

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS ABOUT *GAUDETE ET EXSULTATE*

1. Why did the Pope write this Exhortation, and why now?

Helping people to be holy is one of the Church's main tasks, in every era. At this time, being holy can be distorted by misleading or mythical ideas about holiness. So Pope Francis "exhorts" his followers to engage in a journey that takes place in the concrete here and now of our daily lives, in small gestures and little things, in which we are led more and more by God's grace.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis spoke of the call to all the faithful to be missionary disciples; *Gaudete et Exsultate* is about the mission at the heart of that call, which is to be in relationship with Jesus Christ, who not only invites us to be holy but enables us, through His Grace, to achieve that. Holiness is for all of us, not a select few. Holiness is our destiny; it's what God has planned for us; and yet there is nothing intimidating or overpowering about that; rather it is a liberation, a way of becoming who we really are.

2. What is new about *Gaudete et Exsultate*?

Gaudete et Exsultate is different in tone and emphasis from preceding documents.

First, the Exhortation is addressed *personally* to each and every one of us, whatever our state in life or level of education or development. Pope Francis often uses the informal singular expression *tu* (in Latin languages), which is how we speak one at a time to friends and family. So Francis is extending a *personal* invitation to follow Christ.

Second, it is deliberately *lay* in its language and invitation, aimed at people who live in the world, who have jobs and families and busy lives with many different pressures. Pope Francis wants people to know that they need no special education or qualifications, nor to take religious vows: just an open heart and a desire to spend some time with the Lord in prayer and by reading

the Gospel. He also wants people to know that the Church has everything they need to become holy, and it is all available to them.

Third, the pope shows us, in very *practical* ways, how the journey to holiness is undertaken, and how it makes us more alive and more human.

3. What are the practical points? How does he suggest people will become holy?

Much of what Pope Francis suggests is well known in Catholic life: to make time for prayer, to frequent the sacraments of the Eucharist and Confession, to do a daily examination of conscience, and to read the Gospel regularly, so that Christ's life and ours become ever more closely identified. But he makes a very strong connection between these "spiritual" activities and actions rooted in mercy. In fact, he says they cannot be separated, and the authenticity of our prayer will be shown in how we become and act more humbly and more mercifully. This is rooted in Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus offers a very clear path to holiness in the Beatitudes in Chapter 5. Then in Chapter 25 we read the challenging questions that provide "one clear criterion on which we will be judged" at the end of time, namely how we responded to the concrete needs of others, especially the poor. There is no holiness without this. It involves believing, praying and doing in ways that can't be separated.

4. The document has an entire chapter about two ancient heresies. Why does Pope Francis seem so preoccupied with them?

Pope Francis has referred frequently to the dangers of the modern-day versions of Gnosticism and Pelagianism, and a February document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith called *Placuit Deo* explains them in detail. They are very real temptations to anyone who is attracted by Christian faith. In fact, they are ways of seeking salvation not through the power of Christ but through the power of ideas or human effort. Pope Francis explains this in everyday language so that everyone, not just theologians, can be aware of these dangers.

He tells us, for example, to be aware of beautiful ideas that seem to explain everything in a complex logical system, or of an excessive emphasis on rules and methods. The key point is that we are saved – we become holy – not by our own sophisticated ideas or strong efforts but by being constantly open to the assistance God offers us, in our weakness. This help, or Grace, is not a reward for the righteous, but a way of assisting those who turn to God in need. Equally, the most important thing, says Pope Francis, is the way we respond to the least of our brothers and sisters. We are justified not by our works and efforts but by the grace of God, who always takes the initiative. Grace is God’s free gift to us – including our own desire to be holy. So becoming holy is about a progressive transformation in response to God’s free gift freely accepted and received by us.

