

Sacraments: God Uses the Material World to Sanctify Us

*You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ
and in the Spirit of our God. ~ 1 Corinthians 6:11*

WATER, OIL, BREAD, WINE, the touch of a hand, words, the consummation of a marriage. These things, these very material things, are the ways God has chosen to flood the world with grace through the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony.

The material world, all that we can experience with our senses, is God's creation. It is, all of it, as God himself said when he had completed making it, "very good" (Gn 1:31). And we humans, part spiritual since we have God's own breath animating us are also part material, made of the very clay of the earth (see Gn 2:7).

The heresy of hating the material world arises again and again in human history. Often, the idea arises that there was a second god, perhaps an evil god, that made the material world, and that there is

an eternal struggle between the spiritual and material.

But this is to attribute the terrible effects of sin — the war within our own nature following the disobedience of our first parents, and our abuse of our own passions, each other, and the world we live in — to the world itself. It is to blame desire for the existence of sinful desire, to blame love of home and wife for the existence of greed, theft, and rape, to blame the fruit of the forbidden tree of which Adam and Eve ate for the seductive whisper of the Serpent. The material world that was made for us by God is good; it is we, through the abuse of our free will, that have caused the problems, difficulties, and confusions that we must contend with daily.

As spiritual-material beings, signs and symbols are important to us; we both experience and express spiritual realities through physical things. "God speaks to man through the visible creation" (CCC

"The material world that was made for us by God is good."



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"The sacraments honor our human nature by making the material world the means to sanctify us."

1147), and we understand both God's greatness and his nearness through his use of the material world. Throughout salvation history, God uses the material world and physical things as symbolic of his relationship with us, from circumcision that was a sign of God's covenant with his Chosen People, Israel (see Gn 17:9-14), to the blood of the perfect lamb that protected the Israelites from death (see Ex 12:13) and the blood that sealed God's covenant with his Chosen People at Mount Sinai (see Ex 24:8), to the sacrifice of animals (see Ex 20:24), the burning of incense (see Ex 30:1), and the use of holy water (see Nm 5:17).

When God came to visit his people, he did not disdain human flesh (see Jn 1:14; Lk 1:31). Jesus, having taken upon himself our humanity, knew the importance of physical things in our consciousness. In his public life, Jesus often used physical means to heal. He touched the eyes of two blind men to heal them (see Mt 9:28-30) and even touched lepers for the same purpose (see Mt 8:2-3). But he went further in showing us that the material world is not to be despised. There are three stories in the Gospels of his using his own spittle to heal. In curing a deaf and dumb man, he put his fingers into the man's ears and touched the man's tongue with spittle (see Mk 7:32-35). To cure a blind man, "he took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the village; and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands upon him, he asked him, 'Do you see anything?' And he looked up and said, 'I see men; but they look like trees, walking.' Then again he laid his hands upon his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and saw everything clearly" (Mk 8:22-25). Another cure of blindness is, if anything, even more physical: "he spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and anointed the man's eyes with the clay, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing" (Jn 9:6-7).

Jesus also told us of how he would use material things to sanctify and save us. He told the Pharisee Nicodemus, who had sought him out by night for instruction, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God" (Jn 3:5), a description of the sacrament of Baptism. He told a synagogue full of people: "I am the living bread which came down



The massive dome of the Cathedral of Florence, Italy constructed from 1420 to 1474

from Heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (Jn 6:51, 55-56). (The Greek word the Gospel uses for "eat" is very physical, meaning something close to our English "gnaw.") His hearers were horrified and "many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him" (Jn 6:66); only the apostles remained (see Jn 6:67-69). In this way did Jesus introduce the sacramental understanding of the Eucharist, which he instituted the night before his death by consecrating bread and wine into his body and blood (see Lk 22:19-20). Jesus makes not only the elemental things of creation, such as water, but also the things we ourselves have made from God's gifts, such as bread and wine, as signs of his invisible grace poured

*"We worship with our entire being,
not our mind or spirit alone."*



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*The Holy Oils: Sacred Chrism, Oil of Catechumens,
and the Oil of the Sick*

out upon us. The sacraments he instituted are clear indications of his intent to honor our human nature by making the material world the means to sanctify us. And they are given to us at all the moments and stages of the Christian life, tracking and spiritually elevating our natural lives. The sacraments of initiation — Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist — lay the foundations of the Christian life by giving us birth into the Christian community, strengthening us in faith and virtue, and giving us spiritual food and drink. The sacraments of Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick heal us, spiritually and physically, and the sacraments of Holy Orders and Matrimony sanctify the human community and the building up of the Kingdom through the generous service of life.

