

WHAT IS HOLINESS?

PETER COYNE, O.P., AND MICHAEL JAMES, O.P.



HARPLY-CHISELED ideas make precise and effective action easy. Christian living, therefore, should be smoother and more fruitful for one who accurately understands the meaning of holiness, for holiness is the goal of the Christian. Good Catholics are in energetic pursuit of holiness; they are more concerned with acquiring it than with examining it. Like hungry children enjoying a tasty dish, they seldom bother to ask what it is made of. They know that holiness is necessary to enter heaven; but they also know that St. Peter will not demand a definition of it from them at the pearly gates. Even so, it would be profitable for all to reflect a bit. A sharply-chiseled idea of what holiness is enables a man to tap its sources to greater advantage.

Holiness is a quality. It is a good habit, a virtue. It affects a man's soul. It is added to the soul, not as a hat is added to one's head, but as electricity is added to an idle motor. Holiness comes to the household of the soul, not as an idle guest, but as an eager helper; and it quickly departs when it is not kept busy. The soul first receives holiness in Baptism. Baptism washes away the stain of sin, and makes the soul pleasant for God to look at. Baptism establishes the soul in friendly contact with God. Baptismal holiness, developed as life goes on, leads men to be devout, to pray, and to direct all their acts to God.

HOLINESS CONTAINS TWO ELEMENTS

Holiness involves two things, and if these are first considered separately it will be easier to understand them together. Failure to grasp the idea of holiness is the result of trying to grasp it all at once. This fact is hard to illustrate, but perhaps one of the following examples will help. The idea of holiness may be likened to a mosaic that has to be examined at close range so that its parts may be noticed separately. Again, appreciating holiness is like admiring a beautiful panorama; by gazing at the beauty of the sky, and then at the marvels of the terrain below, the effect of the whole panorama becomes more intense.

The first thing that holiness implies is cleanness. In olden times the word *holy* was used for things that were unsoiled. It was used, too, in describing persons who had been sprinkled with the blood of sacrificial victims, and were thus cleansed or purified. The other element in holiness is firmness. Firmness conveys the notions of immobility, solidity, and constancy.

Holy things have always been set apart and protected by law. In the Jewish temple, the place where the Ark of the Covenant was kept was called the Holy of Holies, and the people were forbidden ever to enter it. Currently the word *holy* is rightly applied to churches, chalices, priests, nuns, indeed to all religious, and to any other creatures especially consecrated to the service of God. Because they are devoted entirely to God, they are set apart from other creatures; they are sacred. But holiness is not restricted to them! Holiness is a virtue that belongs in every man.

CLEANNES AND FIRMNESS

The soul, to be in contact with God, must be clean. It cannot be at one and the same time devoted entirely to God and contaminated by worldly things. The things of earth are of lesser dignity than the soul. Undue contact with them soils the soul just as an alloy of lead makes silver sordid. The purpose of holiness is to join man to God. Without cleanness there can be no such union. St. Paul writes: "Strive for . . . that holiness without which no man will see God" (Heb., xii, 14). "Let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of the flesh and of the spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (II Cor., vii, 1). How cleanness belongs to holiness is readily seen in the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God. Mary had to be holy at every instant of her life. At that very first instant, her soul was perfectly clean, entirely without stain; and she preserved that cleanness throughout her whole life.

Firmness, the other element of holiness, is likewise necessary for fruitful contact with God. Through holiness man holds firmly to God, just as by its anchor a ship holds firmly to the bottom of the sea. Unless a man holds firmly to God his soul becomes dead like an electric cord pulled from the socket. Holiness gives a man a constant, solid, unbreakable contact with God, his Creator and last End. St. Paul expressed this permanence of holiness in this thought: "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus

Our Lord" (Rom., viii, 38). The Blessed Virgin, who never committed nor could commit the slightest sin, shows in her life the constancy of holiness. Her soul, at its first moment of existence, was established in a firm union with God, a union that was to endure through eternity. The permanence of holiness is seen, too, in the consecration of a chalice; once consecrated and used, it can never again be lawfully devoted to profane use.

HOLINESS IMPLIES PERSEVERANCE

Priests and religious strive to persevere in holiness by binding themselves by vows. The vows aim at perseverance. But every Catholic has vows, even though few Catholics advert to the fact. At Baptism the Church exacts a promise to renounce the devil and all his works and pomps. This promise is calculated to help baptismal holiness to endure. The other sacraments either restore that holiness if it is lost, or perfect it if it is preserved.

