

Day of Reflection for Spiritual Directors and Facilitators of
Adult Studies of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

Knock Shrine

Saturday, 5 April 2014

“Knowing and Loving Christ: The Universal Call to Holiness”

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(speaking notes)

Introductory Prayers

“Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful”
“S’é do bheatha a Mhuire...”

Introduction

I have deliberately started with this invocation to the **Holy Spirit**, so that he will help to lead us into the full truth as our Lord promised at the Last Supper (cf. Jn 14-16). The Holy Spirit is the Person-Love who leads us to the Father, in, through and with the Son.

Then we prayed to **Our Lady**... for many reasons. Mainly and above all, because she is our Mother, and here in Knock, we are in a special way in the shelter of her embrace: *faoi bhrat Mhuire*. Moreover, there is nobody better to lead us towards Christ, or to enable us to deepen in our knowledge and love for him, than his Mother, who is also our Mother. We all know that a meeting with Our Lady, a conversation with her, always leads us closer to her Son, Jesus Christ.

My brief is to talk about the fact that **every single one of us is called to holiness, and to see this in the light of the study of Christ through the *Catechism*.**

There will be no exam after this talk, but it may be helpful to structure it around three key points, so that neither you nor I get lost! Also, the Holy Father, Pope Francis, usually divides his homilies and catecheses into three points, so I'm happy to follow his example!

The three parts are:

1. **Holiness is “*the one thing necessary*” and it is *for all*:** It is the one thing that really matters for each and all of us. All the baptized, without exception, are called to the fullness of the Christian life, which is holiness.
2. **Holiness consists in *knowing and loving Christ*:** hence the study of Christ is a sure path towards holiness. The link between “knowing” and “loving”.
3. **Holiness is accessible in every vocation in the Church, and for most of us our vocation is to be holy in *ordinary everyday life*.**

1. **Holiness is “the one thing necessary” and it is for all:**

Not so long ago, I heard a group of young people (university students) discussing a very interesting topic, and so I pricked up my ears: *Why did Our Lady not speak at Knock?* Our Lady said nothing at Knock. Whereas, at Guadeloupe, Our Lady spoke to St Juan Diego in his native Nahwatl (I wonder how that is really pronounced!). In Lourdes, Our Lady spoke to St Bernadette in her native tongue (Gascon Occitan, the experts call it). But at Knock, not a word.

Now these young students I was listening to came up with different theories: One I found interesting was what we might call the “**language hypothesis**”. The idea was that if Our Lady spoke she would speak in Irish or in English and that issue was quite fraught at the time, and Our Lady would never be the source of tension among her children.

Others pointed out that here at Knock, Our Lady did not need to say anything: It was a clear and **graphic catechesis**. Nothing needed to be said.

Then there was **the weather**: It may seem trivial, but as the witnesses of the apparition told us, “It was a very dark night; it was raining heavily” (Patrick Walsh, c. 65 yrs).¹ Had Our Lady spoken, perhaps it would not be easy to hear her words in the lashing rain (and presumably the howling wind too)!

This heavy rain might seem irrelevant, but I think it is absolutely wonderful. It just seems so maternal on the part of Our Lady. She wants to share fully in the lives of her children in the West of Ireland; so she comes on a summer’s evening in the lashing rain, like so many summer’s evenings in the West! As a Westerner, I see this as a sign of the authenticity of the apparition (!), but above all of Our Lady’s motherly love: she graces our summer rain with her presence

Now, I don’t presume to know the answer to why Our Lady did not speak at Knock, but we can freely reflect on this beautiful apparition of Mary. (We can ask her in Heaven please God some day!)