God is aware of our human frailty; he knows the troubles that arise between the spiritual and physical elements of our nature. We live in a material world but are called to a spiritual, a supernatural, goal. Jesus founded a Church as his earth-bound instrument to bring us to holiness and our eternal home with his Father, making use of readily-recognized material things with the spiritual means to reach eternal happiness. The Church's seven sacraments — gifts to us from the heart of God himself — are the sources of grace, making it possible to rise above the purely

natural to the supernatural. Each of the sacraments rests upon an outward material sign that was designated by Christ as a way to gain an outpouring of God's own divine life. Through the sacraments, we can become "*partakers of the divine nature*" (2 Pt 1:4) and "*share his holiness*" (Heb 12:10). Our human nature can, with God's grace, become elevated to a super-humanity — a supernatural state into the very fullness of the life of God.

The visible sign of each of the sacraments exemplifies the gift of grace that Christ pours out in the sacraments that are the means, through the liturgical actions of the Church, which Christ ordained for saving his people and bringing them to life eternal. Water for washing, oil for anointing and healing, bread and wine for food and drink, the imposition of hands to grant authority and power, the spoken words of contrition and absolution to restore us to God's friendship, the consent between the man and the woman to enter in to Holy Matrimony — all accomplish what they signify. The signs of the sacraments of themselves give grace. This does not mean that sacraments are instruments of magic, but that they work, when lawfully and properly administered, through the direct action of Christ. For this reason, they work *ex opere operato* (Latin for "by the very fact of the action's being performed"), regardless of the holiness of the minister of the sacrament. Human failure and sinfulness is no barrier to the outpouring of sacramental grace from the heart of our Savior. However, to receive the graces and other good effects of a sacrament, the recipient must desire them and not be in a state of mortal sin. "Going through the motions" does not make the sacrament invalid, but it does block its effects.

Just as God uses the material world to sanctify us, we use elements from creation and human culture as part of the way we worship God. The liturgical actions of the Church use spoken prayers, music, candles, incense, vestments, and bells to lift the heart to the things of God; we worship with our entire being, not our mind or spirit alone.

A Catholic's outlook on life is a product of God's use of the material world to sanctify us. Everything Jesus touched, said, and did he made holy, and we see the world as St. Francis of Assisi saw it, as the visible reflections of God's glory and splendor and a prefigurement of the glory of Heaven. We Catholics cannot despise the material world, the home God has given us in which we seek and find our salvation.

(CCC 344, 1127-1128, 1145-1152, 1155, 1210-1212)

Baptism

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in Heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." ~ Matthew 28:18-20

JESUS COMMANDED THE ELEVEN (Judas was dead) to baptize all the nations "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

This baptismal formula given to the apostles and passed on by them to their successors continues to be used today while water is either poured over the head of the candidate or the candidate is entirely immersed in water. Ordinarily, the bishop, priest, or deacon baptizes. When these are not available, a catechist or other suitable person can be deputized by the local bishop to confer Baptism. In the case of an emergency, any person can validly baptize provided that they have both the intention of doing what the Church intends and that they pour water while saying the baptismal formula. Only those who have not yet been baptized can be baptized, because Baptism cannot be repeated.

Necessity of Baptism

Although God has not made known to us any means other than Baptism for salvation, this does not mean that God himself is restricted to Baptism. In his great mercy, God does save by other means, such as through the *Baptism of martyrdom* and the *Baptism of desire*.

