

Deacons and the Call to Holiness

In 2018 Pope Francis issued his apostolic exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate: Rejoice and Be Glad*, calling all the faithful to holiness.

In early 2019 I was asked by Jim Alt, editor of the newsletter for the National Diaconal Institute for Continuing Education, to write a series of five essays suggesting how the Pope's call to holiness might apply in particular to the ministry of deacons. *Rejoice and Be Glad* was to be the focus of the 2019 NDICE conference, he told me, and my essays would be a way of leading up to the conference.

This little pamphlet brings together those five essays, one for each of the encyclical's five chapters.

How as deacons can we answer the call to holiness and how can we help others answer this call?

How can we become servants of joy?

In Christ,

Deacon Chris Anderson

Corvallis, Oregon, May 17, 2019

with thanks to Jim Alt and the NDICE

I) The Miracle of Making Us a Little Better . . . 3

II) Surprise . . . 5

III) Keeping Time . . . 7

IV) Going Home . . . 10

V) Recognition . . . 13

1) The Miracle of Making Us a Little Better

Once a week I get up early and drive to church for an hour of Eucharistic Adoration. And promptly fall asleep. Nod off, before the Blessed Sacrament. Sometimes I wake myself up with my snoring.

And what Pope Francis says in the first chapter of his most recent apostolic exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate: Rejoice and Be Glad*, is that I'm on the path of holiness. I don't have to be perfect, and I can't be. I just have to do the best I can and trust in God, because it's not we who are ever holy. It's Christ in us. "When you feel the temptation to dwell on your own weakness," the Pope says, "raise your eyes to Christ crucified and say: 'Lord, I am a poor sinner, but you can work the miracle of making me a little bit better.'"

This is freeing advice, wonderfully freeing, but it's also very challenging. For one thing, I don't have any excuses anymore. I have to get going. And for another, to be holy doesn't mean doing grand and noble things that will get me a lot of attention. It means slogging along in my ordinary life day to day, and not just at church but at home and in my job and in my own heart.

The Pope talks about the holiness of our next-door neighbors, of the woman, for example, who refuses to gossip in the checkout line, who cares for her family even when she's completely worn out, and as deacons we all know women like this. The Church is always being attacked for its hypocrisy and rigidity, but when I think of the Church I think of all the people I know who are building wheelchair ramps, or stocking shelves at St. Vincent de Paul, or caring for a husband with Alzheimer's or a disabled child. I think of countless, quiet acts of heroism. Of self-sacrifice.

The path is different for each of us. The Pope stresses this again and again: “each in his or own way.” I know a writer who makes the sign of cross before she opens her laptop. I know a woodworker who makes the sign of the cross as he enters his shop. All work done with integrity and skill is holy, because Christ is present in all that is good. Just being patient is an act of holiness, one of the hardest of all—with the telemarketer, with the tailgater, with the homeless person sleeping in the passageway. “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,” and this is a call that as deacons we are in special position to celebrate, as we are men who often have families and ordinary jobs and so know firsthand that prayer isn’t just kneeling in a shaft of stained-glass light, that we are always deacons, or are supposed to be, even when we’re not wearing our albs and stoles.

And so, still groggy, I stop for two Americanos with cream on the way home from Adoration, and when I walk through the door my wife is on the deck, watering the marigolds and the delphiniums. It’s a cool, summer morning, and suddenly I’m filled with joy, a quiet joy, because this is the point: that God exists, the Resurrection is real, here and now, and holiness is the stumbling, human effort simply to be aware of that, to glimpse that, if even for just a moment. Your life is a “mission,” the Pope says, the entirety of it, and “the Lord will bring it to fulfilment despite your mistakes and missteps.” We just have to try to stay awake a little bit longer each week, before the Blessed Sacrament. We just have to rejoice and be glad, for the marigolds and the delphiniums and all the things in our lives.

