

## Article on Holiness in *Catalyst*

Holiness is not a word much in use today. A word like ‘piety’ has fallen into disuse because it now connotes a smugly self-righteous attitude. But holiness does not seem to connote much at all today—hence our reluctance to employ it. Whatever residual meaning it has in the aftermath of Rudolf Otto’s *Idea of the Holy* seems inapplicable to the church and the Christian life. Yet, when we recite the ancient creeds we assert that we believe in the holy church. So the word must mean something. But what?

If we look to the way in which holiness is portrayed in the Bible, then a cluster of ideas attach to holiness. One of these is that something is holy when it has been placed in a relationship to God such that it belongs exclusively to God. The Old Testament abounds in examples of things devoted in this way to God, but the chief example is Israel. In the words of Deuteronomy 7:6, “You are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.” This important passage links three ideas: 1) holiness, 2) election and 3) possession. Israel was holy because God had chosen it. This act of choosing established a relation between Israel and God, a relationship of belonging. The holiness due to God’s choosing and placing Israel in relationship was in a way independent of the behavior of Israelites. Although the Old Testament recognizes that, in one sense, Israel could be defiled, it also affirms that in another sense Israel would always be the people of God and would always stand in this relationship of belonging. As a result, Israel was holy because of God’s choosing even if the behavior of Israelites was anything but holy. What was true of Israel is true as well of the Church, which God chose “in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless” (Ephesians 1:4). As the chosen spouse of Christ, the church stands in an everlasting relation to God, a relation by virtue of which the church is holy. Holiness, then, is first of all standing in a relationship of exclusive belonging to God.

But the Bible is adamant that, in response to God’s act of choosing, the church must respond with an act of consecration. Consecration is a second meaning of holiness and lies behind passages such as Romans 12:1: “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.” We are to devote the totality of our lives to God and thus actualize through decision and practice the holiness that belongs to the church by virtue of God’s choosing. If we have truly been placed in a relationship of exclusive belonging to God, then we should act as people whose lives are determined by this exclusive relationship.

Consecration implies a third meaning of holiness—separation or purity. In the Old Testament, Israel was to keep itself separated from the practices of the surrounding nations because of its holiness. Likewise, priests and implements used in the temple were segregated and kept in a state of heightened purity so that they could minister in the sanctuary in the presence of the holy God. In the New Testament, the whole people of God are expected to live lives of separation: “You must no longer live as the Gentiles live. . . . You were taught to put away your former way of life” (Ephesians 17 & 22). Of course, the purity and separation that the New Testament insists on is not a matter of physical distance, as though we could maintain our holiness by never coming into contact with those outside the church. On the contrary, we are to be pure and separate in the midst of a fallen world.

Finally, holiness means righteous behavior. The connection between holiness and righteousness receives classical expression in Leviticus 19, in which Israel’s obedience to God’s commands is regarded as a direct implication of Israel’s holiness and God’s holiness. “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my sabbaths: I am the Lord your God” (19:2-3).

But it is not enough to know that holiness is grounded in being placed in a relationship of

exclusive belonging to God and that it consists further in consecration, in purity and separation, and in righteous obedience to God's commands. Regretably, it is possible to know all this and fail to respond to God in ways consistent with the church's holiness. In light of this possibility, we have seen in the last few years theologians using the language of embodiment to indicate the importance of specific and distinctive practices in the Christian life. In contrast to the persistent American tendency to emphasize the subjective aspects of religion, the emphasis on embodiment reminds us that the Christian life is not only a matter of disposition and intention but also a matter of practice. It is to affirm, with John's Gospel, that truth is something that we do as well as believe, and with the letter of James that faith without works is dead.

The recent emphasis on embodiment reminds us also that the holy life is gained through specific and distinctive practices. Although preaching, teaching and catechesis are indispensable in the pursuit of holiness, becoming holy requires more than cognitive knowledge. Becoming able to love our neighbors requires more than knowing that we ought to love and knowing what love consists in. Additionally, we must have examples of loving that we can emulate and we must dwell in a nurturing community in which love is practiced. Since love is, in part, a deed, we learn to love in the same ways in which we learn to perform other deeds. A pastoral theology of holiness must take this fact into account.