Baptism of martyrdom refers to the salvation granted to those

who suffer death for the sake of the faith. Their faith is so sure that they willingly give all to Christ, even their lives. Thus, just as in Baptism one dies and is reborn, they, too, die and then are reborn into eternal life.

Baptism of desire refers to the salvation granted to those who die while they are still catechumens, or those who do not know Jesus, "but seek[s] the truth and does the will of God in accordance with his understanding of it." (CCC 1260) Catechumens who die before they are baptized can be saved based on the presumption of their desire to receive the sacrament, to repent of their sins, and to live a life of charity.

Baptism of martyrdom and Baptism of desire show the necessity of both faith and Baptism for the forgiveness of sins which Jesus established when he commissioned the apostles: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mk 16:16).

The salvation of others is implied by the fact that Christ "died ... once for all" (Rom 6:10; see also 2 Cor 5:15; Heb 10:10), and so every person must have some sort of opportunity to receive Jesus' gift of salvation. The salvation of children is supported by Jesus' words affirming that those who are like children are the greatest in the Kingdom (see Mt 18:1-5; Mk

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Baptism of Christ, 6th century ivory panel from northern Italy

9:33-37; Lk 9:46-48). The salvation of those who do not know Jesus is further supported by the fact that these people who make sincere efforts to seek truth and to do the will of God to the best of their understanding would have desired Baptism if they had known of its necessity.

Grace of Baptism

In Baptism, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are "*all baptized into one body*," the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13). Through this union with Christ in Baptism, we receive both the forgiveness of sins and new birth through the Holy Spirit. These two principal effects accomplished by the grace of this sacrament have several important aspects.

The first principal effect includes not only the forgiveness of personal sins but also the washing away of original sin inherited from Adam and Eve. Baptism also erases all punishment due to sin. Furthermore, the grace received through Baptism is a tremendous aid in the struggle against sin. This assistance against sin is necessary because Baptism does not erase the temporal consequences of sin such as suffering, illness, and death, nor does Baptism erase our human inclination to sin.

The second principal effect, new birth in the Holy Spirit, refers to rebirth as adopted children of God (see Gal 4:5-7). This divine adoption is much more than our common notion of adoption. Through Baptism, one truly becomes a child of God, a partaker of the divine nature (see 2 Pt 1:4), a member of Christ (see 1 Cor 6:15), and a fellow heir with Christ (see Rom 8:17). The baptized person is really made a member of the Trinity-family and truly has God as Father. On earth, this family of God is the Church.



An adult Baptism during the Easter Vigil Mass

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(see Heb 4:14-16). This participation is referred to as *the common priesthood of all believers* and should not be confused with the *ordained priesthood* of bishops, priests, and deacons who govern, preach, and sanctify the Church in the person of Christ. Rather as members of the common priesthood, the baptized are called to witness to the faith they have received and to participate in the Church's missionary and apostolic work.

In Baptism one receives sanctifying grace. Grace is nothing other than God's own divine life given to each person. In Baptism, this grace includes the theological virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit (see Is 11:2). The theological virtues — faith, hope, and love — are infused into the soul by God at Baptism. They give the baptized the capacity to live as children of God. They also serve as the source for all the other virtues that are acquired by human effort with God's help.

Although sin may obscure the fruits of Baptism, the effects of Baptism can never be erased from one's soul. In Baptism, one receives an *indelible spiritual mark* (character). God will not abandon or forsake his own (see Is 49:14-15; Heb 13:5). Once made a child of God, one is a child of God for all eternity. For this reason, Baptism is never repeated.

