The Diversity of Sanctity and the Unity of Holiness: Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II
Bishop William Murphy

Originally delivered as a lecture at the Center for Catholic Studies, Nassau Community College, New York, October 5, 2013, this address outlines the ways in which the lives of Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II exemplify the following principle: although union with God in Christ (holiness) is the common aim of Christians, there are many paths to achieve this within the context of every individual life (sanctity). The address anticipated the canonization of John and John Paul on April 27, 2014.

INTRODUCTION

The title of this reflection was chosen very purposely. It is best explained by a citation from St. Francis de Sales’s Introduction to the Devout Life: “God . . . commands Christians, the living branches of the vine, to bear fruit by practicing devotion according to their state of life.” He goes on:

The practice of devotion must differ for the gentleman and the artisan; the servant and the prince, for widow, young girl or wife. Further it must be adapted to their particular strength, circumstances and duties. Is the solitary life of a Carthusian suited to a bishop? Should those who are married practice the poverty of a Capuchin? . . . True devotion never causes harm, but rather perfects everything we do; devotion that conflicts with anyone’s state of life is undoubtedly false.¹

Thus my thesis is simple but, I believe incontrovertible: there are many ways to achieve sanctity but holiness of life is a deep and profound inner bond of the Spirit that the Church can identify through her processes that lead to canonization. And we as well, despite our own limitations and spiritual blindesses, can often espy true holiness shining forth in the life of an individual even during his or her life. Think for a moment of the universal regard for the holiness of Blessed Mother Teresa during her life. Think as well of the spontaneous cries at the funeral of soon to be Saint John Paul II: “Santo Subito; Magnus!”

My goal is simply to share a few thoughts about both of these popes, each in his own way a great pontiff, each in his own fashion a man of deep and contagious holiness, both rightly approved to be added to the canon of saints this past Monday, September 30, 2013, in a white consistory in the Vatican. Both are to be elevated through their canonization by Pope Francis next April 27, 2014, Mercy Sunday at St. Peter’s, where both are buried and where their tombs are privileged places where daily pious pilgrims and good men and women of the City and of the World come to pray and seek their guidance, their inspiration, their help.

I. SANCTITY

While the literature on sanctity and holiness is vast, one of the most authoritative sources is the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* (DTC). This magnum opus of the last century remains a standard reference point. In a long article on *Saintite*, A. Michel offers a thorough overview of what are the main points that shape the Catholic teaching on holiness and sanctity. Some of this is dated, especially the sections that compare holiness in the Catholic tradition with holiness in other Christian traditions in ways that are somewhat unfavorable to the gift of the Spirit being present in other Christian bodies. That said, the DTC article is a good starting point for our reflection.

First, Michel states that in the Old Testament there are many references to holiness but its precise meaning is difficult to determine. It is no doubt the expression of a religious spirit, with emphasis on purity and a lack of faults, sin, or vice. Within the Hebrew word (*qodes* or *qodas*), there is a sense of separation. God who is holy is totally separate and other from the world of human vice and failure. God is *The Holy One* par excellence.

Persons are holy because they belong to God or are consecrated to God. The interior presence of holiness is shown by fidelity to God’s precepts. Things are holy by analogy or by their use in cult and worship.

Second, in the New Testament, these Old Testament ideas are retained. God the Father alone is the All Holy. His Son, Jesus Christ, is the incomparably holy one. And the third person of the Trinity is by definition holy, as the Holy Spirit. Persons are holy because they are created in God’s image, consecrated to God’s service, and participate in divine holiness. Men and women can be called holy because they belong to the Church and have been consecrated by baptism. In the New Testament much more than in the Old, holiness is an interior reality, a sharing in the perfect purity of God. This manifests itself by purity of life, practice of virtue and flight from all evil. The holy Christian keeps before the self “all that is pure, all that is just, holy, loveable, and virtuous.”
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The Fathers of the Church, according to Michel, continue these themes: the absence of negative qualities and the positive qualities of an interior life of the Spirit, which is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. For the Father’s holiness is not static but is a dynamic force that expresses itself through all the words and deeds of the follower of Christ. In short, Scripture and Tradition are as one to affirm that the qualities of an interior life of the soul animated by God’s love and transformed by the presence of the Spirit as Christ’s indwelling, is the dynamic force that guides and directs the actions of the disciples of Christ.

