



## Pastoral Reimagining 2024 and Beyond

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### Reflection Two: The Church is Holy

#### Opening Prayer

Good and gracious God, we turn to you with grateful hearts for what we have,  
and with great anticipation for what is yet to be.  
Bless us with a sense of unity, a spirit of cooperation,  
and an abundance of understanding.

Guide our efforts to embrace the rich tradition of the past of our Diocese as we build a future  
of hope assured of your steadfast love in what is to come.

Enliven our parishes with the gifts of your Holy Spirit and draw us into a deeper  
relationship with Jesus Christ and one another. Help us to fully live our faith in word, action,  
and deed.

In time of doubt may we be reminded of the words of Jeremiah:

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm  
you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

We ask this through Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

#### The Church is Holy

The *Church is Holy* because God alone is holy and loves all of creation into being, especially woman and man created in his image and likeness. From creation flows salvation and God has wedded himself to the church forever through the death and resurrection of his Son, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Through faith and Baptism, we become members of the Lord's body, the church, and we are washed clean in the Blood of the Lamb and sanctified by the Holy Spirit through the forgiveness of our sins. Although the baptized can fall from grace and holiness through sin at any time, God who is faithful is always at work in our lives to bless us in holiness through the many avenues of grace in the church and in the world.

Known as the *Little Flower* St. Therese, who never ventured out from the convent during her brief time on earth, is the church's beloved co-patroness of the missions because her loving heart reached to the ends of the earth.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) states unconditionally that "love is the soul of holiness to which we are all called." (826) What follows in this section of the catechism is a wonderful quote from St. Therese of Lisieux:

***"If the church was a body composed of different members, it couldn't lack the noblest of all; it must have a Heart, and a Heart Burning with Love. And I realized this love alone was the true motive force which enabled the other members of the church to act; if it ceased to function the Apostles would forget to preach the Gospel, the martyrs would refuse to shed their blood. Love, in fact, is the vocation which includes all others. It's a universe of its own, comprising all time and space—it's eternal." (CCC 826)***

God's call to holiness began with the Israelites before they even settled in the Promised Land. God's words to Moses in Leviticus, Chapter 19, reveal the heart and soul of the Covenant established on Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments. "Say to all the congregation of the children of Israel. You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." (19:2)

The rest of the chapter, instructs the Israelites how to "be holy." The list of laws includes many having to do with relationships, from honoring parents (19:3) to loving the aliens who live among the Israelites. (19:33-34)

***To "be holy" has to do with treating other people with justice and caring for the poor (19:9-10), being honest (19:11-13, 35-36), having respect for life (19:32), and, in general, acting with moral and ethical integrity. At the center of these laws is the second most important commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (19:18)***  
***"I am the Lord your God" frames the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of Leviticus nine times.***

Of course, Moses was prepared to speak of holiness because he had encountered the living God up close and personal at the burning bush on Mount Horeb. "Then God said, do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." (Exodus 3:5)

From that moment on God established a faithful and personal relationship with Moses, and the Holy One was calling the people of Israel to the same stature through the covenant he established on Mount Sinai. This is abundantly clear because the first and greatest commandment was the doorway to holiness. *"Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, mind, soul, and strength."* (Deuteronomy 6:5) "Come back to me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13) would be the refrain of the prophets throughout Israel's existence.

Jesus the Christ, the Anointed One of God, fulfilled all of the yearnings of the people of Israel, and all of the Law and the Prophets. The long-awaited Messiah carried forward the two great commandments (Mark 12: 28-31) and transformed them through his death and resurrection into the new Covenant in his blood. At that moment the holiness and glory of God were visible on the face of Jesus Christ and in his body the church.

Let us return once again to the Last Supper in St. John's Gospel to the great priestly prayer of Jesus. Here we read that along with his heartfelt yearning for unity is the prayer of sanctification and consecration. "Father, I do not pray that you should take them out of the world, but that you should keep them from the evil one. They are not of this world, even as I am not of this world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they may be also consecrated in truth." (John 17:15-19)

Earlier during the Last Supper Jesus made it clear that he is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6) so that the truth in which we are consecrated is the Lord himself.

Immediately before the reception of communion at Mass the priest celebrant elevates the consecrated bread and wine and proclaims, *"Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb."* Indeed, we are immersed in God's holiness through faith and baptism and washed clean through the blood of the spotless lamb, crucified and risen.

Another way to appreciate the holiness of the church is at the Mass of Chrism during Holy Week. Each year the bishop blesses the oil of Catechumens and the oil for the Anointing of the Sick and consecrates the oil of Chrism.

Afterwards, the oils are distributed to all the parishes and missions in the diocese to be essential elements with the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, and the Anointing of the Sick. At the Cathedral the bishop applies the oil of Chrism to the hands of the newly ordained priest during the sacrament of Holy Orders. If a new Altar is consecrated in any church throughout the diocese, sacred Chrism is lavishly poured upon it. Therefore, the Chrism Mass uniquely celebrates the holiness as well as the unity of the Diocese of Jackson.

I referred earlier to the quote from the Catechism that *charity or love is the soul of holiness*. St. John had a very loving relationship with Jesus in life, in death, and throughout his life into old age. He was present at the Last Supper leaning against the Lord, and at the foot of the cross with the Blessed Mother. The love that he had for and from Jesus carried him into old age so that even in exile he knew that the living God held him in the palm of his hands.