Those who saw the apparition at Knock are all clear about what Our Lady was doing during that time: **She was praying.**

Patrick Hill (11 yrs, Claremorris) testified: “I distinctly beheld the Blessed Virgin Mary, life size, standing about two feet or so above the ground, clothed in white robes

¹For the official testimonies of the fifteen witnesses to the Knock apparition of 21 August 1879, cf.: <http://www.knockshrine.ie/uploads/documents/The%2015%20Depositions%20arranged%20alphabetically.pdf>

which were fastened at the neck. Her hands were raised to the height of the shoulders, as if in prayer, with the palms facing one another, but slanting inwards towards the face; the palms were not turned towards the people, but facing each other as I have described; she appeared to be praying; her eyes were turned as I saw towards Heaven.

She wore a brilliant crown on her head, and over the forehead where the crown filled the brow, a beautiful rose; the crown appeared brilliant, and of a golden brightness, of a deeper hue, inclined to a mellow yellow, than the striking whiteness of the robes she wore; the upper parts of the crown appeared to a series of sparkles, or glittering crosses...

I noticed her hands especially, and face, and appearance.

(...)

The altar was a plain one, like any ordinary altar, without any ornaments. On the altar stood a lamb, the size of a lamb eight weeks old – the face of the lamb was fronting the west and looking in the direction of the Blessed Virgin and St Joseph”.

Our Lady says nothing, but says everything.

Our Lady doesn't say a word because she adores the Word Incarnate, Christ the Lamb of the New Covenant, sacrificed for our redemption on the altar of the Cross.

At Knock, Mary adores Christ. She is the model of prayer. She is the icon of Eucharistic Adoration. She is showing us the “one thing necessary”, which is to be with Christ and to be aware that He is with us.

Each one of us has our own vocation in life; each one of us is unique. But **we all share one broad calling; which is to be holy**, to be saints. Remember how our Lord sums up the Sermon on the Mount: “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). The Beatitudes and all the teaching of the Gospel come to this: Be saints, be holy; be truly identified with Christ.

Here we might use the image of a motorway. We are all on one big motorway towards Heaven, please God. We are all called to travel in the same direction towards the same ultimate destination. But, as with all motorways, there are different lanes. We have

the common vocation to holiness, the fullness of charity, and at the same time we each have a unique individual vocation in the Church and in the world.

No Christian is called to mediocrity. Every single person is called to be and grow in the image of God. This is a natural consequence of love. God loves us so much he will not settle for us to be any less good or truthful or beautiful than we can be. People who love each other are very demanding with one another. (Like the youngster who says to his mother: “I love you Mam”, and his Mam answers straight away: “Right, go and do your homework on time then!” Or, “That’s great darling, now, please go and get your hair cut!”)

In Baptism a **light is lit in our soul**; and it is destined to grow into eternal light in the Kingdom of Light. Bl. J.H. Newman said: “Grace is glory in exile; glory is grace at home”. **The natural outcome of Baptism is holiness.**

St Paul expresses this in multiple ways: Eph 1:4-5: “[God the Father] chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ”. In 1 Thess 4:3, he says: “This is the will of God, your sanctification”.

This universal call to holiness is the **central teaching of Vatican II**. Paul VI stated that the “strong invitation to holiness could be regarded as the most characteristic element of the whole Magisterium of the Council, and so to say, its ultimate purpose”.² Bl John Paul II declared: “The tension towards holiness is the central point of the renewal undertaken by the Second Vatican Council”.³

Naturally, the call for all the baptized to be saints is echoed **in the Catechism** (CCC) in a particular way, since the CCC is itself ultimately a fruit of the Council. CCC

² Paul VI, Moto Proprio, *Sanctitatis Clarior*, 19 March 1969, AAS 61, (1969), p. 149.

³ Bl John Paul II, *Angelus*, 29 March 1987.

2013 quotes Lumen Gentium 40: “All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity’. All are called to holiness”.