The author goes on to present the classical citations indicating that the holiness of the Church is the mark that guarantees the means for the holiness of her members and that union with Christ is union in and through the community. He concludes, “Like catholicity, holiness is above all (to be found) in the Church of Christ, a force which attracts and guides souls toward perfection.” The realities of historical and personal imperfections mean that no generation can claim holiness simply because they are members of the body. However, members of the body, by living in union with the Church who is holy, can more easily achieve holiness of life than those who seek holiness apart from this source of salvation and grace. Thus the holiness of the individual is best attained within the Church, where holiness is guaranteed by the promise of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Certainly our subjects would have affirmed all that this brief overview on holiness presents.

II. BLESSED JOHN XXIII

Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli was born in Sotto il Monte Bergamo on November 25, 1881. His was the classic Italian formation to the priesthood beginning with minor seminary when he was eleven years old and progressing through the seminary system, including studies at the Apollinare (today’s Lateran University) in Rome where he was ordained in 1904, the same year he received his doctorate in Sacred Theology. Eugenio Pacelli was the vigilator who read Roncalli’s thesis. Returning to his native Bergamo, he became secretary to his bishop and served in various other roles: professor of Church History at the seminary; speaker at congresses; and eventually secretary for the Pontifical Mission Societies. In 1925 he was named apostolic visitor to Bulgaria and ordained a bishop. There he stayed for ten years when the Holy See transferred him to the delegation in Turkey. In 1944 he was informed he would be the nuncio in Paris succeeding Valerio Valeri, who had earned the scorn of Charles de Gaulle. Roncalli turned a tense situation into a diplomatic triumph and was a great success.
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in Paris, diplomatically and socially. The French episcopate admired him deeply and it was common talk in 1958 that they wanted the Patriarch of Venice to be the next pope. The illness of the Patriarch of Venice led Pius XII to inform Roncalli in 1952 that he would soon be made the next patriarch and in 1953 was also created a cardinal. He remained there until his election as pope in 1958 following the death of Pius XII. He was Supreme Pontiff and Bishop of Rome from October 1958 till his death on June 3, 1963.

The best source for the spiritual journey of this humble Italian priest can be found in the diary he kept recording his spiritual life, retreats, reflections, and spiritual and priestly resolutions from 1895 to 1962. It is a delightful book and one that shows us the inner soul and the spiritual beauty of that priest and bishop who became known throughout the world as “Good Pope John.”

A few excerpts will give you a sense of who this man was and how he saw himself and strove to live a holy and humble life. At age fourteen, when he began his *Journal of a Soul*, he chose to make his own a traditional but popular “rule of life” referred to by many seminarians as “the little rule.” He organized his spiritual life according to it. Thus: “First thing is to choose a spiritual director in whom you have full trust and on whom you will depend entirely.” There follow twelve rules for daily life: a quarter hour to mental prayer; a quarter hour to spiritual reading; attend or better serve Mass; visit the Blessed Sacrament; say the rosary. There follow the weekly rules: confession and communion; fast on Friday and Saturday; an extra hour to prayer; when sitting or walking with one or more companions discuss good and spiritual things; always ask pardon of your director if you have been derelict in anything; and monthly, then yearly and then at all times: above all other evils beware of bad or unworthy companions (p. 4ff.).

Truly a beautiful set of youthful ideals to which he was committed. It seems he lived up to them and grew through their help. On the eve of his priestly ordination in 1904, he wrote,

I must be careful, when things are not going well, not to unburden myself to anyone except my spiritual director. What will become of me in the future? Will I be a great theologian or philosopher? I must get it in my head that, just because God loves me, there will be no plan for me in which ambition plays a part . . . If I am to be truly great priest, I must be stripped of everything like Jesus on the cross.
A few months later on retreat he continues the practice of listing “things to do” and again makes very concrete resolutions—nine of them—about specifically how he will conduct himself in a spiritual journey to achieve the ideal of a humble, detached, holy priest whose only ambition is to love God and serve in whatever capacity his superiors ask him.