Sin is a fact. Men frequently weaken or destroy entirely their devotion to the service of God. The defects of men do not remove firmness as an element of holiness. Holiness is directed to God, and God is unchanging, stable, and immovable. It is the purity and stability of God, which men grasp by directing their acts to Him, that makes men holy. No ordinary man continually enjoys complete stability and absolute cleanness of soul; if he did, he would be perfect. Because men are not perfect, they have to seek perfection from God. It is from Him that they draw cleanness and firmness. Holiness implies firmness because God remains unchanging, even though men do not. The firmness comes from God, its object, and resides in the vacillating soul of man only by participation.

HOLINESS AND RELIGION

The idea of holiness can be brought into clearer focus by comparing it with the idea of religion. True religion and holiness are essentially the same thing, but we do think of them as being different. We think of holiness as more extensive.

Certain internal acts, namely devotion and prayer, are acts of religion. Religion expresses itself externally in acts of adoration, in sacrifice, and in vows. Religion regulates the reception of the sacraments and the use of the name of God. Holiness is the result in the soul of the proper performance of religious acts. Religion involves all that a man does in honoring God. Holiness leads him to serve God and it grows as he serves God more. A man is called *religious*

on account of what he *does*; he is called *holy* on account of what he *is*.

It is by working on the mind that holiness controls the other works of the virtues, even of religion. Holiness uses the works of all the virtues to apply the mind, as well as all human acts controlled by the mind, to God. Here lies the reason why many persons engaged in religious activities are not holy, and why every holy person is religious. All who offer sacrifice and who take part in ceremonies can rightly be called *religious*; but no one can ever be called *holy* unless through his religious acts he applies himself interiorly to God.

WRONG IDEAS OF HOLINESS

To espouse a wrong idea of holiness is tragic. The Pharisees considered holiness as an external thing. They gave money to religion, they prayed long prayers, and they paid their taxes. They were careful to seem just in the eyes of men. But their souls were not clean. Jesus called the Pharisees blind fools. He said to them: "You are like whited sepulchres, which outwardly appear to men beautiful, but within are full of dead men's bones and of all uncleanness. . . . You also outwardly appear just to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity" (Mt., xxiii, 27-28).

On the other hand, holiness is not confined inside a man. Some men think it makes no difference how they live, as long as they believe in God. Martin Luther taught that the stronger a man's faith is, the more freely he may sin. Scripture condemns that idea. St. James writes: "Faith without works is useless" (Jas., ii, 20). Mere belief is not enough, for "the devils also believe and tremble" (Jas., ii, 19). Protestants, following Luther's basic doctrine, leave out the cleansing necessary to holiness. They explain that the merits of Christ cloak and hide our sins, but do not cleanse them. On the contrary, true holiness renders the whole man clean.

HOLINESS IS NOT A MIRAGE

Christ will cast away unholy persons, just as the king in the parable (Mt., xxii 11-14), expelled the guest who came to the wedding feast without a wedding garment. Heaven is only for those clothed in the garment of holiness. It is the place where the pure of heart shall see God, and "there shall not enter into it anything defiled" (Apoc., xxi, 27). Yet, the holiness Christ demands is not unattainable. And when it is attained it does not make life unbearable. "My yoke is sweet and My burden light" (Mt., xi, 30). Holiness is not a weight that oppresses a man, but rather a penetrating unction that makes Christian living easier.

The holiness that Christ demands is all embracing. It pervades the mind and it extends to action. "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father in heaven shall enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt., vii, 21). Real holiness is nothing else than living according to the will of God. It means freedom from sin, which is purity and cleanness. It means living in the state of grace, which is a firm and enduring condition.

THE SOURCES OF HOLINESS ARE AT HAND

The sources of holiness are all about us. Jesus demands nothing of us that has not first given abundantly to us. The sources of holiness are in the Church which He established. They are the Mass, the sacraments, the works of mercy; and, indeed, all the various means by which the Church puts men in touch with God. To say that these things are sources of holiness is to say that they cleanse the soul and anchor it firmly to God. Baptism is the basic source. Penance, too, cleanses the soul and reestablishes the contact with God that sin breaks. The other sacraments perfect holiness. In a lesser degree and in a different way, the soul is made holy by the other kinds of sources. The fourteen duties listed as "works of mercy" promote holiness. Teaching, for example, which is "instructing the ignorant," should make the teacher holy. If it does not, something is wrong with the teacher. Even pain can bring men to holiness if they bear it in the spirit of Christ.

THE RULES FOR HOLINESS

Jesus laid down the rules for holiness when He summed up the commandments of the law: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind, and with thy whole strength . . . and . . . thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Mk., xii, 30-31). The test of holiness is charity.

The inquiry about holiness is certainly important and intensely practical. There is in most men a strong temptation to make the idea of holiness conform to unholy living; the Pharisees succumbed to that temptation, and so did Luther. The saints had the correct idea of holiness, and they made their deeds conform to that idea. Holiness is a definite virtue, attainable and necessary. Rightly understood, it can be intelligently sought!