(CCC 537, 977-978, 1213-1274, 1533, 2813)

By Baptism, we also are made brothers and sisters to one another. By this rebirth, one becomes a "*new creation*" (2 Cor 5:17), with the rights, responsibilities, and dignity that belong to all who are Trinity-family members (every baptized person). Becom-

ing a member of Christ also means sharing in his eternal high priesthood

Infant Baptism

And [the prison guard] called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out and said, "Men, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ... and he was baptized at once, with all his family. ~ Acts 16:29-31, 33

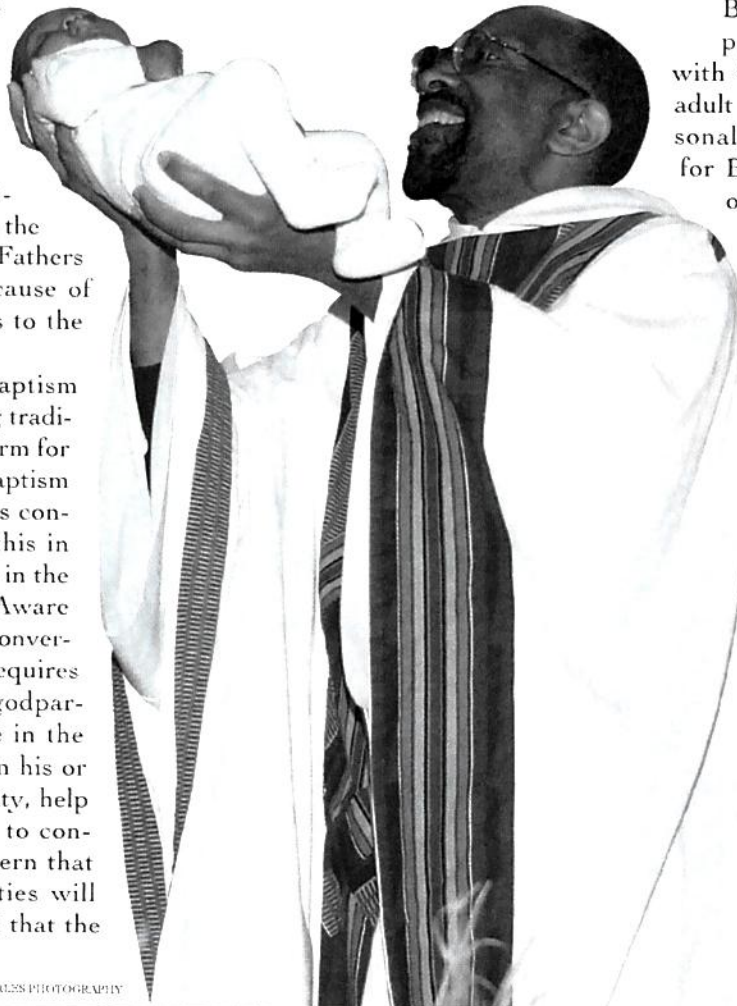
THE BAPTISM OF INFANTS and children who have not reached the age of reason has been practiced since the beginning of Christianity. Scripture provides implicit evidence of this practice when it mentions the Baptism of entire households, which most likely included infants and children (see Acts 18:8; 1 Cor 1:16), and also when the faith of a parent brings about healing of their child (see Mk 9:17-27; Lk 8:41-42, 49-56). Explicit references to infant Baptism are found as early as the second century in the writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Polycarp, and others like them whom the Church honors as Fathers of the Church because of their contributions to the Christian faith.

While infant Baptism has a long-standing tradition, it is not the norm for this sacrament. Baptism rightly presupposes conversion. We see this in countless examples in the New Testament. Aware of the necessity of conversion, the Church requires that the parents, godparents, and all those in the community, each in his or her role and capacity, help to bring this child to conversion. The concern that these responsibilities will not be fulfilled and that the

child will never be brought to conversion is far outweighed by the spiritual advantages of this practice — that the child, once baptized, has God's life in him or her and can begin to grow in holiness immediately.

Baptism of infants and children demonstrates the necessity of the community to provide the faith required for Baptism (see Mk 16:15-16). Just as we cannot give ourselves life, we cannot give ourselves faith. Both faith and life are possible only after and with God's initiative. An adult is able to make a personal act of faith needed for Baptism only in light of having witnessed the faith of someone else. Furthermore, an adult cannot live and grow in faith in isolation — they, having become "members of Christ" (1 Cor 6:15), live and grow in faith in the community, the Body of Christ, the Church. For an infant or child, the parents make this act of faith as part of their divine responsibility of nurturing and educating their children. Faith, like life itself, is something that parents with

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PHOTO: CHARLES HIBBY FOR HARVEY

“Faith, like life itself, is something that parents with the help of God enable their children to have.”

the help of God enable their children to have. They provide the first faith community in which the infant or child will live and grow in faith.