We are only the farmer, and the seeds we plant grow in the night, in the darkness, we know not how.

We are not the source of holiness or of grace, God is, and He neither slumbers nor sleeps.

(II) Surprise

A few days ago I was leading a Rosary after daily mass for a small group of parishioners, mostly older. They were sitting in the pews on the far side, near the tabernacle, and as I stood in front in my alb and stole, joining in the back-and-forth of the Hail Mary's, I began to feel a love rising up in me for those people. An admiration.

And I was grateful for this feeling--it was a gift--because I haven't always felt this way.

I think that as deacons we are all tempted by what Pope Francis, in the second chapter of *Rejoice and Be Glad*, calls the "two subtle enemies of holiness": Gnosticism and Pelagianism.

Particularly when we are first ordained we are often so excited by the intellectual beauty of Catholic theology that all we want to do is talk about it, and that's fine, except when we begin to promote certain ideas over others or become so abstract that we lose track of the real world of our parish. We get caught up in ecological theology or the theology of the body, the primacy of the pope or the faith of the people, the idea of Biblical forms or the fact of the historical Jesus. And not just caught up but convinced. We have the answers and other people need to be educated.

This is what Pope Francis calls "Gnosticism," a faith of pure ideas. "Gnostics think that their explanation can make the entirety of the faith and the Gospel perfectly comprehensible," he says, and more, "they absolutize their own theories and force others to submit to their way of thinking." Reason is necessary and reason is good but it can only go so far. "God infinitely transcends us," the Pope says, "he is full of surprises," and those surprises aren't reserved for the smart and the educated. The Rosary may seem too simple, but it isn't. The people may seem too

pious, but they aren't. Beneath these simple, pious acts there is often a genuine and abiding faith, a real experience of God, too deep for words.

Particularly when we're first ordained we can be so excited about wearing an alb and a stole we begin to think we're pretty special. We're pretty advanced. This is the second evil, of Pelagianism, and for deacons it often comes in the form of clericalism. We're servants, but we want people to see us being servants. We preach that all depends on the mercy of God but deep down we don't believe it at first. And "ultimately," as the Pope puts it, this "lack of a heartfelt and prayerful acknowledgement of our limitations prevents grace from working more effectively within us."

Time of course usually takes care of this. We fail too often. We're humbled by some quiet act of self-sacrifice on the part of someone we looked down on. But pride always lurks. Without quite knowing it, for example, we let ourselves be politicized, becoming the "conservative" deacon or the "liberal" deacon, proud of the purity of our convictions. We become attached to a particular form of liturgy, or offended by a particular form of liturgy, and that justifies our righteousness. We criticize our pastor, behind his back. We criticize our bishop. We criticize whatever group we don't like, in or out of the parish.

No. The grace of this small moment after daily mass, in the give-and-take of the Rosary, is the grace of so many small moments in our ministries as deacons, when the eyes of the people are not on us, when the words we speak are not our own. It's a grace—we don't earn this either, this temporary reprieve from our egos--but it keeps coming to us, and it changes us over time, or can, so that now and then for just a moment Mary truly is our model.

And she doesn't ask us to look at her. She asks us to look at her son.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

III) Keeping Time

In a recent study reported in Adam Alter's *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*, researchers found that the average attention span of a goldfish is nine seconds. (They held a card in front of the bowl and timed how long it took before the fish turned away). The average attention span of a person? Before the advent of smart phones: 12 seconds. Now, in a world dominated by smart phones: 8 seconds.

We have an attention span shorter than that of a goldfish.

“Blessed are those who mourn,” Jesus tells us in the Beatitudes, which is to say, blessed are those who are willing to face the darkness, the suffering we all have to endure. “But the world has no desire to mourn,” Pope Francis explains. “It would rather disregard painful situations, cover them up or hide them.” This is from the third chapter of *Rejoice and Be Glad*, his powerful reflection on the Beatitudes. So we spend three to four hours a day on average looking at screens. We reach for our phones forty times a day. “Blessed are the meek,” Jesus says, and “blessed are the peacemakers,” but why be meek when we can attack others with impunity online, and *are* attacked when we don't? Why make peace when there's a constant virtual war? “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Jesus says, but not on line, where the rule is continual self-promotion.

