

Saints Celebrated and Unsung

The Universal Call to Holiness

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Introduction

This book is inspired by the 2018 apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exultate* (“On the Call to Holiness in Today’s World”), which the pope intended not as a theological treatise on holiness but as a modest effort “to repropose the call to holiness in a practical way for our own time, with all its risks, challenges, and opportunities” (no. 2). The exhortation, as it will be referred to throughout, is divided into five chapters: The Call to Holiness; Subtle Enemies of Holiness; the Light of the Master; Signs of Holiness in Today’s World; and Vigilance and Discernment. In this exhortation, Francis functions as a wise spiritual guide, offering acute analyses of human existence and solid practical advice for all Christians seeking to live the gospel.

In my two previous books on Pope Francis, I recognized that his role as a spiritual and pastoral guide was reinforced by his personal witness and the practical character of his teaching.¹ In this book, the pope’s role as a

1. James Bacik, *Pope Francis and Campus Ministry* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2019); and *Pope Francis and His Critics* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2020).

spiritual director is highlighted by drawing eight general principles from his exhortation and devoting a chapter to each one. Following the conviction that personal witness makes the gospel more credible and attractive, I include two stories in each chapter, one of a celebrated saint, such as Augustine and Thérèse of Lisieux; the other of an “unsung saint,” known to me personally. My presentation of these saints—both celebrated and unsung—is inspired by the theology of the German Jesuit Karl Rahner, by my almost six decades of pastoral ministry as a priest of the Diocese of Toledo, Ohio, and by my critical studies of Pope Francis.

The first chapter, which repeats the pope’s insistence that we are all called to holiness, recalls the conversion of the great saint and theologian Augustine of Hippo, and is complemented by the story of Sue, who lived her faith for years as a loving wife and mother and later extended her loving care to the elderly in a nursing home. The second chapter deals with finding our unique path to holiness through the stories of the popular spiritual writer Henri Nouwen and of Bill, who totally redirected his life in his late thirties. The next chapter presents Thérèse of Lisieux and my father, George Bacik, as models of serving God through ordinary everyday activities. The fourth chapter raises up the theologian Karl Rahner, along with a parishioner, June, both of whom continued to grow in their understanding of Christ and their commitment to his teaching as they got older. The fifth chapter notes that authentic Christian spirituality must include work-

ing for justice and presents the life of Martin Luther King Jr., along with my personal priest friend Bernie Boff, who marched in Selma. The sixth chapter relates the stories of the late secretary-general of the United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld, and of Mary, both of whom met the challenges of their busy lives by maintaining a vibrant contemplative spirit. The next chapter tells the stories of two religious women, Mother Teresa and my lifelong friend Pat, a Sister of Mercy, both of whom exemplify the Lord's command to care for the needy. The final chapter considers the pope's emphasis on discernment, where we recall the conversion of the recently canonized John Henry Newman and learn of the story of a former parishioner, Charmaine, who made good decisions leading to a happy marriage. The conclusion summarizes the eight major principles for spiritual growth and offers some advice on how to implement each of them.