

# THE NEW AGE OF HOLINESS

## *Vatican II: Today and Tomorrow*

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FROM THE 25<sup>th</sup> to the 31<sup>st</sup> October, 1963, during the Second Session of the Second Vatican Council, debate ensued on Chapter IV of *De Ecclesia*, the draft conciliar document on the Church, entitled, ‘The Call to Holiness.’

The subject of Christian holiness could hardly be thought of as a contentious subject. Yet, this small chapter was not without its conflict. This debate about holiness emerged out of the firmly rooted spiritual tradition within Roman Catholicism that imagined Religious Life as a more perfect form of Christian sanctity than any other. The ‘way of the commandments’ and the ‘way of the counsels’ had been imagined, historically, as the two pathways to salvation: the first for those ‘in the world’, the second for those who had renounced the world. (Wulf 1966, 256). It was the second that the tradition had envisaged as the more perfect, and indeed as ‘the state of perfection’ as Religious Life itself had come to be known and referred. (cf Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1 II q. 99a.6c; q. 108 a. 4 c; 2 II q. 184 a.5c.)

It was not surprising, then, that the discussion on the nature of holiness had begun in the Council in the consideration about the place of Religious Life in the Church. And even when, on the 30<sup>th</sup> September 1964, the revised sections of *Lumen Gentium* were represented to the Council for final deliberation, an initial vote was taken as to whether the two considerations—holiness and Religious Life—should be kept in the one chapter or divided and made into two separate chapters. The final conclusion was for separate chapters. [For individual chapters, the vote was 1,505 ‘yes’ to 698 (7 null), though the final version of chapter

V of *Lumen Gentium* received overwhelming final endorsement (1,856 ‘yes’ votes to 17 ‘no’ with 302 *juxta modum*, 2 null). (Rynne, 1965, 57-58)]

The result—what we are presented with today as the legacy of the Council’s decision, chapter V of *Lumen Gentium*, ‘The Call of the Church to Holiness—is, what Komonchak describes, ‘a[n] historic development that seemed revolutionary.’ (Grootaers, 1997, 408).

In its final form, chapter V of *Lumen Gentium*, represents a paradigmatic shift in the Church’s understanding of the locus of Christian holiness. As Fredrich Wulf and Gérard Philips comment:

A one-sided attitude that was taken for centuries towards the relationship of Christians with the world, its goods, its arrangements, and its history, has now been abandoned in the Church and in her doctrinal pronouncements (Wulf, 1966, 258)

[...which now excludes] completely any discrimination between a higher category composed of nuns and monks, and the mass of the faithful who manage to be saved one way or another, by the help of an elementary form of morality, offered to them, so to speak, at a lower cost. (Philips, 1966, 123)

Thus, we now read about the nature of holiness:

Therefore all in the Church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness, according to the apostle’s saying, ‘For this is the will of God, your sanctification’. (I Th 4:3; cf. Eph 1:4). (LG 39)

It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love. (LG 39)

The forms and tasks of life are many but holiness is one—that sanctity which is cultivated by all who act under God’s spirit and, obeying the Father’s voice and adoring God the Father in spirit and in truth, follow Christ, poor, humble and cross-bearing, that they may deserve to be partakers of his glory. Each one, however, according to [their] own gifts and duties, must steadfastly advance along the way of a living faith, which arouses hope and works through love. (LG 41)

Therefore all the faithful are invited and obliged to holiness and the perfection of their own state of life. (LG 42)

The theological basis for such universality is to be discovered in Chapter II of *Lumen Gentium*, ‘The People of God.’ By virtue of their baptism each member of the Church shares in the priesthood of Christ, all are consecrated to be ‘a spiritual house and a holy priesthood’. All are to persevere in prayer and praising God, and should present themselves as a sacrifice, living, holy, and pleasing to God. (Rom 12:1). (LG10) This inclusive concept, given further expression in Chapter IV on ‘The Laity’, provides, ‘a common dignity among all the members deriving from their rebirth in Christ, a common grace, as sons [and daughters], a common vocation to perfection, one salvation, one hope and undivided charity. . . In the Church not everyone marches along the same path, yet all are called to sanctity and have obtained an equal privilege of faith through the justice of God (Pet 1:1).’ (LG32)

We take such sentiments today as given and as standard, forgetting the paradigm shift that they entailed forty years ago. No paradigm shift occurs, however, in a vacuum. Consciousness about the nature of Christian holiness had been reflecting change throughout the twentieth century.