The Pope calls the Beatitudes “a Christian's identity card”—they define what it means to follow Christ—and they have never been more countercultural than now, in the unreal world of Facebook and Snapchat and Twitter, where we can spend all day ignoring both the needs of others and our own emptiness, our own longing, and I think this is a call in particular for us as

deacons. We are conformed in our ordination to Christ the servant, or should be, and so conformed to the Beatitudes, to the humility and the self-sacrifice they demand, and every day we are given many opportunities to act out that humility, on the altar and on the street.

We are not the priest. We hand things to the priest. We are in the background—a great grace, and a great challenge, for those of us deacons with large egos and Type-A personalities.

We are both in the Church and in the world, too, many of us, with jobs outside the church, and so we have all kinds of opportunities to be “persecuted,” however mildly, made fun of or dismissed or ignored. As a deacon who is also a college professor I have felt this many times, on the edge of a remark, or explicitly, in what a student or colleague has said, and I find even this low-grade kind of suffering difficult to bear. But that’s exactly the work. “In living the gospel,” Pope Francis says, “we cannot expect that everything will be easy, for the thirst for power and worldly interests often stands in our way.” “We are not called to be successful,” St. Teresa of Calcutta famously said. “We are called to be faithful.” Our ineffectiveness is sometimes our greatest witness, if only we can accept it with trust. It also a great grace: we enter into the Kingdom of Heaven only when we realize that our own efforts are never enough.

Blessed is the deacon who is merciful, who forgives the spacey altar girl or the unprepared lector, who endures a tirade from an angry parishioner--and who preaches mercy from the ambo, doing the best he can to get out of the way and allow the infinite love of Christ to flow through him and out into the people.

Blessed is the deacon who forgives himself for all he is unable to do.

Blessed is the deacon who helps the people of his parish see the suffering of others and realize that they must do something about it—and that to live out the Beatitudes, as the Pope insists, means we can’t just focus on one social issue and ignore the rest, devoting our attention to the

rights of the unborn, for example, while ignoring the plight of the migrant, or the homeless, but that this is all connected, all related, not simple, not easy, and requiring not just private, individual acts of charity but work towards structural, social change. And, of course, there are many, many deacons whose ministries are exactly this, are exactly devoted to the poor and the marginal and the outcast, directly and concretely, in the soup kitchens and the halfway houses. They are the model. They are the example.

Blessed is every deacon who in some way, in what he does and doesn't do, in how he preaches and how he listens, helps others to listen, too, to see, to pay attention for longer than eight seconds to the world around them, not just to its suffering but to its beauty and its grace.

Near the end of his life, when Mr. Rogers accepted a lifetime Emmy for his work in children's television, he stood in front of that glittering Hollywood crowd, silver-haired and smiling, and quietly asked the audience to stop and think about all the people in their lives who had believed in them and helped them along the way. Let's all spend ten seconds remembering, he said: "and don't worry, I'll keep the time." And he did. He stood there, in silence, for ten seconds, while those beautiful people, those Hollywood stars, thought of someone else.

Many wept.

Ten seconds. That's an eternity on television.

That's an eternity anywhere. For Christ is present in those moments, and in every moment. All we have to do is stop. Is remember.

This is the call of the deacon, in whatever way he can, in whatever way he has been given to do it: to keep the time.

IV) Going Home

Evening light in the trees and the smell of the woods and the sound of water. Driving on a dusty gravel road and just wanting to be home with Barb, and I feel this quiet, steady sense of God's presence. As if God is like the light and like the feel of the air and I can turn my head and miss Him entirely, jump tracks and not feel Him, but I can turn back and there He is, all around me, everywhere.