In 1925, when Pius XI named him Delegate to Bulgaria and titular archbishop of Areopolis, he was again on retreat, this time at the Villa Carpegna in Rome. He reflected:

I have not sought or desired this new ministry. The Lord has chosen me making it so clear that it is his will that it would be a grave sin for me to refuse. I am to be a bishop, so there is no time to prepare myself. Mine is to be a state of perfection already acquired. . . . This is a terrifying thought for me for I feel and know myself to be very helpless and incapable. Another reason for remaining humble, very, very humble!

There follow eleven points that spell out his resolutions to live a humble life of service to the Church with a keen sense that the more he is obedient to the Holy Father and the Holy See, the more he will know true peace. The accomplishments of his life in Sofia and Istanbul are well known: his capacity for building bridges to other Christian communities and other faiths, his work in shielding Jews and helping them escape from the growing menace of Nazism, the protection of the tiny Catholic communities in both countries and his successful efforts to use his diplomatic post to protect all the Christian communities, including the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople, from persecution and even threats against life.

Similarly, in Paris, where he was sent at the end of WWII, he defused the negativity of General DeGaulle toward the Church and later developed extraordinarily good relations with President Auriol, a professed socialist and atheist. In 1952, prior to being transferred to the See of Venice, he was on retreat alone in Oran, Algeria for the Sacred Triduum. These pages of his journal (pp. 273–77) are worth reading in full. Sixty-nine years old and about to be made a cardinal, his own reflections turn always back to God and his Son, Jesus Christ. He meditates one day on the past, the next on the present, and the third on the future. His reading remains the traditional: Thomas á Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ*. His thoughts:

My will has remained firm, faithful and convinced. In all my years I am numbered among the poor, the humble. O My Jesus, how much I thank you for keeping me faithful. . . . My gratitude will never cease. . . . My present: Here I am still alive, prostrate over the crucifix, kissing the face of Christ and his wounds,
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kissing his heart laid bare in his open side; here I am showing my love . . . how could I not feel grateful to Jesus!

And for the future:

As for my soul, I shall try to make the flame burn more brightly, making the most of the time that remains: total detachment from the things of this world, dignities, honors, things that are precious in themselves or greatly prized. . . . As I hear the Easter bells ringing, I remember with joy my last homily in Istanbul when I cited Gregory Nazianzen: ‘the will of God is our peace’!

During the years that followed, the themes we have seen in his early years continue to preoccupy him. But the tone changes and the vision becomes ever more limpid. He took as his episcopal motto the same three words as Cardinale Cesare Baronio, the great friend of St. Philip Neri: Obedientia et Pax. It sums up his personal commitment as priest and bishop. Obedience and peace become intertwined in his spiritual life and are the two keys to understanding the inner serenity and the outward sheer goodness of a transparent soul and a man at peace with God and thus at peace wherever he might be sent by the Holy Father.

In a sense the motto gathers together all the individual concerns about innocence, penance, humility, and acceptance of the will of God. His complete devotion to the will of God as expressed through the superiors becomes seeking God in all things. In 1961, he begins with “I confess” and says “chastity, yes nothing serious ever against chastity. I never once permitted temptation and failure, never, never! I never once felt temptation against obedience. I no longer feel hurt at what others say of me. And charity above all for everyone.”

The road to holiness began at age eleven and from fourteen years on he pursued it with a singlemindedness and a true devotion. Over the years he knew many humiliations all of which he learned over time to accept. He never expected to go to Paris as nuncio, let alone to Venice as cardinal or to Rome as pope. He remained serene on the same spiritual path, no matter what the role he was called to play or what the task he was sent to do.

