

Holiness is the Vocation of All Believers

Pope Francis

April 12-15, 2021

International Conference:

“Mujer excepcional” (Exceptional Woman)

“Holiness is not only for some ‘specialists of the divine’, but rather it is the vocation of all believers”, the Holy Father said in a video message addressed to participants in the **International Conference “Mujer excepcional” (Exceptional Woman)** which took place on 12-15 April and marked the **50th anniversary of the proclamation of Saint Teresa of Ávila as Doctor of the Church.**

The following is a translation of the Pope’s message, which he offered in Spanish.

I greet the participants in the university congress that is commemorating the 50th anniversary of the proclamation of Saint Teresa of Jesus as Doctor of the Church.

The expression “exceptional woman”, which gives the title to your meeting, was used by Saint Paul VI .1 . We are before a person who stood out in many dimensions. However, it should not be forgotten that her recognized relevance in these dimensions is nothing more than the consequence of what was important to her: her encounter with the Lord, her “determined determination”, as she said, to persevere in union with him through prayer,² her firm intention to carry out the mission that had been entrusted to her by the Lord, to whom she offered herself with simplicity saying, in that simple, and one

might even call it ‘rustic’ language: “I am yours, for You I was born, / What do you want of me?”.³ Teresa of Jesus is exceptional, first of all, because she is holy. Her docility to the Spirit united her to Christ and she remained “all afire with the love of God”.⁴ She expressed her experience with beautiful words, saying: “Already I gave myself completely, / and have changed in such a way, / That my Beloved is for me, / and I am for my Beloved.”⁵ Jesus had taught that “out of the abundance of the heart, his mouth speaks” (Lk 6:45). The audacity, creativity and excellence of Saint Teresa as a reformer are the fruit of the inner presence of the Lord. We say that we are not experiencing “an epoch of changes, but an epochal change”.⁶ And in this sense, our times share many similarities with those of the 16th century in which the Saint lived. As then, today too Christians are called to ensure that, through us, the power of the Holy Spirit may continue to renew the face of the ground (cf. Ps 104:30), in the certainty that after all, it is saints who allow the world to advance and approach its ultimate goal.

It is good to remember the universal call to holiness of which the Second Vatican Council spoke (cf. LG 39-42). “that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity; by this holiness as such a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society. In order that the faithful may reach this perfection, they must use their strength accordingly as they have received it, as a gift from Christ.... They must devote themselves with all their being to the glory of God and the service of their neighbor”. Thus says

number 40 of *Lumen Gentium*. Holiness is not only for some “specialists of the divine”, but rather it is the vocation of all believers. It is through Baptism that we receive the union with Christ, which mystics like Saint Teresa experience in a special way by pure grace. The saints stimulate and motivate us, but they are not there for us to literally try to copy them. Holiness is not copied, “for that could even lead us astray from the one specific path that the Lord has in mind for us. The important thing is that each believer discern his or her own path”,⁷ each of us has his or her own journey of holiness, of encounter with the Lord.

In fact, Saint Teresa herself warned her nuns that prayer is not to experience extraordinary things, but to unite ourselves to Christ. And the works of charity are the sign that this union is real. “This is the reason for prayer, my daughters, the purpose of the spiritual marriage: the birth always of good works”.⁸ she said in *The Interior Castle*. And before that in the same book, she had warned: “When I see people very anxious to know what sort of prayer they practise, covering their faces and afraid to move or think lest they should lose any slight tenderness and devotion they feel, I know how little they understand how to attain union with God since they think it consists in such things as these. No, sisters, no; our Lord expects works from us. If you see a sick sister whom you can relieve, never fear losing your devotion; have compassion.... This is the true union of our will with the will of God”.⁹ In *The Interior Castle*, she also said this: in short, “a person’s perfection is measured not by the information or knowledge they possess, but by the depth of their charity”,¹⁰ and other similar things.

