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“We are frequently tempted to think that holiness is only for those who can withdraw from ordinary affairs to spend much time in prayer. That 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” (n 14). This is the message Pope Francis addresses to all of us in his 2018 Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exultate*, (On the Call to Holiness in Today’s World). Francis insists the Lord “wants us to be saints and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence” (n 1). Recognizing a potential problem, he encourages us: “Do not be afraid of holiness,” because “it will take away none of your energy, vitality or joy” but will set you free from “every form of enslavement,” move you to become your “deepest self” and recognize your “great dignity” (n 32).

The pope’s appeal to seek holiness and to become a saint resonates with some Christians today, especially those inclined to see saints as role models and those attuned to the Church’s teaching on the universal call to holiness. At the same time, there are many good Christians who generally think in more secular terms and do not respond well to the religious language of “sainthood,” perhaps finding it too lofty, or unrealistic, or ethereal, or out of reach. We need other ways to interest those more secularized Christians in the many good ideas Pope Francis presents in his inspiring exhortation.

One possibility is to frame the pope’s teaching as a path to greater personal growth, deeper self-actualization, and more generous service, notions already found in his exhortation. We could also borrow language from the world of athletics, where coaches and players commonly talk about improving day by day, getting steadily better and learning from defeats. This approach to spiritual growth could be applied to major life transitions; for example, a young woman could strive to achieve a healthier attitude toward sexuality as she prepares for marriage, or an older man could try to gain a deeper appreciation of leisure as preparation for retirement. We could apply it to the liturgical year: by the end of Advent I want to be a more patient person or when Pentecost ends the Easter season, I hope to have a more joyful sense of my faith. On a daily basis, we could include in our night prayers a brief review of any progress we made that day on our spiritual journey. Christians broadly interested in making progress in the spiritual life can join those committed to sainthood in appropriating the sage advice of Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation.

Fundamentally, the pope encourages all of us to determine the next step forward on the spiritual journey and to take it now. For some that step might be obvious, as in the case of the alcoholic who needs to join AA and go to meetings regularly. For others, determining the most helpful step forward may be more difficult, requiring prayerful discernment or advice from a confidant, sometimes revealing unexpected approaches; for example, a mother struggling to be the adult in dealing with her teenage daughter may find that regular exercise, which gives her more energy, is more helpful than daily prayer. Procrastination can be a serious impediment to spiritual growth. It may help to take at least a tiny step toward a desired goal; for instance, a person who knows it would be good to say a prayer every day before going to work could start out by doing it at least a couple times a week.

Francis encourages us to learn from the example of the great canonized saints. On the call to holiness, Augustine of Hippo (354-430) offers helpful advice in his classic autobiography, *Confessions*, which describes with profound psychological insight the ways he resisted the divine call but then finally succumbed to God’s persistence. Augustine, a passionate seeker for truth, who actually had more troubles with selfish ambition than with sexual promiscuity, as is often thought, was converted to Christianity in his early 30s. Reflecting on this experience in his mid-40s, he addresses God in the 10th book of his *Confessions*: “Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient and ever new: late have I loved you.” He recognizes his fundamental error: “And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made.” Along the same line: “You were with me and I was not with you.” Recognizing God’s persistence and power: “You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness.” And then comes his own response: “I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.”

Augustine’s remarkable reflection on his conversion reminds us that our God is like Francis Thompson’s *Hound of Heaven* who pursues us down the “labyrinthine ways” of our minds, who never tires of forgiving us and who ceaselessly seeks to touch our minds and hearts. His story invites us to look for God within, who is closer to us than we are to ourselves. It also alerts us to ways we may be blocking the call to holiness, perhaps subtle, hard to detect, easily rationalized. For example, a practicing Catholic who actively participates in the Sunday liturgy may automatically tune out any applications to social justice made in the homily. Indirectly, Augustine teaches us that it is never too late to respond to the divine call to holiness. Loving late is less than ideal, but it is better than not loving at all. We should take a step toward greater spiritual maturity now, without delay, but today’s failure leaves open tomorrow’s possibilities. Procrastination is dangerous to spiritual health, but it need not be fatal. A wife who realizes she has endured a psychologically abusive marriage far too long may benefit from waiting a few more weeks or months to gather herself and develop an effective strategy before confronting her husband with a demand that they see a marriage counselor together.

We need to be cautious in reflecting on Augustine’s portrayal of the inner peace he knew in his conversion experience. We cannot expect or demand such a gift as we respond to the call of holiness. It is true, however, that ordinary people who make choices in tune with God’s will often do experience some sort of consolation, perhaps a quiet assurance of being on the right road or a simple conviction that no more soul searching is necessary. A man who anxiously rejected for a long time the impulse to reconcile with his estranged sister finally decided to call her and slept better that night. On the other hand, there are times when individuals, following a dictate of their well-formed conscience, take a proper step forward without any sense of consolation or satisfaction but with feelings of dread and foreboding. A woman did the right thing and stood up for a Muslim co-worker periodically subjected to Islamophobic comments, even though her good deed went unappreciated, drew the ire of one of her friends and failed to reward her with any sense of satisfaction. Sometimes, the appropriate step forward on the spiritual journey is taken in the dark, illumined only in retrospect by the light of faith.

No doubt, the great canonized saints like Augustine have an inherent power to inspire and enlighten, but for us today they can seem remote, far removed from us historically, socially and culturally. This is why Pope Francis invites us to reflect on what he calls “next-door neighbor saints” or “middle class saints,” who are not perfect but keep striving for Gospel ideals. The good people we encounter in our lives, who live the Christian life in simple, ordinary ways, may have a more profound effect on us than the famous followers of Christ remembered in the calendar of saints. They can serve as examples of heeding the call to holiness and taking the next step forward on the spiritual journey.

A slightly disguised story comes to mind. Marion, a life-long Catholic, happily married, a devoted mother and a regular at Sunday Mass, attended an afternoon of reflection based on Matthew 25, where Christ identifies himself with the hungry and thirsty. She came home convinced that she should do more to fulfill the Lord’s command to love our neighbor. She began by a weekly visit to an elderly neighbor now confined to a nursing home. This simple beginning gradually expanded as she visited her friend more often and stopped in to visit more residents. She started to feel free to pray with them and talk about spiritual joys and challenges. To enrich her encounters, she became a eucharistic minister in her parish so she could bring communion to the nursing home residents. She took her time with each person, prepared to listen to those who wanted to talk. Over months and years, her first step grew into a dedicated ministry that brought joy and comfort to many and enriched her own personal spirituality and family life.

As Pope Francis teaches and as the famous Augustine and the unknown Marion exemplify, we are all called to holiness and to make progress on our spiritual journey. At crucial points on the journey, we are challenged to discern the best next step toward a deeper love of God and neighbor. We can proceed with confidence that the Spirit will sustain all of our good efforts as we identify our excuses, pray for guidance, seek help if necessary, and take at least small steps forward on our journey toward greater spiritual maturity.