

The Universal Call to Holiness: Setting Ourselves Apart

This week begins a five-part homily series that Father Val and I will preach across our parish campuses. As with our discipleship series earlier this year, we've synchronized the central themes and takeaways so that, wherever you attend, you'll hear the same essential message. Each week we'll also hold up a saint—sometimes two—whose life illuminates the portion of the journey we're exploring.

Our series is titled “The Universal Call to Holiness.” Please say it with me: the universal call to holiness. This conviction, emphasized by the Second Vatican Council, corrects a common misunderstanding. Too many once imagined holiness as a special vocation reserved to priests and religious, while lay people were expected mainly to “pray and obey.” The Council insisted otherwise: every baptized believer is called to holiness. By God's grace, none of us is excluded from becoming a great saint, having love—charity—perfected within us.

Over the next five weeks, we'll look at five dimensions of this call. We want to ask: What does holiness look like? What is it for? How does it grow? What practices help it take root? Today we begin with the first movement in the spiritual life—how holiness starts—and we look to St. John the Baptist as our guide.

God's Initiative: Sanctified and Set Apart

Everything in the Christian life begins with God. Holiness becomes possible because God sanctifies. From the first moment of your life—at your conception—the Holy Spirit endowed you with a unique, unrepeatable soul. There has never been another you, and there never will be. Your personal vocation matters not only for your own sanctity but for the health of the whole Body of Christ.

To be sanctified means to be set apart—by God and for God. From the womb, the Lord sets us apart for a purpose within His plan. This is the *imago Dei*: you are made in the image and likeness of God, a singular expression of His love. In Baptism this sanctification goes deeper. We are adopted as beloved children, incorporated into the life of the Trinity, and made heirs to the gifts and graces we need to become holy and to bear fruit in the world.

John the Baptist shows this dramatically. Scripture tells us he was filled with the Holy Spirit even in his mother's womb, leaping for joy when Mary greeted Elizabeth. John's life is a sign that God consecrates us first; He sets us apart before we ever lift a finger. That's the foundation.

Our Response: Piety and a Chosen Dedication

Grace invites cooperation. Around the “age of reason”—typically seven or eight—a person can recognize himself in relation to his Creator, hear the voice of conscience, and begin to “render God His due.” That is the essence of piety: the basic justice of worship, Sunday Mass, and a living relationship with the Lord who made us. Doing what is required by justice does not earn us special credit—we are “unprofitable servants”—but it establishes the right orientation of humility and holy fear.

Holiness, however, begins to blossom when we freely choose more than the minimum. Recognizing that God has set us apart, we in turn set ourselves apart for God. This is a deliberate personal consecration, possible for a seven-year-old or a 107-year-old: “Lord, I am Yours. Not only my Sunday worship, but my life.” John embodies this by going into the desert—literally stepping apart from ordinary patterns. There, before the crowds ever arrived, he did three things: he prayed, he did penance, and he learned to listen to the Lord. Prayer, penance, and listening—these are accessible to all, and they orient us to ask, each day, “Lord, what would You have me do? How can I glorify You with the life You have set apart?”

Two Ongoing Tasks: Purity of Heart and Charity

St. Thomas Aquinas helps us name the ongoing work of those who have dedicated themselves to God. Beyond the fundamental dedication, two steady labors remain.

First, purity of heart. John the Baptist preached repentance. Purity of heart means turning from divided loves and returning to the Lord. When we miss the mark, we repent, make a good confession when needed, trust His mercy, and begin again. Purity isn’t only about private faults; it touches our public conduct, our habits, and our social roles.

Luke’s Gospel notes three groups who came to John with the same question: “What should we do?” To the crowds, John says: be generous, “whoever has two tunics should share with the one who has none.” To tax collectors: take no more than what is prescribed. To soldiers: do not extort; be content with your pay. None of these people necessarily thought they were “sinning”; they were doing what everyone else did. But holiness is impossible if we merely copy the crowd. We are called to live set-apart lives, embracing disciplines that go beyond the lowest common denominator.

Second, charity. Charity is God’s own love at work in us—love for God and neighbor taking root and bearing fruit. St. Paul urges Timothy to “stir into flame” the gift he has received. That stirring is our part. We ask the Lord to expand our hearts, to overcome ego and selfishness, and to teach us to love as He loves. Charity grows through daily acts of self-gift, through generosity with our time and resources, and through a readiness to see Christ in the least.

God's Vision Pressing to Completion

The prophet Habakkuk speaks of a vision that “presses on to completion.” God’s vision for you is holiness of life. He has sanctified you; He calls you by name; He equips you with every grace needed. Our task is to answer that call: to give God His due with humble piety, to set ourselves apart for Him in conscious dedication, to cultivate purity of heart through ongoing repentance, and to stir into flame the gift of charity.

This is not only for priests and religious. It is for every baptized believer—every single one of us. By God’s grace, may we be set apart, transformed in love, and made ready to serve His purposes in the Church and in the world.