Saint Teresa teaches us that the path that made her an exceptional woman and a person of reference throughout the centuries, the path of prayer, is open to all those who humbly open themselves to the action of the Spirit in their lives, and that the sign that we are advancing on this path is to be ever more humble, more attentive to the needs of our brothers and sisters, better children of the holy People of God. Such a path is not open to those who consider themselves to be pure and perfect, the Cathars of all the centuries, but to those who, aware of their sins, discover the beauty of the mercy of God who welcomes and redeems everyone, and invites everyone to friendship. It is interesting that the consciousness of one’s own condition as a sinner is what opens the door to the path of holiness. Saint Teresa, who considered herself very “weak and wretched” — this is how she described herself — recognized that God’s goodness “is greater than all the evil we can do”, and he “remembers not our ingratitude”.... Remember his words and “see what he has done for me”, she said, “who first wearied of offending” him before he “ceased forgiving me”. We are first to weary of offending God, of walking in strange ways, rather than God of forgiving us. He never grows tired of forgiving. We get tired of asking for forgiveness, and therein lies the danger. The Lord is “never weary of giving and never can [his] mercies be exhausted. Let us not tire of receiving”,¹¹ opening our hearts with humility. One of her favourite passages of Scripture was the first verse of Psalm 89, which in a sense, she made her motto for life: “I will sing forever the mercies of the Lord”. That “mercy” of God.

Prayer made Saint Teresa an exceptional woman, a creative and innovative woman. Starting from prayer, she discovered the ideal of fraternity that she wanted to make a reality in the convents she founded: “all must be friends with each other, love each other, be fond of each other and help each other”.¹² And when I see ‘quarrels’ in a convent, inside a convent, or ‘quarrels’ between convents, ‘I am from here’, ‘I am from there’, ‘I interpret this way’, ‘I accept this from the Church, I do not accept this’... the poor nuns have forgotten their Foundress, what she taught them. In prayer she felt treated as a bride and friend of the risen Christ. Through prayer she opened herself to hope. And I want to finish this greeting with this thought. Like Teresa, Doctor of the Church, we are experiencing a difficult time, one that is not easy at all, that requires God’s faithful friends, strong friends.¹³ The great temptation is to give in to disappointment, resignation, the foreboding and unfounded omen that everything will go wrong. That infertile pessimism, this pessimism of people who are incapable of giving life. Some people, frightened by these thoughts, tend to shut themselves off, to take refuge in little things. I remember the example of a convent, in which all the nuns had sought refuge in little things. The convent was called Saint ... I will not say who, and was in a city, but they called it the “Convent trifle, trifle, trifle”, because they were all locked up in trifling matters, as a refuge, in selfish projects that do not build community, but rather destroy it. Instead, prayer opens us, it allows us to appreciate that God is great, that he is beyond the horizon, that God is good, that he loves us and that history is not getting out of hand. We

may be walking “through the valley of the shadow of death” (Ps 23:4); do not be afraid if the Lord is with you. He never stops walking by our side and leading us to the goal that we all long for: eternal life. We can have the courage to do great things, because we know that we are favoured by God.¹⁴ And with him, we are capable of facing any challenge, because in reality his company alone is what our hearts desire and what gives us the fullness and joy from which we were created. The Saint summarized this in a well-known prayer which I invite you to pray frequently:

Let nothing disturb you,
let nothing frighten you,
all things pass away
God never changes;
patience obtains all things,
whoever has God lacks nothing.
God alone suffices!

May Jesus bless you, and the Virgin and Saint Joseph accompany you. And please do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.

[1] *Homily on the Proclamation of Saint Teresa of Jesus as Doctor of the Church*, 27 September 1970.

[2] Cf. Saint Teresa of Jesus, *The Way of Perfection*.

[3] Saint Teresa of Jesus, “I am Yours and born for You”, *The Complete Poetry of St. Teresa of Avila*.

[4] Cf. *The Book of my Life*.

[5] Saint Teresa of Jesus, “I am Yours and born for You”, *The Complete Poetry of St. Teresa of Avila*.

[6] Cf. *Address to the Roman Curia on the occasion of the Christmas greetings*, 21 December 2019.

[7] Cf. *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 11.

[8] *The Interior Castle*, VII, 4.6.

[9] *The Interior Castle*, V, 3,11.

[10] *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 37.

[11] Saint Teresa of Jesus, *The Book of my Life*, Chapter 19, n. 15.

[12] Saint Teresa of Jesus, *Path of Perfection*, Chap. 4 n. 7.

[13] Cf. Saint Teresa of Jesus, *The Book of my Life*, Chapter 15, n. 5.

[14] Cf. *The Book of my Life*, Chapter 10.3: “Without God nothing can be done — cannot, in my opinion, be purchased with all the labours of the world, because of the great gain it brings us. And what greater gain can we have than some testimony of our having pleased God?”.