And he always presented himself to the world with a serenity and a goodness that sprang from a very traditional piety that led him to deep inner depths of union with God and with bonds of love to the Lord, to the Blessed Mother, the angels and saints. His way was that of an earlier age but his goal went beyond the traditional forms by using them wisely and well.

In the last years, this habitus spiritualis provided him with the inner strength and tranquility to dare great things and to do so with a love that
was a gift truly supernatural but a gift he expressed in all his relations with people: as pope, visiting the Vatican secret archives; receiving the first group of Jews; the opening night of the Vatican Council; the reception of Khrushchev’s son-in-law; the last blessing on the Feast of the Ascension 1963, and June 3, 1963, St. Peter’s Square in the evening.

*Obedientia et Pax. In Thy will, O God, is our peace.*

### III. BLESSED JOHN PAUL II

The bibliography on John Paul II, Karol Wojtola, is just as large as that on John XXIII and even more varied. Still the best English-language biography is George Weigel’s *Witness to Hope* along with his second volume, *The End and the Beginning*. I recall the time George spent gathering his data and poring over documents, interviewing persons, and spending considerable time with the Holy Father himself to whom much of the detail in his first volume can be attributed. His breakthrough came when he figured out how to arrange the material, bringing together two approaches into one: the chronological and the theological.

Karol Wojtyla was born in 1920 of a military father whose wife died when Karol was a small child. His only sibling, a brother, died very young after having become a medical doctor. Karol grew up in a small apartment with a father who was very religious and received from his father a solid grounding in the faith. As a young man he was fascinated by the theater and entertained the idea of becoming an actor. As the war threatened and ultimately engulfed Poland, he was working as a laborer in the Solvay Chemical Plant and was involved in the “Theater of the Living Word,” an underground group of Polish nationalist youth. His experiences led him more and more toward increased prayer and soul searching until Cardinal Sapieha invited him to join the underground seminary in his house in Krakow. Ordained a priest on November 1, 1946, he served as a priest in Krakow and in Nowa Huyta, then studied philosophy and theology at the Angelicum, which awarded him a doctorate on the spiritual writings of St. John of God. In 1958 he was named an auxiliary bishop and succeeded to the See of St Stanislaus in 1964. Named cardinal in 1967, he participated in the two conclaves of 1978, being elected on October 16, and served as Supreme Pastor and Bishop of Rome until his death on April 2, 2005. The world was fascinated by his person, his thought, his sense of the dramatic, his pastoral trips around the world, his regime-changing challenges to communism and in favor of human rights. The Church was deepened by his teaching, his pastoral care of the flock and, in a unique sense, all were riveted by the saintly example of his suffering and his holy death.
While he often spoke of the influences in his life, for this gathering I have chosen to take what I believe is the most helpful of his writings: *Gift and Mystery*, which are his reflections on his life as priest, bishop, and pastor on the occasion of his fiftieth anniversary of priestly ordination in 1996.

In his early years and into high school, unlike Blessed John XXIII, his thoughts were not of priesthood. He himself, however, places his vocation in a wider context, a theological one:

> The story of my priesthood? It is known above all to God. At its deepest level, every vocation to the priesthood is a great mystery, it is a gift that infinitely transcends the individual. Faced with the greatness of the gift, we sense our own inadequacy. (3)

That insight came when later he reflected on what God had done in his life. He speaks of his passion for dramatic literature and Polish language and literature, which were his focus at the Jagiellonian. But even at that point he saw language and literature from the angle of *mystery*. The 1939 invasion of Poland brought the public presentation of Polish nationalist arts to an end. Others saw the potential priest in him more than he did himself. Yet it was growing side by side with the deep sense of Polish identity and culture. From 1942 till liberation the clandestine seminary and the theater were his two loves while he continued at the Solvay plant. But his vacation time now was spent in parishes where he helped parish priests whose prayerful lives and courage impressed him. The parish also became the place where he seems to have developed almost naturally an inclination to meditative prayer and silent adoration before the Blessed Sacrament.