Perhaps there has existed at times a **certain mentality**, which was never the teaching of the Church, **that holiness was reserved for only some very special chosen souls**, for example only for priests and religious. The most lay people might hope for, in this perspective, would be to save their souls, as if there were two parallel paths, “sanctity” for the specialists, and “salvation” for the ordinary folk. There is no doubt at all about the need for holy priests and religious, or about the beauty and necessity of the charisms of consecrated life in the Church. We pray with all our hearts for more priestly and religious vocations. And yes indeed, priests and religious are called to heroic sanctity according to their vocations. Lay people also, married and single are also called to the fullness of Christian maturity, which is holiness, and this teaching is central to the Council.

Bl John Paul II put it like this in his Apostolic Letter *At the Beginning of a New Millennium* at the end of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000: “As the Council explained, this ideal of perfection must not be misunderstood as if it involved some kind of extraordinary existence, possible only for a few ‘uncommon heroes’ of holiness. The ways of holiness are many (...) The time has come to re-propose wholeheartedly to everyone this *high standard of ordinary Christian living*: the whole life of the Christian community and of Christian families must lead in this direction”.⁴

What a wonderful reality our Christian vocation is! We are called to intimate communion with Christ, to be sons and daughters in the Son by the work of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. “Therefore”, as St Paul says, “be imitators of God, as beloved children” (Eph 5:1-2). We are called to be, and in Baptism, made to be, a “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17), “sharers in the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4). It is almost too good to be true! *Almost* too good, because it *IS* true!

⁴ Bl John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 6 January 2001, 31. (The italics are in the original).

The intervention of Our Lady at Knock, like her every intervention in salvation history, is surely a **reminder to us of our immense dignity** and calling to be holy, to live our Christian vocation, our divine filiation in Christ, to its ultimate consequences. It is like a motherly “nudge”, a reminder not “to take our eye off the ball”, not to lose sight of who God is and of who we are: what we mean to him, who we are in Christ, by grace. And sometimes we can get distracted even by good things.

Yes, holiness is the “one thing necessary”. When our Lord calls into see Martha and Mary in Bethany, those dear friends of his, Martha “remonstrates” with Jesus: “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me”. And our Lord as it were corrects her (and we can just picture the affection and understanding, as well as the clarity in his gaze as he looks at Martha), “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is necessary”. Now it is not a question here of condemning Martha, St Martha now, whose feast we celebrate every year, but of realising that Christ gives this teaching to all of us, all his disciples of all places and times: Don’t forget the “one thing necessary” (**cf. Lk 10: 38-42**).

Every single person made in the image and likeness of God, is called to collaborate with the Holy Spirit who sculpts the image of Christ in so far as we struggle, work, towards holiness.

- a) So, first of all let’s **ask the Holy Spirit** for his grace, his light, his strength. He is the main architect of our holiness.
- b) In this quest we must have a very **great determination**. A retreat-day like this is a perfect time to renew “the great ambition of our lives”: to be all that we are called and capable of being in the light of the love of God. **St Teresa of Avila** writes: “It matters a great deal, it is essential (...), that one have a very great, very determined resolution not to halt until one attains it, come what may, however much one suffers, however much people may gossip, whether I get there or not, even if I die on the way or

am not able to face all the effort involved, even if the world collapses around me.”⁵

The story has often been told that one morning during the final years of Bl John Paul II’s pontificate, one of the Polish nuns who staffed the papal household felt great compassion on seeing the weariness and frailty of the Holy Father. Bl John Paul II noticed her concerned look and asked her: “What is the matter Sister?” She replied: “Your Holiness I am very worried about your Holiness”. To which John Paul II humorously replied: “Yes Sister, I too am very worried about my holiness!”

- c) **Begin again every day, with a sporting spirit: St Augustine:** “If you say ‘enough’ you are finished that very minute. Always grow, always walk on, always advance; do not stop on the way, do not turn back, do not go off course. One who does not advance is standing still (...) It is better to hobble along the road than run on any other route”.⁶

Love cannot stay still; love always grows.

Yes, indeed, all the faithful are called to holiness, and the holiness of even one person is immensely powerful. It can be helpful to remember this in moments when it seems that things are going badly, when the wind is blowing harshly against the Church or against goodness and truth: What is all that compared to a single holy person, or to sinners who are trying to love God?