From the haven of this relationship, he wrote majestically of love and holiness. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:16-17)

Later on in the New Testament we read in the first of the three letters of St. John:

***"In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through him...God is love and the one who abides in love abides in God and God in him or her...There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." (1John 4:10ff)***

Loving with the mind and heart of Jesus Christ is the fundamental call to holiness, and a clear sign that the Holy Spirit abides in us. At the Last Supper the Lord was anticipating his ultimate act of love on the Cross, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father, I have made known to you." (John 15:14-15)

The Apostles became the friends of the Lord to the point of laying down their lives for their friend, but they came late in the day, so to speak, compared to the Blessed Mother who was with the Lord from the moment of his Incarnation in her womb. *She has much to teach us about holiness through prayer, the acceptance of God's will, perseverance through unspeakable suffering at the foot of the Cross, and, at last, the dawn of a new day with the birth of the church on Pentecost.*

**The Magnificat, Mary's hymn of praise, is also the prayer of the Church.**

***"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. The Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name."***

It is true that she was spared from the effects of original sin in preparation for her singular vocation in God's plan of salvation, and so achieved a unique level of holiness in this life. However, the Almighty and loving God works unceasingly to do great things for each one of us by calling us away from sin and guiding us on the path of holiness. Through faith and baptism, we are God's beloved children, friends of his Son, and dwelling places for the Holy Spirit.

What are some of the standards by which holiness is measured?

Prayer, of course, is essential, and our Catholic tradition offers us a panorama of ways to be with God. Along with the Eucharist, we have the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the gift of God's Word at hand at all times, the rosary, and opportunities for Adoration.

In particular, the petitions of the Lord's prayer, the Our Father, so near and dear to us, are a firm foundation. The Beatitudes that introduce a whole new way of compassionate and just living contribute to a holy way of life. Blessed are the poor in spirit, the pure of heart, the merciful, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and the peacemakers. (Matthew 5:1-11)

St. Luke places his stamp for holiness on forgiveness and mercy, recalling the Lord's teachings and, more so, his actions from the cross. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. (Luke 23:34)

Consider the nastiness, division, and hostility we see all around us. Then consider the following words of the Lord: "But I say to you that hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you...and your reward will be great; and you will be sons and daughters of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." (Luke 6:27-28:35-36)

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught about the need for vigilance and focus to remain on the path of life and holiness. Enter through the narrow gate because the gate to destruction is rather wide in this world. (Matthew 7:13-14)

Our personal sin and life's temptations can overwhelm the best of intentions, but the grace of God is ever before us. "We have not a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:14-16)

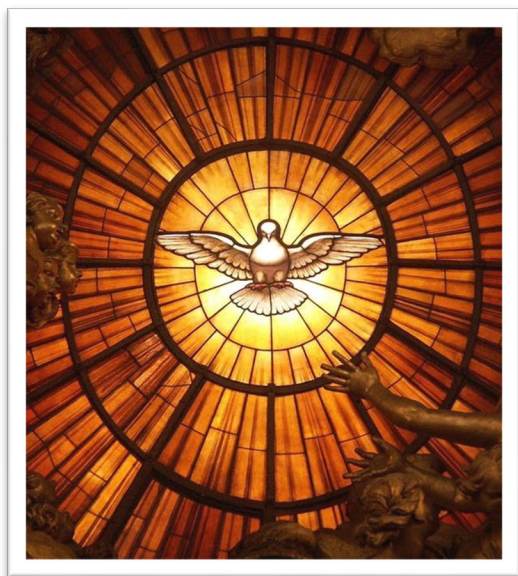
St. Paul described authentic freedom that fosters holiness to the young church in Galatia, an instruction that awakens us to what holiness is not, and what it is.

"Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, depravity, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissension, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing and the like. I warn you, as I warned you previously, that no one who does such things will inherit the Kingdom of God." (Gal. 5: 19-21)

In other words, for folks ensnared in that web, the time for repentance is now. Turn away from sin and believe in the Gospel.

*On the other hand, the Fruits of the Holy Spirit, the qualities of holiness, or virtuous living are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us be guided by the Spirit." (Galatians 5: 22-25)*

## Closing Prayer



Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful.  
And kindle in them the fire of your love.  
Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created.  
And you will renew the face of the earth.

Lord,  
by the light of the Holy Spirit  
you have taught the hearts of your faithful.  
In the same Spirit  
help us to relish what is right  
and always rejoice in your consolation.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

## Reflection Questions

1. "If the church was a body composed of different members, it couldn't lack the noblest of all; it must have a Heart, and a Heart BURNING WITH LOVE. And I realized this love alone was the true motive force which enabled the other members of the church to act; if it ceased to function the Apostles would forget to preach the Gospel, the martyrs would refuse to shed their blood. Love, in fact, is the vocation which includes all others. It's a universe of its own, comprising all time and space—it's eternal." (CCC 826)

*Re-read the words of St. Therese of Liseux as quoted in the Catechism. If the heart of love ceased to function in your community would anyone notice? If so, in what ways?*

2. Re-read the quotes from Leviticus, Chapter 19:

"Say to all the congregation of the children of Israel. You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." (19:2) The rest of the chapter, instructs the Israelites how to "be holy." The list of laws includes many having to do with relationships, from honoring parents (19:3) to loving the aliens who live among the Israelites. (19:33-34) To "be holy" has to do with treating other people with justice and caring for the poor (19:9-10), being honest (19:11-13, 35-36), having respect for life (19:32), and, in general, acting with moral and ethical integrity. At the center of these laws is the second most important commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (19:18)

*In what ways does your parish demonstrate love of neighbor? A culture of justice and care for the poor? Being transparent and honest? Respect for life? In what ways do you fall short?*

*What are practical ways you can increase holiness in your community?*

3. The *Fruits of the Holy Spirit* are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

*How do you see the fruits of the Spirit manifested in your own life? In the life of your parish community? In the Diocese of Jackson?*

*If we live by the Spirit, let us be guided by the Spirit." (Galatians 5:25) How does the Spirit guide you?*