

# CAN ORGANIZATIONS BE HOLY?

## *Pope Francis Asks Us To Consider What Holiness Means*

In recent years, we have strengthened our formation programs and made “spirituality” a common word. For a variety of reasons, we don’t invoke the notion of holiness as easily, but there is good reason to do so.



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It is a challenge to move from spirituality or spiritual awareness to holiness, even on a personal level. It is one thing to say, as I often do when I explain what we mean by formation, that each of us has a spiritual awareness and our goal is to deepen that as a resource for the ministry. It is another thing to say that our formation programs are geared to fostering personal holiness.

Most of us would hesitate to consider holiness to be an attainable goal, let alone to consider that we have achieved it. Catholics, as members of a hierarchical church, are used to thinking that holiness was a “higher calling,” reserved to priests and religious. In fact, official church teaching said as much. *The Baltimore Catechism*, which provided instruction to generations of American Catholics, used to define the lay state negatively, as “all its [the church’s] members who do not belong to the clerical or to the religious state.”<sup>1</sup> That definition, plus a long history of ascetical or spiritual theology reserved to a spiritual elite, made us wary of raising the spiritual bar too high for the laity.

That began to change in the 1960s with the Second Vatican Council, when the church declared a universal call to holiness, rooted in baptism rather than in ordination or religious vows. Everyone was to aspire to holiness.

Pope Francis reiterates this in his marvelous apostolic exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*. In this very readable document, he says quite bluntly, “Do not be afraid of holiness.” It is not weird or depressing, and “it will take away none of your

energy, vitality or joy. On the contrary, you will become what the Father had in mind when he created you, and you will be faithful to your deepest self.”<sup>2</sup>

He cites the Catholic layman Leon Bloy, who said, “The only great tragedy in life is not to become a saint.”<sup>3</sup> We also might cite the famous American monk Thomas Merton, who said, “To be a saint means to be myself.”<sup>4</sup>

Pope Francis cites five signs of holiness in today’s world: inner strength that includes perseverance, patience and meekness; joy and a sense of humor; boldness and passion; community; and prayer. The idea of holiness-in-community is important: It is what saves the search for authentic selfhood from degenerating into the market-driven “Me Generation,” which is incompatible with holiness.

The Holy Father cites two major threats to the pursuit of holiness: Gnosticism and Pelagianism. Both are recurrent heresies in the church. Gnosticism is a view of life in which the intellect is separate from and even hostile to the flesh. This renders us incapable of “touching Christ’s suffering flesh in others” because we are “locked up in an encyclopedia of abstractions.”<sup>5</sup> Gnostics want to “domesticate the mystery” of life by sealing it in perfect doctrinal propositions safe from contamination by experience.<sup>6</sup>

Pelagianism is the temptation to believe I can do it all on my own, without God’s grace and often without the help of other people. Pelagians believe everything is possible by an act of the will.

These descriptions of holiness and challenges to it are not new. Pope Francis’ letter pulls together many threads of our tradition in a new, accessi-

ble way. He makes it clear that holiness is for all of us, that it is achievable and that it is not outside of us, but rather a realization of our truest selves.

### CAN INSTITUTIONS BE HOLY?

If the search for holiness is valid on a personal level, can it be applied to institutions?

We know that institutions, including corporations, public juridic persons and governments, are widely recognized as having legal and moral agency. They have rights, obligations and distinct identities. They can establish contracts, accumulate assets and be sued. Most

of them have mission statements that guide them and establish accountability. It is no wonder that even civil law recognizes these entities as “persons.”

We acknowledge this in the church when we establish a juridic person and when we talk about its identity and charism, qualities that are usually applied to individual persons. PJs not only have agency, but they have, like the persons who constitute them, spiritual awareness and capacity for spiritual formation. In a sense they even have vocations, which grow from the commitment of those who found and sustain them.<sup>7</sup>

When we raise questions about corporate spirituality or when we establish formation programs whose goal is to strengthen the spirituality of an organization, we are knocking at the door of holiness.

Organizations are persons in a sense, because they are made up of individual persons who exercise their freedom, judgment and responsibility together for a common purpose. Clearly the purpose of any organization can be morally good or morally bad. We would evaluate the moral character of a human trafficking ring very differently

from the moral character of refugee assistance organization such as Catholic Charities. Both are involved in moving people, but for very different reasons. Their moral character is based on their purpose and means, and those can be established only by persons.

So yes, institutions can strive for holiness if their leaders are properly motivated and formed. What constitutes institutional holiness requires some

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serious thought, but let me name three things that I think need to mark a holy institution:

■ **Transcendent purpose.** In 1940, Fr. Alphonse Schwitalla, SJ, PhD, the first president of the Catholic Hospital Association, said, “The Catholic institution towers here on Earth, but its purposes are in heaven.” This is still true today. To be holy, an institution needs to realize that it is not just business and technique but has a purpose that only can be fully achieved by God. Pope Francis notes that this transcendence must be expressed in prayer.

■ **Rooted in real human experience.** One aspect of this is community, which we have already noted. A holy institution does not stand aloof from the human condition — which would be gnostic — but is immersed in it. Community benefit programs, and now the emphasis on population health, provide us with a gauge of what the world really needs.

■ **Boldness.** Businesses often are conservative, primarily concerned about profit and shareholder satisfaction. Stability is important, but we also need to take chances as we strive for our purpose. If our founders always had

taken the safest route, there would be no Catholic schools, hospitals or social services. The recent revision of Part Six of the *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* emphasizes this as it talks about the real need to build collaborative relationships, despite the risk, for the sake of the common good.

■ **Passion.** Health care is analytical, scientific and data-driven, but it only achieves true holiness if that precision is complemented by desire for excellence and a passionate devotion to our mission.

My goal has been to introduce the idea of institutional holiness. I would be happy to hear from you about signs of holiness in your organization and ways in which you think this holiness can be deepened.

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### NOTES

1. Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, *The Baltimore Catechism*, No. 2, revised edition (1941), no. 150.
2. Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, March 19, 2018, para. 32.
3. *Gaudete et Exsultate*, para. 34.
4. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, (New York: New Directions, 1961) 33.
5. *Gaudete et Exsultate*, para. 37.
6. *Gaudete et Exsultate*, para. 40.
7. In fact, an important question that we face is whether the goal of our formation efforts is really the individual persons within the organization, or the organization itself, or whether one is the means to another. It is important for us to know whether we are forming persons, who in turn will shape an organization, or whether we are forming an organization that will in turn form individuals. Indeed, it is probably a reciprocal process.

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