Responsibility of the Parents

The parental responsibility of nurturing and educating their children in the faith is repeatedly mentioned throughout the Rite of Baptism. The rite begins with the naming of the child, followed by the parents requesting Baptism for the child. The priest or deacon tells the parents that by their request they are “accepting the responsibility of training him (her) in the practice of the faith” (*Rite of Baptism for Children* 77). This includes the parents’ responsibility to see that this child receives the rest of the sacraments of initiation (Confirmation and Eucharist).

Later in the rite the priest or deacon tells the parents, “[Y]ou must make it your constant care to bring him (her) up in the practice of the faith. See that the divine life which God gives him (her) is kept safe from the poison of sin, to grow always stronger in his (her) heart” (*Rite of Baptism for Children* 95). In order to carry out their obligations, the parents are then asked to renew their baptismal vows to “reject sin” and “pro-

less your faith in Christ Jesus” (*Rite of Baptism for Children* 95).

Next, the infant is clothed in a white garment, which represents Christian dignity. The priest or deacon proclaims that the words and examples of the infant’s “family and friends” are to help the child bring this Christian dignity “unstained into the everlasting life of Heaven” (*Rite of Baptism for Children* 99). Finally, a candle is lit to represent the light of Christ. The priest or deacon reminds those gathered, “Parents and godparents, this light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly” (*Rite of Baptism for Children* 100).

Responsibility of the Church

Although the parents have the primary responsibility of being examples of faith to their children, the Church assists in this duty. This obligation is also mentioned in the Rite of Baptism, most clearly in the community’s profession of faith when children of catechetical age are baptized during the Easter Vigil: “[A]ll of us who have in any way prepared them to meet Christ today must always be ready to assist them” (*Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* 512).

(CCC 1250-1252)

Holiness and Joy

*Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.
God, the Lord, is my strength. ~ Habakkuk 3:18-19*

JESUS TELLS us that we “*must be perfect, as [our] Heavenly*

Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). Many people think that achieving this perfection, attaining true holiness, takes the happiness out of life, and that those who actively pursue sanctity are wet blankets who are hard to live with. These beliefs are exactly the opposite of the truth. Holiness is the wellspring of freedom, peace, and a deep inner joy.

When we see our lives in real terms, as God sees things, we realize that we are transient — here today, gone tomorrow. We are here on earth to live a good life, but the purpose of this good life is to gain an eternal reward. We know from observation that people who live as though there is no tomorrow are not truly free, at peace, or happy. Fleeting pleasure and self-gratification, in a world destined to perish, cannot compare to an eternity of peace and joy with our God.

