*, selected by Naomi Tutu (New York: Newmarket, 1989), 26.

²⁵ *Deus caritas est*, 39.

Thomas Merton (1915–1968), the renowned Trappist monk, author and activist, epitomizes this conviction through his thought-provoking words and through his stimulating experiences:

The spiritual life is not a life of quiet withdrawal, a hothouse growth of artificial ascetic practices beyond the reach of people living ordinary lives. It is in the ordinary duties and labours of life that the Christian can and should develop his spiritual union with God Christian holiness in our age means more than ever the awareness of our common responsibility to cooperate with the mysterious designs of God for the human race.²⁶

This is a sure and reliable pointer to understanding sanctity in today's world. It means affirming with sincerity, courage and determination: 'Yes, Lord, make us become Easter persons, men and women of light, full of the fire of your love'.²⁷

Hector Scerri, a diocesan priest from the archdiocese of Malta, lectures in christology, mariology, sacramental theology and eschatology at the University of Malta, where he is head of the Department of Fundamental and Dogmatic Theology. He is the president of the Theological Commission and of the Ecumenical Commission of his diocese, and a member of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain.

²⁶ Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* (New York: Image Books, 1964), 9–10.

²⁷ Benedict XVI, homily, Easter Vigil, St Peter's Basilica, Vatican City (22 March 2008).