

Father John Catoir

The Road to Holiness

“The road to holiness for most of us lies in our secular vocations. We need a spirituality which calls forth and supports lay initiatives and witness not just in our churches but also in business, in the labor movement, in the professions, in education and in public life. Our faith is not just a weekend obligation, a mystery to be celebrated around the altar on Sunday. It is a pervasive reality to be practiced every day in homes, offices, factories, schools and businesses across our land.” (The U.S. Catholic Bishops’ Pastoral Letter on Economic Justice, paragraph 25)



Holiness was once presented as the pursuit of perfection. One was holy if one was pious, charitable and especially if one was sexually pure. But the bishops offer us a broader vision of holiness. Jesus told us we would be judged according to how we respond to the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger. “As followers of Christ,” the bishops say, “we are challenged to make a fundamental option for the poor.” They remind us that “in any society the ‘litmus test of its

justice or injustice’ is how it treats its poor and powerless.”

How does this insight which the bishops are stressing square with our traditional notion of holiness? Obviously one does not cancel out the other, but I think some confusion comes from a mis-translation of the line, “Be perfect, therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48) Read the entire section (Matthew 5:43-48) to get the sense of it. Perfection as we usually understand it means being pure, immaculate, stainless. But we know according to Scripture that the just man sins seven times daily. God cannot be asking us to be perfect in the sense of being entirely free of faults.

In the book “The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr” (Yale University Press) we read, “The Aramaic words of Jesus which were rendered in the Greek translation ‘Be ye perfect’ actually meant ‘let your love be all inclusive as God’s love includes all.’” Niebuhr continued, “This would make the demand a part of the consistent love-universalism of Jesus.”

The universality of God’s love is what Jesus preached and asked us to practice. Our primary concern is not perfectionism.

“Our primary concern is to see that our love doesn’t fail.” (Bl. Julian of Norwich)