One other story illustrates an early grasp of the inner significance of public gestures. He records how moved he was when Prince Sapieha returned from Rome as a new Cardinal and the students “physically lifted up his car and carried it some distance to the Basilica . . . expressing the religious and patriotic enthusiasm which his appointment as cardinal had inspired in the people.”

Central to his notion of his life as a gift would be the influences that helped shape him: family, the workers at the Solvay Plant “with their deep religiosity and their great wisdom about life,” the Salesians and a man who was a tailor explaining to him that “working as a tailor made it easier for him to develop his interior life.” Through all the contacts of his youth, his confessor, the Carmelites who awakened a love for the Spanish mystics, and others, he early on discovered what he called “the Marian Thread” that would perdure throughout his life and become central to his spiritual-
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ity and his understanding of his relation to God and to the Church. (This Marian devotion owed much to St Louis de Montfort and Brother Saint Albert.) Finally there was his inner sense of tranquility and peace that came from recognition of the vocation to the priesthood as the gift that is real and true and brought profound peace.

His ordination invites him to enter more deeply into the mystery of what was happening, the mystery that surrounds and informs all things worthwhile. Years later he wrote a poem in St. Peter’s Basilica thinking of the priest lying prostrate on the floor on ordination day: “Peter, you are the floor that others may walk over you . . . not knowing where they go, you guide their steps! You want to serve their feet that pass—as rock serves the hooves of the sheep. The rock is a gigantic temple floor, the cross a pasture.”

For young Father Wojtyla, Rome and travels in the West opened him up to a wider vision of life and Church. He finished his doctorate on St. John of God, traveled especially in France, Belgium, and Holland and recalls with emotion his visit to Ars. He speaks of the lesson of St Jean Vianney as the “power of grace working through human limitations.” The pastoral spirit of Wojtyla was taken by the saint of Ars, especially his devotion to the sacrament of penance. The future pope’s ecclesial vision was broadened and deepened by this experience, as he concluded that “every priest must be personally concerned for the whole Church and should in some way feel responsible for the whole Church (60).”

Returning to his native Poland, he became increasingly involved in the parish life of St. Florian’s as well as teaching moral theology. He sums up these experiences by offering an interesting act of thanksgiving to Poland linking the mystery of Poland to the mystery of priesthood and, using his later experience working on the statement on the laity, by extending this act of thanksgiving to the gift of the lay men and women who carry the mystery into the world and who live the mystery of God’s love in ways that are proper to them but also help the priest live faithfully the mystery of priesthood.

Let me complete this with a series of quick citations:

The priest is the steward of the mysteries of God, this mystery of a wondrous exchange between God and man. Man offers his humanity to Christ so that Christ may use him as an instrument of salvation through which the man finds complete fulfillment. For can there be any greater fulfillment than to re-present every day in persona Christi the redemptive sacrifice? What Christ accomplished on the altar of the cross and what he had earlier
instituted as a sacrament in the Upper Room, the priest now renews through the power of the Holy Spirit. The priest is the witness and the minister of divine mercy. He is always in contact with the holiness of God and through daily contact with God’s holiness he becomes holy. Prayer is ever in his heart and on his lips: prayer makes the priest and through prayer the priest becomes himself.

To live his priesthood is for a priest to enter into an intimate relation with the Triune God. How pleasant it is just to be with the Lord in the tabernacle and contemplate his goodness and be near him as he is always to us. From this the priest gathers the strength to be one with his people. He unites himself more and more with God at the center of his life through whom he sees the Church and the world. His response to God’s indwelling love is concretized by the total dedication of himself to serve the Church and the world till his last breath and with all those gifts and talents that are caught up in the mystery which is the only true reality and the only true meaning of life on earth and human destiny in the next.

Anyone who has been in the Pope’s private chapel can attest to what I experienced many times: the total absorption of John Paul in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. He is totally engrossed. There is no one else there but the two of them. Any of us who have talked with him or, even more, celebrated Mass with him knows that his whole identity is summed up in his profound consciousness that the greatest gift he has received in life is to be a priest. It is a mystery given to him who did not merit it, and it is a mystery to be lived to its core in union with Christ, the High Priest and in loving communion with Mary to whom he dedicated his life “Totus tuus.”