It was just a moment, on my way home from a writers' retreat. It didn't happen at mass or Adoration but on a dusty road, in the Coast Range. In a Honda Civic. It was subtle. It only lasted a few seconds. But it was exactly the kind of moment Pope Francis celebrates in chapter four of *Rejoice and Be Glad*, a moment of grace, of joy, and the key to holiness, he says, is to train ourselves to remember these moments, to not let them pass. "Prayer," he says, "because it is nourished by the gift of God present and at work in our lives, must always be marked by remembrance."

When we pray, we pray our experience. "Think of your own history when you pray, and there you will find much mercy," and there you will find much joy, and there as deacons we will find the strength to endure the violence and the struggles and the disappointments of our ministries in the world.

We can just feel it, when we're around people who really believe. We feel their joy. "Though completely realistic," the Pope says, "they radiate a positive and hopeful spirit." It's joy that persuades, it's joy that invites, and it's joy that's the source of the other signs of holiness the Pope discusses in this chapter: perseverance, patience, and meekness; a sense of humor; boldness and passion; and a strong sense of community, of solidarity with others.

This is who we want to be as deacons, men of joy and men of prayer, men who remember the moments, and this is who we want to call the people in our parishes to be.

I don't know if you're like me in this, but lately I've been in conversation after conversation with people complaining about the problems in their lives and in the country and most of all in the Church. I don't know how many times lately I've sat and listened to people get angry, and I've always sensed that anger like this is a temptation, however valid the complaints are, that it's easier to rage against something in the abstract, outside of us, than to face our own emptiness and need.

The other day I asked a trusted friend and advisor how he would handle these conversations. He said he only wants to spend about 10% of his time on complaints. When that time is up he says, *that's enough*. He says, *we could talk about this all day, and everything we said would be true. But tell me. What has God been doing in your life? Tell me something sweet He has done.*

As Pope Francis puts it, “the saints do not waste energy complaining about the failings of others.” They know that we are always projecting, that the truth is always within.

People will either quickly end the conversation, my friend says, or they'll turn, they'll answer, and either outcome is good. We will have changed their point of view, or tried to. We will have tried to redirect their gaze, from the grand gestures and the unreal abstractions to what Francis calls “the small everyday things”—holding a door open, saying a kind word, emptying the garbage—the little things that offer us no chance for glory or victory or recognition. Only salvation. Only Christ.

Another friend of mine, a dear friend, is dying of brain cancer, and more and more he is losing his ability to make sense when he talks. The symptoms are like the early symptoms of

dementia. But he knows this, he's aware when he makes a mistake, and he is of such good cheer. The other day he told me, *yes, I really need to go to confusion.*

I knew he meant *confession*, and he did, too, and he laughed and laughed, and that laughter, too, is a sign of holiness, Pope Francis says. When we let ourselves go. When we take ourselves less seriously. When we trust.

This is the kind of conversation we should try to have. When we go to confusion.

We just have to humble ourselves first, enter into the ordinary, as Christ Our Lord did, coming into the world in a manger, living and working in the villages, preaching in the tiny synagogues--making a fire on a cold morning, by the Sea of Galilee, and cooking breakfast for the disciples—who of course don't recognize him first. And by "we" I mean we deacons, too. This is what we must preach and this is how we must act, for "a community that cherishes the little details of love . . . is a place where the risen Lord is present."

We just have to put down our nets and follow him, walking down the dusty roads, to Jerusalem, to Emmaus.

It's evening and the light is in the trees. I hear the sound of water. I'm driving back and I'm missing my wife and for a moment I know that the Lord is with me. He is there, beside me. All around me. No need to fantasize. No need to imagine myself anywhere else. I'm just traveling down a gravel road, driving back in the evening light, through the trees, along a stream.

I don't know where I'm going except that I'm going home.