A person who tries to respond fully to the grace of Baptism is like a nuclear explosion of immense goodness in the middle of the world and in the middle of history. As Bl John Paul II wrote in his Apostolic Exhortation on the Church in Europe, *Ecclesia in Europa*, “Holiness is the essential prerequisite for an authentic evangelization capable of reviving

⁵ St Teresa of Avila, *Way of Perfection*, 35, 2.

⁶ St Augustine, Sermon 169, 15, 18.

hope”.⁷ And Benedict XVI repeated this teaching time and again, and our Holy Father Francis is saying exactly the same thing; it is enough to read *Evangelii Gaudium*.

2. Holiness as knowing and loving Christ, and the study of the CCC

“So”, we might say, “fair enough, we are all called to holiness, but what has this got to do with studying the CCC?” Let’s go back to the Apparition at Knock, and this time look at **St John, Apostle and Evangelist**.

29 year old Mary Byrne testified: “The third figure appeared to be that of St John the Evangelist⁸ (...) He held the book of the Gospels, or the Mass Book, open in his left hand, while he stood slightly turned on the left side towards the altar that was over a little from him”.

St John is often called **the “Theologian”** (*theos-logos*: God-word) and we think of the prologue his Gospel where he talks so much about **the Word**: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn 1:1). At the start of his first Letter, St John talks about “the Word of life” who is none other than the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, whom he says “we have heard, we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands” (1 Jn 1:1) .

In the Knock Apparition, it is as if St John is preaching about the Word as he turns towards this saving Word on the altar of sacrifice. Remember that as he stood by the banks of the Jordan, St John the Baptist pointed out Christ to Sts John and Andrew and said to them: “**Behold the Lamb of God**” (Jn 1:36) . In Knock, it is as if St John is doing the same to us, pointing out the Lamb of God to us, the Lamb who is the saving Word, in the “double-table” of the Mass, the table of the Word (Scripture) and the table of the Altar (Bread of Life).

⁷ Bl John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, 28 June 2003, 49.

⁸ This witness, along with others, recognised St John the Evangelist because of a statue of this Apostle in the church at Lecanvey with which they were familiar.

Now it is very clear in the writings of St John that to “know” God is not just theoretical or abstract knowledge, but rather an intimate, experienced attachment. In other words, for St John, **knowing implies loving**. And this is where study of the Christ and of the Church, especially in the CCC, is so linked to holiness. To study Christ and the Church more is to come to love Christ and the Church more.

This is how we are made as persons, with our spiritual faculties of **intellect and will**. We know by our intellect and we come to love what we know with our will. (all this preceded by grace of course). Knowing leads to loving. And love is increased by knowing more. Holiness involves both. If we are truly to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and being, that involves loving him with all our faculties and if we can study, we should not neglect study. **Piety without doctrine** can be dangerous, in the same way as plenty of **knowledge without prayer** can be a real danger. We need both.

Knowledge and love are inseparable; And where do we come to know and love Christ better than in the Sacred Scriptures and the Sacred Tradition of the Church, and **where is there a better compendium of these than in the CCC?**

Holiness, as we know, is about loving Christ. The Christian life is not, in the first instance a question of performing certain rituals or observing certain laws. First and foremost it is a love-affair with Jesus Christ. Pope Francis stresses this point in *Evangelii Gaudium* n. 7, quoting from his predecessor: “I never tire of repeating those words of Benedict XVI which bring us to the very heart of the Gospel: **‘Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction’**”.⁹

Holiness is friendship with Christ, love of Christ, communion with Christ. St Thomas Aquinas says: “*Christus est maxime et sapiens et amicus*”: “Christ is our best

⁹ Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, 25 December 2005, 1.

and wisest friend”.¹⁰ Studying the CCC helps us to deepen in knowledge and love of this great Friend who never ever lets us down, and whose friendship lasts into eternity.