The first twenty years of his pontificate were an exciting and extraordinary drama that brought the Church into the world by the gift of this man whose life was defined by his loving intimacy with God the Father and His Son the eternal High Priest, and his consciousness of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. His encyclicals, writings, homilies, and speeches are a treasure trove we have yet fully to unpack, even more to understand and digest.

Yet those last years of sickness and suffering uncompromisingly lived out in full public view may constitute for much of the world of the future the most precious legacy of his pontificate. How many took heart from his heroic witness! How many have had their own pains made more bearable by his example! How many of us can remain indifferent when we see how, to his last breath, he offered himself as a sacrifice to God and a holocaust for the good of all humankind!
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I mentioned being in his chapel, which was a privilege I cherish. I also remember the young Pope whose directness and whose dynamic force of personality inspired all of us who were privileged to work with him. I also mention the determination and the courage to face every challenge and not flinch before those who would flout the law of God or harm the good of humankind.

But above all I remember him at prayer. I can conclude only that he was mystic in the literal sense of the term. He saw more deeply into the mystery of God’s love than the rest of us have been given to see. He lived that mystery on a deeper level than most human beings are capable of, and he expressed it with a normality that can only be called fraternal and a love that can only be called transcendental.

IV. CONCLUSION

Pope Francis has time and again professed himself a sinner. He reminds us that we are all sinners, a lesson we have yet truly to make our own. But as baptized disciples of Christ and members of His Body, the Church, we are all called to be saints. The central document of the Second Vatican Council, Lumen Gentium, devotes chapter 5 to The Call to Holiness. This is incumbent on us all who, as St. Paul tells us, are rightly called saints. The French philosopher, Léon Bloy wrote, “There is only one great sadness in life, at the very last, not to be a saint.”

The example of the saints not only informs us and instructs us. More importantly they serve to attract us—attract us to see the beauty of sanctity in their lives so that we might in turn desire to attain holiness of life, union with God as we cooperate as completely as we can with Him in this life.

St. Francis de Sales is right about having a spirituality that conforms to your state of life. We see in these two holy men many differences in their prayer lives, their interior strivings, their approaches to becoming more perfectly united with God. That they both became popes does not surprise us because, different as they are in their backgrounds, their formation and the way they articulate their desire for God, ultimately they share the one passion that truly matters: the desire to know, obey, and love God in this life so that we might be happy with him forever in heaven.

Anyone might find him or herself attracted to traits of one more than the other, be desirous of following the ways of one more than the other, just as we would with a St. Catherine of Siena, a St. Therese of Lisieux or a St. Francis of Assisi. In the end we look at these two men, and we rejoice as we rejoice with all those martyrs and saints, heroes of the Church because they are signs to us of the triumph of God’s love in the hearts of men and women whose hearts are created by God to know love and serve him.
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Yes, there are many ways to sanctity. The experience of more than two thousand years of the Church’s life has proven that time and time again. But we rejoice because we also need to have these examples. The Church needs to be able to point to what is the essence of the vocation of every disciple of Christ: holiness, union with God so deep and profound that it is expressed in this life by a total love of neighbor and a faithful desire to show to one and all the height and the depth, width and the breadth of love of God revealed in Christ Jesus. All this will be formally recognized next April 27. We know already, however, that this is the truth their lives proclaim.

In the Preface of Saints, the Church thanks God for these her saints when we pray:

By their way of life you offer us an example; by communion with them you give us companionship; by their intercession, sure support so that, encouraged by such a great cloud of witnesses, we may run as victors in the race before us and win with them the imperishable crown of glory through Christ our Lord.

Notes

1. Francis de Sales, Introduction to the Devout Life (1609), part I, chap. 3.
4. The Woman Who Was Poor (La Femme Pauvre, 1897).