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In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exultate* (On the Call to Holiness in Today’s World), Pope Francis insists that we find and follow our own unique path to holiness and a deeper more robust spirituality: “The important thing is that each believer discern his or her own path, that they bring out the very best of themselves, the most personal gifts that God has placed in their hearts (*cf* 1 Cor 12:7), rather than hopelessly trying to imitate something not meant for them. We are called to be witnesses, but there many actual ways of bearing witness” (n 11).

The influential Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner, confessed his own misguided effort to imitate the prayer content of Saint Francis of Assisi. Aware that his own piety did not spontaneously appreciate the grandeur and beauty of nature, Rahner tried to make his own the marvelous *Canticle of Creation* by Francis, praising our “Brother Son” and “Sister Moon.” Unable to generate any authentic appreciation of the wonders of nature, Rahner concluded that we all do better following our own inherent religious sentiments in developing our prayer life.

The hopeless, ineffective imitation identified by Francis can take many forms. Lay persons who compare themselves unfavorably to celibate priests and nuns can conclude they are not called to holiness. A couple who tried to pray together, on the advice of their pastor, found it caused more friction than good. Individuals who wanted to maintain their practice of frequent confession found that they made more spiritual progress by going less frequently but with greater meaning. Diocesan priests who tried to follow a monastic regimen of prayer could not do so because of the demands of parish ministry. A busy mother of three youngsters longed for the solitude enjoyed by her unmarried sister but was totally consumed by the demands of motherhood. There are probably cases where imitation is spiritually fruitful, but the pope’s warning is well taken for most of us.

Henri Nouwen (1932-1996), the Dutch priest and popular spiritual writer, who spent most of his adult life in the United States and Canada, serves as an instructive example of a man who struggled to find his own unique path to holiness. After his ordination in 1957, he came to the United States studied psychology and for almost two decades pursued an academic career, teaching at Notre Dame, Yale and Harvard. However, the great acclaim he received from his books, which sold over two million copies and his extremely popular lectures never fully satisfied him and left him in “a very dark place,” feeling “spiritually dead.”

In the early 1980s, Nouwen continued his spiritual quest by spending time in Latin America, living with the poor for months and learning from Gustavo Gutierrez, the father of liberation theology. Nouwen came to see that his own spirituality was “excessively spiritualized, individualistic, interior, elitist and romantic.” He dreamed of founding a community of committed persons who would serve the poor by living with them. Eventually, he came to see that this spiritual path would not work for him because of his great need for emotional support and because the struggle for justice often left him discouraged and disheartened.

In his ongoing search for a viable spiritual path, Nouwen went in 1985 to live in the L’Arche Daybreak community near Toronto to serve the mentally challenged residents, who form the core of the community. He was assigned to care for Adam Arnett, who was unable to talk or care for himself. Over time, Nouwen became more comfortable with Adam, patiently getting him up in the morning, bathing, dressing, shaving and feeding him. When Adam died at the age of 34, Henri preached at his funeral, calling Adam “his counselor, teacher and guide, who could never say a word to me but taught me more than anyone else.” He added: Adam “called me home,” “home in my own body” and “home in the body of the Church” and concluded without Adam, “I would not know where I would be today.” Although not everything went smoothly for Nouwen while at Daybreak, including a severe depression, we can say that this talented man found his path to holiness and a degree of inner peace not in a highly successful academic career or in writing influential books, but in patient, loving care for one of God’s most vulnerable individuals.

Henri Nouwen serves as an especially instructive example of finding and following our own path to holiness for various reasons: he revealed his own struggles in finding a viable path; he kept searching despite false starts; he continued to rely on God’s help and guidance; and he found a path forward in unlikely circumstances, reminding us that our God works in mysterious ways.

Pope Francis encourages us to learn not only from well-known holy persons but also from what he calls “next door saints,” who live the Christian faith in relative obscurity.

Two composite disguised examples. Bill has done a good, if not perfect, job of using the opportunities for spiritual growth provided by the various stages of his life as they naturally unfolded. During his collegiate years, he grew in his Catholic faith by getting involved in the Newman Club, attending mass regularly and participating in a number of service projects. During his first year of grad school, he married a young woman he had first met at church. Together they formed a genuine partnership and have ever since attempted to help each other develop spiritually by praying together, participating in Sunday liturgy and attending parish enrichment programs.

After completing his master’s degree in social psychology, Bill got a job with a major corporation in their human development department. In that position, he often exercised the virtue of charity going out of his way to help individuals in need. In midlife, he left his job and started his own consulting firm, which enabled him to create a culture of hard work, team play, personal respect, strict accountability, and wide diversity. He likes to think of his company as providing not only a good living for him and his employees but also a congenial work environment that fosters personal growth.

Since retiring, Bill has devoted himself to working with others on a long-term project to revitalize a section of the city devastated by poverty. When he sees even slight progress, Bill is quick to say prayers of gratitude to the God who has guided and strengthened him through his whole life. Sometimes the path to holiness is clear and the challenge is to seize the opportunities along the way.

Sue sees herself as her father’s favorite, ahead of her two brothers. As she grew up, he encouraged her to assert herself, to play sports, and to do well in school. For her part, she did all she could to please him, including getting a master’s degree in business from his alma mater. She also followed in his footsteps by getting a job in a major corporation and rapidly moving up the corporate ladder. She put in extra hours and was always ready to move when asked, including spending three years in Brazil. She had many male friends, but always resisted those interested in a romantic relationship, insisting she was concentrating on her career and was quite happy with her active single lifestyle. When Sue turned 40, she began to feel something was missing in her life. She had pleased her father, was still advancing in her career, had wonderful friends and could afford expensive clothes and vacations.

Following her mother’s advice, she started going to Mass again after many years of being too busy to attend. She was surprised to find that the pastor gave homilies that actually interested her about how to live the Christian faith in everyday life. Sue started to put this general advice into practice: paying more attention to the interests and needs of her parents and brothers; showing greater respect for her subordinates at work; cutting back on the extra hours on the job, while spending more time with her friends; buying fewer luxury items and giving more to charity. In a radical move, she told her CEO that she was no longer open to a long-term assignment overseas, which probably curtailed further advancement, but left her with a new sense of liberation. In a long, fruitful conversation with her father, who disagreed with her decision, she expressed her gratitude for his support and guidance, but made it clear she had to be true to herself and follow her own conscience. Over time, Sue was able to transform her driven career path into a path toward holiness, which brought her greater inner satisfaction and enriched her relationships.

As Pope Francis insists and as these examples indicate, we are all called to find and follow our unique path to holiness and spiritual development.