I used to work as chaplain in a youth-club on the north-side of Dublin city. One day I asked one of the young lads there: “Do you pray?” “Of course I do”, he immediately answered: “And what about you Father; do you pray?” (I was a bit taken aback by this. I thought I was the one trying to give him some spiritual guidance, but in the event I think it might have been the other way around!) I told him, yes, I did pray, at least I tried to. “Try to?” he quizzed; “But sure prayer is very easy Father” he told me. I answered that I didn’t always find it easy and asked what was so easy about it for him. He replied, that when we chat with somebody else here on earth, a friend, our parents, etc. we always have to give some introduction (e.g. say how we are, what we have done, where we are coming from, how we feel, etc.), but in the case of God, sure He knows all of that already, so you can just talk to him straight away, without any introductions...

3. Holiness is lived out in our daily lives

Holiness is for everyone and holiness is deep loving communion with Christ. The last point in this talk is that holiness is lived out in daily ordinary everyday life.

Let’s take one last look at the Apparition at Knock: Patrick Hill (11 yrs, Claremorris), whom we have already cited, tells us: “I saw St Joseph to the Blessed Virgin’s right hand; he head was bent, from the shoulders, forward; he appeared to be paying his respects”.

What a lovely image of the St Joseph! In the testimonies, no one dwells on St Joseph. He is mentioned as it were in passing. St Joseph is such a great saint, surely the greatest after Our Lady. And as an ordinary day-to-day worker, who does not attract attention, and is reliable and faithful to God, he is a wonderful model of holiness in daily

¹⁰ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 108, a 4, *sed contra*.

work, family life and normal existence; the kind of life to which the vast majority of us are called.

(It may be noted that at the moment we are living in a wonderful “Josephine” time in the Church. Bl John XXIII had introduced St Joseph’s name into the Roman Canon or Eucharistic Prayer I, at the time of Vatican II. Last year, Pope Francis brought to fruition a project begun by Pope Benedict XVI by decreeing that henceforth St Joseph is to be mentioned in Eucharistic Prayers II, III and IV. This is very significant.)

When we look at the ensemble of the Knock Apparition, we see the heavenly Church and the Church on earth (the pilgrim Church: the visionaries, and you and I). And all of us are called to holiness. Like the visionaries, ordinary people, most of us are called to be saints in and through our daily family, social and work duties.

When Bl John Paul II canonised St Josemaria Escriva, founder of Opus Dei, in 2002, he referred to him as “the saint of ordinary life”.¹¹ We are, the vast vast majority of us, called to be “saints of ordinary life”. “There is something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary everyday things”, said St Josemaria, “it is up to each one of us to discover it... Heaven and earth seem to merge on the horizon, but where they really meet is in our hearts, when we sanctify our ordinary lives”.¹²

This is holiness like that of St Joseph, the contemplative who does his work as well as he can, with love of God and others. And surely this is also the holiness most people who have come to Knock and will come in the future are called to. Saints who are not well-known perhaps, who didn’t perform any extraordinary miracles, but who sought time and again to be faithful to Christ, to love the Church in their daily lives, were committed to prayer and the Sacraments, fully united to the Pope and their Bishops, loving Christ in others, especially in the marginalized, and hence daring and joyful

¹¹ Bl John Paul II, Audience, 7 October 2002.

¹² St Josemaria Escriva, Homily, “Passionately loving the world”:

<http://www.escrivaworks.org/book/conversations-chapter-8.htm>

ambassadors of Christ, just like Pope Francis is asking us all to be now. This is a beautiful, accessible and nonetheless heroic, “un-pass-remarkable” holiness, which is discreet, hidden, humble, and immensely powerful for the salvation of souls.

Conclusion

Yes, to study the CCC, and to help this study grow throughout the length and breadth of the country is a powerful contribution for now and the future. For it can only help, as St Paul puts it, “to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge (...) Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen” (Eph 3:18-20).