This can be evidenced even if we take a very narrow cross-section of that history through the filter of magisterial pronouncements. For example, in the encyclical *Mater et Magistra* (1961), John XXIII had penned, ‘No one should make the mistake of supposing that [their] own spiritual perfection is inconsistent

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with the tasks of this present life. The two are perfectly consistent. Let no one imagine that [they] must necessarily withdraw from the activities of temporal life in order to strive for Christian perfection, or that it is impossible to engage in such activities without jeopardizing one’s human and Christian dignity.’

Yet, even Pius XI, in celebrating the third centenary of the death of Francis de Sales, has written in *Rerum Omnium Perturbatione*,

We cannot accept the belief that this command of Christ concerns only a select and privileged group of souls and that all others may consider themselves pleasing to Him if they have attained a lower degree of holiness. Quite the contrary is true, as appears from the very generality of His words. The law of holiness embraces all and admits of no exception. (n.3)

[Francis de Sales] sets himself expressly to prove that holiness is perfectly possible in every state and condition of secular life, and to show how each can live in the world in such a manner as to save their own soul, provided only they keep themselves free from the spirit of the world. (n.13)

...the truth that holiness of life is not the privilege of a select few. All are called by God to a state of sanctity and all are obliged to try to attain it. (n.27)

It was a theme also taken up by Pius XII in *Provida Mater Ecclesia* (1947), the Apostolic Constitution concerning Secular Institutes, in which we read:

[God] has sent out his invitation, time and time again, to all the faithful, that all should seek and practice perfection, wherever they may be.

So it has come about in the working of Divine Providence that many chosen souls even in the midst of the world, so vicious and corrupt, especially in our times, have opened out to him like flowers to the sun, souls not only full of burning zeal for that perfection to which each single soul is called, but capable in the midst of the world with a vocation that is from God of finding new and excellent ways of seeking perfection together in associations suitable to the needs of our times and yet well adapted to the search for perfection. (n.13)

Every man and every woman may, in the hidden world of the human heart (the canon lawyer would call it *forum internum*) reach out to perfection. (n.14)

The ‘universal call to holiness’ proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council in effect synthesises a development of one hundred and fifty years standing preceding the Council.

As a synthesis, however, even without realising it, this declaration becomes the well-spring of new charismatic consciousness. Hindsight is beginning to offer a realisation into perhaps why there was a marked difficulty in the conciliar debate as to where to place Religious in the life of the Church. This difficulty, I suggest, is not simply a theological one, as it may have been perceived at the time of the Council, but one which may well have stemmed from the changing nature of the charismatic impulse throughout the twentieth century.

The charismatic life, present in the Church, since that first Pentecostal experience of the Spirit, has assumed the form of various waves in the history of Christian life. It has long been a feature of the Catholic imagination to acknowledge the vitality of the tension between the institutional and the charismatic polarities within ecclesial life. The charismatic life is that unpredictable gift of the Spirit to disclose ever-new possibilities for discipleship appropriate to context.

It begins in the domestic church of second century Palestine and Rome; it erupts again in the fourth century North African desert through the phenomenon of monasticism; it in-breaks further through the visionary mendicant orders

of the thirteenth century, just as it finds expression in evangelically committed responses to the discovery of the new world in the seventeenth century and the social questions of the nineteenth century. From this last irruption of the charismatic life, we witness the plethora of those groups known as the apostolic orders.

Dramatic changes in consciousness throughout the twentieth century augur for a yet further irruption of the charismatic impulse. These changes, socio-historical, philosophical as well as theological, are what have occasioned this new paradigm for Christian holiness we see reflected in the Council’s conclusions.

Writers speak of this paradigmatic shift in a number of different ways. Some, like Claudio Leonardi, speak of the movement from monastic holiness to political holiness. Others, like William M. Johnston, speak of the ‘democratisation of holiness;’ others still, like Owen Thomas of the ‘secularisation of spirituality’ or the transformation from a focus on ‘interiority’ to ‘exteriority.’

However the paradigmatic shift might be described, the two-tiered system of holiness in which perfection was reserved to an elite who had forsaken the secular in pursuit of the sacred, and which had been the currency of religious commitment since the end of persecution in the fourth century, became less and less tenable as the twentieth century unfolded.

This dissolution of a two-tiered system of holiness has had a number of implications for our spiritual consciousness. It has challenged the nature of separation from the secular as intrinsic to consecration, and it has re-defined the locus of charism. Whereas for earlier irruptions of the charismatic life, including that stage of the flowering of apostolic orders, charism was identified with a state of life, now charism is experienced with a new sense of inclusion, and now consecration is not seen as antithetical to a full involvement in the ordinary demands of life and of the world.