- 5. Paragraphs 43 and 44 talk about doctrine, saying that in the Church there are many ways of interpreting doctrine – or our understanding of it – and that it is not a closed system. Is this not an implicit criticism of past pontificates, which worked so hard to reaffirm traditional teaching in the Church?**

Pope Francis is not warning here against doctrinal clarity or the use of reason but against attempts to unify doctrine in a single, monolithic intellectual system that leaves no room for nuance and diversity. In fact, much of Catholic doctrine is rather hard to grasp by reason alone; its truth can only be grasped by contemplating it rather than explaining it. Reason has its place, but the truth of Christ lies beyond reason.

- 6. Paragraph 58 is a blistering attack on those who would make the Church a museum piece or a club for a chosen few. Who is the Pope talking about?**

Pope Francis is warning here against the “new Pelagians” in the Church: not anyone or any group in particular, but anyone with tendencies such as an obsession with the law, a punctilious concern with liturgy, doctrine and prestige, and so on. He is not, obviously, saying liturgy and doctrine are

unimportant; but where Catholics become obsessive about them, it can be a sign that they are falling into Gnostic or Pelagian attitudes.

7. Why does the Pope insist so much on the dangers of gossip? (Paragraph 87)

The pope has often talked before about gossip, and has referred to it as a form of violence that destroys communities, sowing division and suspicion. The danger is greater now because modern social media make it so easy to spread false information (¶115); he reminds us of the Eighth Commandment's warning against bearing false witness. On the positive side, he uses this as a very practical example of somebody who is on the road to holiness: he or she refrains from engaging in and repeating gossip.

8. In Paragraph 98, Pope Francis gives the example of encountering a homeless person on a cold night. Does he mean to suggest that I am obliged to help that person there and then?

He is not offering a precept, but illustrating how holiness changes the way we view the world, and especially our fellow human beings. If I see this person not as a problem but as a brother or sister in need, then I am seeing them, as it were, through the eyes of Christ. What action flows from this will rightly depend on various factors. In the following paragraph he mentions the way we suffer "a constant and unhealthy unease" when we look at the world this way. It's a sign of our growth in holiness.

9. Without using the word abortion, the Pope seems to argue in Paragraph 101 that there is a moral equivalency between abortion and a number of other practices that destroy human dignity. Is this the case?

Pope Francis is here criticising an unholy attitude which separates off one area of ethical concern from all the rest and absolutizes it. And he offers the very common example of a Catholic who believes passionately in the pro-life cause while dismissing the social engagement of other Catholics as in some way ‘political’. The call to holiness requires a larger view, so that loving your neighbour means being concerned for anyone whose human dignity is under threat. Two of many examples are a family forced to flee their home because of bloodshed, or someone who has been trafficked into prostitution. Because we can’t be equally concerned all the time with every threat to human dignity, we should be grateful that others are responding where we cannot.

10. In Paragraphs 102 and 103, the Pope deals with migrants, saying this is not a notion invented by some Pope, or a momentary fad. Is the Pope implying that all migrants should be received? Given that this is a major political issue around the world, is he not politicizing a call to holiness?

The Pope has never said that all migrants have to be received or welcomed. He has encouraged wealthier countries to be generous, and to see that immigrants can be integrated into the societies into which they come. He has always talked about building bridges, and against walls to keep people out. He has spoken of the importance of seeing migrants not as statistics but as people. Here he makes the point that the plight of migrants is not a ‘secondary’ or lesser ethical issue. The call to holiness is a call to put the Gospel into action, and that also means welcoming the foreigner (Mt 25:35).

11. In Paragraphs 160 and 161, the Pope pays a lot of attention to the devil. Given that, he presumably believes in hell as well?

Pope Francis has regularly referred elsewhere to hell. Here he does not mention hell but the devil, warning that any journey to holiness will involve being assailed by the enemy of holiness. This is a constant struggle, not just a one-off event, and being aware of this is key: if we think of the devil as

merely a symbol or an idea, we will let down our guard. But in the Church the Lord has given us many powerful weapons against the devil's efforts, particularly the gift of discernment, which is particularly necessary today when there is much to distract us that seems superficially good. Holiness is a series of victories over the devil's temptations.