This last observation leads us to consider the role of the church in nurturing the pursuit of holiness. What does or should the church and its leaders do to bring its members to acts of consecration, separation and righteousness?

One thing has already been mentioned—the didactic function expressed in preaching, teaching and catechism. This function is the attempt to convey to the church's members the “truth that is in accordance with godliness” (Titus 1:1) through the instruction whose aim “is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5). We can see from these texts that preaching and teaching are not primarily the communication of information. On the contrary, they exist to be God's instruments in the transformation of our character. They aim at godliness, love and faith. In other words, they aim at holiness. Of course, at some level preaching and teaching require the conveying of information. But this is not their primary purpose, because the knowledge that the church seeks is, ultimately, the knowledge of the God who is love. This God cannot be known only by the accumulation and analysis of information. This God can be known only by our becoming “participants of the divine nature” (1 Peter 1:4). Only with this sort of participatory knowledge can we be perfect as God is perfect (Matthew 5:48). Accordingly, preaching, teaching and catechism must be preoccupied with encouraging the people of God to consecrate themselves to God, with helping them understand how to be a separated people, and with urging them to walk in the paths of righteousness.

Besides these didactic and verbal ministries of the church, there are other ministries that are instrumental in helping the church's members pursue holiness. One of these is administering the means of grace. As an example of a formal means of grace, let us consider baptism. First, the act of baptism is an act of consecration. This is true whether the person baptized is an infant or an adult. In baptism the candidate and the community declare jointly that the candidate is being drawn into the community that stands in a relationship of excluding belonging to God. In baptism the candidate becomes, in the words of 1 Peter, a member of “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people” (2:9). Second, baptism signifies the beginning of the life of purity and of separation from sin. As Paul put it, in baptism we have been buried with Christ so that we might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4). Although it takes wisdom and discernment to understand the full implications of this separation, baptism is the decisive moment when we turn our backs on the fallen world and orient ourselves to the kingdom of God. Third, baptism implies the necessity of righteous behavior. Because in baptism we have died to sin and begun to live to God in Jesus Christ

(Romans 6:11), we are to present ourselves to God as instruments of righteousness (6:13). As 1 Peter counsels, “Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct” (1:15). To be holy in conduct is to act in obedience to God’s commands, especially the command to love the neighbor.

Besides the formal means of grace, i.e., the sacraments, there are informal means of grace. These are those Christian practices that are channels of God’s grace to us but which do not require pastoral supervision. They include prayer, the devotional study of the Bible, the practice of self-denial, and works of mercy toward the neighbor. In these and other means of grace, we are brought to continual decision about our consecration, about the strength of our purity and separation, and about the necessity of righteous obedience. By them we are strengthened in our resolve to continually consecrate ourselves, to live lives of separation and to obey God’s commands.

A third ministry of the church by which members are aided in the pursuit of holiness is the most informal of all. It is the ministry of influence. Both the living members of a congregation and its remembered dead exert a formative influence on the church and its members. They constitute the nurturing community that supports the pursuit of holiness. They also, in healthy congregations, provide a collective image of the life of holiness. Since the physical presence of Jesus is no longer with us, the only embodied image of the holy life that we have is fellow members of Christ’s body. That is why the letter to the Hebrews counseled us to remember our leaders in the faith and to “consider the outcome of their way of life, and [to] imitate their faith” (13:7). We may learn from the Bible that we ought to love our neighbors, but it is likely that we will learn *how* to love by observing fellow-members.

Today in what is becoming in some ways a post-Christian America, it is more important than ever for the church to know what it is about and to be faithful to its divine calling. This does not mean that we adopt a strident and harsh attitude toward the world outside the church. It means only that we should be resolute in our intention to be the people of God as this has been revealed in Jesus Christ. To be the people of God is to be the *holy* people of God—the people who embody holiness by practicing consecration, separation and righteous obedience.