Precisely from this perspective, I believe the new ecclesial movements, developing as extensions of Catholic Action in the first half of the twentieth century, do demonstrate

new possibilities for the life of holiness, the charismatic life. In this understanding, I am particularly indebted, albeit critically, to the work of Sicari, 'Ecclesial Movements: A New Framework for Ancient Charisms.' As Sicari illustrates, the new ecclesial movements gather to themselves a variety of states of life: single, celibate, married and clerical. They make the reception of charism available not through the withdrawal from secular affairs but capable of being experienced in the midst of the secular. And they have begun, albeit with some lack of transparency, to re-situate charism not as an end in itself, but firmly at the service of mission in which alone it can find its genuine purpose.

It is my own conviction, that the twentieth century will be recognised, historically, as that period characterised by the rise of the new ecclesial movements—at the least, *by way of intimation*, a new form of the charismatic impulse which overshadows earlier forms.

I say this in full recognition of the highly questionable political character, ecclesiastically, of some of these movements. Yet, this awkwardness—and, even distortion—should not, in itself, blind us to the deeper reality of what is occurring from the widest perspective of history.

We live in a new age of the charismatic life, heralded by chapter V of *Lumen Gentium*. That is to say, I believe, this little chapter announces that we are at a new threshold of irruption of the charismatic dimension of the Church's life.

This contains enormous implications for the way in which Religious Life, in particular, might be understood and practiced in the future. Religious, especially, are being invited to accept the relative nature of their way of life in deference to the larger mystery of the charismatic impulse. I do not accept that Religious Life is dying and that it faces extinction. Religious Life, consecrated celibate women and men, living in community and dedicated to mission, will be an ongoing part of ecclesial life, albeit in the background. However, just as in the thirteenth century the monastic paradigm receded into the background in the face of the

mendicant paradigm, so too, now, Religious Life will recede into the background in the face of the new charismatic paradigm.

Whatever terms may be used to describe the general shift of perspective on the locus of Catholic spirituality, the development finds sociological expression in the rise of the new ecclesial movements within the Catholic Church throughout the twentieth century. In very different ways these new expressions of spirituality affirm both the universal call to holiness and 'the world' as the place in which the spiritual endeavour is to take place. Further, albeit in varied form, they attempt to integrate the pathways of mysticism and politics—a conjunction which, itself, may well be conceived as the deepest implication of the conciliar call to universal holiness. Though there is every possibility that the 'secularisation' of Catholic spirituality might dissolve, as some caution, into the 'sectarianisation' of the same, (Melloini, 2003, 18) these new communities evidence the new relationship between holiness and the world given expression by the Council.

The link between the conciliar call for renewal and the new movements goes on to be explicitly endorsed by the late Pope John Paul II in *Christifideles laici: On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World*, and further underscored in his 1998 Pentecost address to the assembled new communities in Rome. At this event he declared:

It is from this providential rediscovery of the Church's charismatic dimension that, before and after the Council, a remarkable new pattern of growth has been established for ecclesial movements and new communities... There is a great need for living Christian communities! And here are the movements and the new ecclesial communities: they are the response, given by the Holy Spirit, to this critical challenge at the end of the millennium. You are this providential response.' (*L'Osservatore Romano*, 3 June 1998)

The new ecclesial movements are wide and varied. They stretch from the politically ascendent *Opus Dei* through to the widely ecu-

menical *L'Arche* communities of the Canadian Jean Vanier. A number of them remain very much enclined within their originating cultural context; such as the Neo-Catechuminate; others, like the San Egidio movement have inculturated in much more diverse ways.

Time alone, along with the continuing process of discernment, will determine which of the movements satisfactorily represent the full ecclesial life in the Spirit. Their presence alone does not guarantee them validity. Yet, their emerging presence, throughout the twentieth century and their enthusiasm at the beginning of the twenty-first century, does open up new possibilities for the way in which Christian holi-

ness is imagined. Without abdicating criticism, let us wonder at the new things that are coming to pass in our midst. 'See I am doing something new. Can you not see it?' (Is. 43:19)

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*In particular the life of holiness which is resplendent in so many members of the People of God, humble and often unseen, constitutes the simplest and most attractive way to perceive at once the beauty of truth, the liberating force of God's love, and the value of unconditional fidelity to all the demands of the Lord's law, even in the most difficult circumstances.*

—John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendoris*, 107.