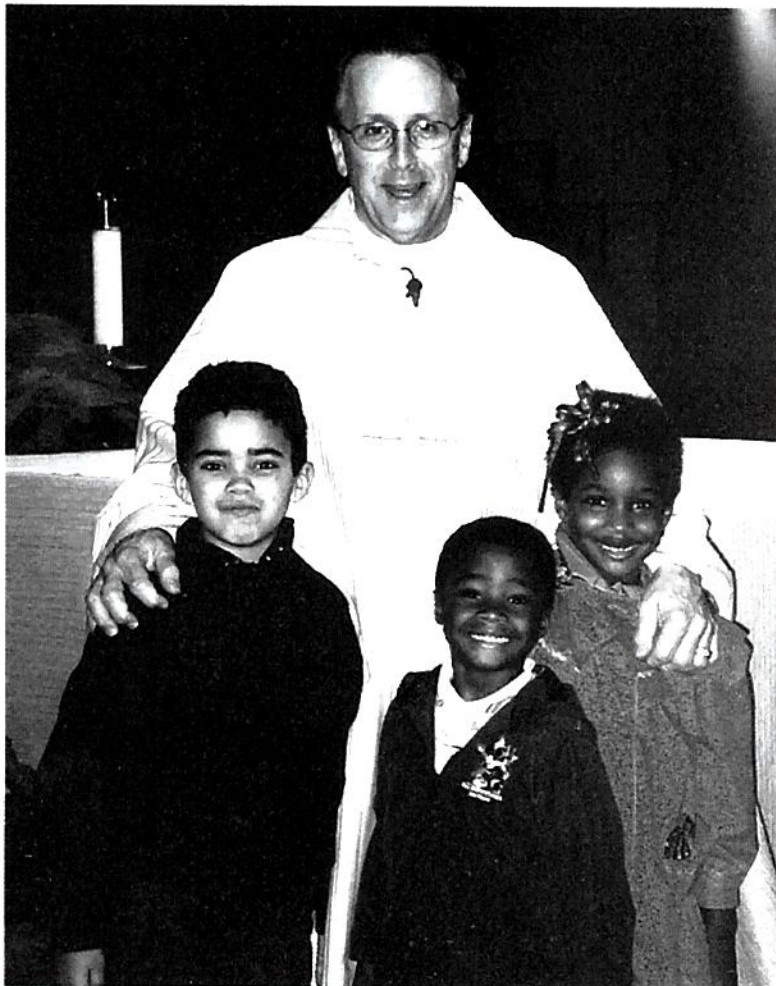
The way we seek happiness makes all the

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difference. Our nature, wounded by sin, makes us likely to succumb to the temptation to put emphasis upon things that contribute little to our real purpose for living. Yet Jesus plainly tells us, “*seek first [the] Kingdom [of God] and his righteousness*” (Mt 6:33). Without fail, this gives us an abiding and intense joy: “*Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy*” (1 Pt 1:8).

But what about the pain, suffering, and grief that

life brings? A life of holiness can have sorrow, trials, and tribulations. Yet this is also true of those who do not seek holiness. Jesus teaches us that we must “*take up [our] cross and follow [him]*” (Mk 8:34). This is not an option; holiness comes by way of the cross, and those who are closest to Jesus do not get a “pass” from the slings and arrows of life. In fact, the effort to become holy requires the deliberate sacrifice of earthly things, transient things. Yet sacrifice and self-denial need not mean sadness. Jesus also



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said: *“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full”* (Jn 15:11). In human terms, a cross is not itself a delight; it means trial and grief. But it is, nevertheless, the source of joy: *“[Y]ou will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy”* (Jn 16:20). To explain this, Jesus speaks of a mother’s birth pangs that turn to joy when her child is finally born (see Jn 16:21).

Those intent on sanctity know how to understand their troubles and keep their eyes on their goal. Knowing that they are doing the right things, they feel a keen sense of freedom and their souls are possessed of peace. The Scriptures tell us to *“serve the Lord with gladness”* (Ps 100:2). The true Christian disciple also finds joy in bringing others to the love and service of God, for joy cannot be hidden, but must be shared: *“For I greatly rejoiced when some of the brethren arrived and testified to the truth of your life, as indeed you do follow the truth. No greater joy can I have than this, to bear that my children follow the truth”* (3 Jn vv 3-4).

Why, then, is there such a widespread notion that holy people — “living saints” — are sour killjoys? Sadly, many so-called “saints” are actually self-righteous, sanctimonious people convinced of their own virtue and of their superiority to everyone around them. Self-righteousness is another name for pride, the kind of pride that Jesus condemned when he told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee prayed: *“God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adul-*

terers, or even like this tax collector: I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get” (Lk 18:11-12). These people give a bad name to sanctity and do great evil by giving others a false view of what true holiness is and thereby discouraging them from seeking it. In the same parable, Jesus tells us that *“the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to Heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’”* (Lk 18:15). Holiness requires knowing that one is a sinner and begging God daily for mercy.

It is not difficult to know when one has encountered a saint. The saint is the person who makes us think longingly, “I want whatever he, or she, has.” This is joy — true joy — and every holy person has it.

(CCC 425, 1721-1722, 2013, 2015)