V) *Recognition*

The subject of the fifth and final chapter of Pope Francis's *Rejoice and Be Glad* is what in Ignatian spirituality is known as the "discernment of spirits." The Spirit moves within us, but there are other spirits within us, too--there is evil, in us and in the world--and we need to learn how to discern which spirit is which.

Early this fall I was at an English Department meeting. We were making plans for the school year and everyone was talking and sharing their news. And I was just besieged with envy and jealousy. It really surprised me. My colleagues were getting grants and winning awards, and I was sitting in the back, green with envy. *I* wanted to win the awards. *I* wanted recognition. I felt this so strongly it confused me—so strongly I wonder now if it wasn't the result of some external evil pressing in on me.

"We should not think of the devil as a myth," Pope Francis says. There is a "battle" going on, and that battle is real.

How do we battle evil in a situation like this? First, we apply what Pope Francis, quoting St. Bonaventure, calls the "logic of the cross." Jesus never calls us to envy, never incites us to violence, never urges to dominate others. The cross is our lens, and Jesus on the cross, and whatever comes closest to his humility and compassion is always what we are being called to do.

And then: we ask for the grace to follow this call.

It wasn't until later that I realized my sin wasn't just the sin of envy but the sin of not wanting to admit it. I keep thinking I'm beyond this. I pray and go to mass, and I'm getting older and should be getting wiser, and yet again and again I find that I'm a sinner after all and it embarrasses and humbles me.

Good. To love as Christ loves is a gift, and we can only receive it when we realize we need it. This is what recognition must mean, in the beginning: the recognition of our own sinfulness.

Later this fall when the Pope Francis canonized Archbishop Oscar Romero--when he recognized him, as a saint--it wasn't because he'd published a lot of books or made a lot of money but because he resisted tyranny and oppression and so identified with the poor of El Salvador that finally he was assassinated, gunned down at mass, as he finished his homily and was walking towards the altar.

Romero discerned the spirits in his own life, and he faced the evil all around him with great courage and faith, and I guess I've always admired him because I don't think I could ever have that kind of courage. But then, I don't think Romero would say that he had that kind of courage either. He would say it was a gift:

We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something and do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the workers. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

I love this quote—I've carried it with me for years—and it's very much in the spirit of every chapter of *Gaudete*. If we are called in our joy to serve the homeless, we should serve the homeless. If we are called in our joy to write or quilt or program computers, that's what we should do. We don't have to do everything, and we can't.

This is how we discern the will of God for us: through our joy--and our limits.

A few weeks ago, going through a box of childhood things, I found “A Certificate of Recognition” from a Vacation Bible School class I attended at a Lutheran church in Malta, Montana. It reads: *in recognition of faithful attendance and creditable work*, signed Velma Sutton and the Reverend James Proffitt, June 30, 1961. On the left of the certificate there’s a picture of Jesus the Good Shepherd coming towards us with a flock of sheep. Jesus is soft-focus, with long brown hair and kind, caring eyes--he’s holding a little a lamb in his arms--and looking at it I felt a pang of longing for that feeling I had when I was kid and thought of him, that trust and happiness. And why not? Isn’t that what we’re called to? To humble ourselves, to let ourselves be sheep, so that we can have a shepherd?

We are the workers, not the master builder; the sheep, not the shepherd. We are all known, we are all loved for who we really are, and we have only to recognize this to be freed, walking with the rest of the flock, Jesus before us, young and strong and smiling, the sky full of pure white clouds. “Of the kindness of the Lord the earth is full,” the psalmist says. “See, the eyes of the Lord are upon those who fear him, / upon those who hope for his kindness.”

This is what *Gaudete et Exsultate* is about, all of it. This is the Pope’s animating idea. The eyes of the Lord are upon us—*Jesus* recognizes us—and nothing else matters. Nothing else is real.

This is how we battle evil: by surrendering to the Lord.

This is how we win the battle: by remaining joyous and free, in Him and through Him and for Him.