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Audience with participants in the Conference organized by the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the Study Conference “Holiness Today” organized by the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, taking place in Rome at the *Augustinianum* Patristic Institute, from 3 to 6 October 2022.

The following is the Pope’s address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I am pleased to meet you at the end of the Conference on “Holiness Today”, organized by the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints. I greet and thank Cardinal Marcello Semeraro, the other Superiors, the officials, the postulators and the collaborators. I greet all of you, from various parts of the world, who have participated in these days of study and reflection, encouraged by the contribution of valuable speakers, exponents of the theological, scientific, cultural and media world.

The theme chosen for the Conference is in tune with the Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, which aims “to repropose the call to holiness in a practical way for our own time, with all its risks, challenges and opportunities” (no. 2). This call is at the heart of the Second Vatican Council, which dedicated an entire chapter of *Lumen Gentium* to the universal vocation to holiness and which affirms: “All the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord, each in his own way, to that perfect holiness whereby the Father himself is perfect” (no. 11). Today, too, it is important to discover holiness in God’s holy people: in the parents who lovingly bring up their children, in the men and women who perform their daily work with commitment, in the people who endure infirmity, in the elderly who continue to smile and offer wisdom. The witness of virtuous Christian conduct, lived out today by so many of the Lord’s disciples, is for all of us an invitation to respond personally to the call to be saints. They are the “saints next door” we all know.

Alongside, or rather, in the midst of this multitude of believers, whom I have called the “saints next door” (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 7), there are those whom the Church indicates as models, intercessors and teachers. These are the beatified and canonized saints, who remind everyone that living the Gospel to the full is possible and beautiful. Holiness, in fact, is not a programme of effort and renunciation, it is not about doing “spiritual gymnastics”, no, it is something else; it is first and foremost the experience of being loved by God, of receiving his love, his mercy, freely given. This divine gift opens us up to gratitude and allows us to experience great joy, which is not the emotion of an instant or mere human optimism, but the certainty of being able to face everything with the grace and boldness that come from God.

Without this joy, faith is reduced to an oppressive and sad exercise; but one does not become a saint with a “long face”: one needs a heart that is joyful and open to hope. This holiness full of good humour is exemplified by the newly baptized John Paul I. For children and young people, Blessed Carlo Acutis is also a model of Christian joy. And always edifying us in his evangelical paradoxicality is the “perfect joy” of Saint Francis of Assisi.

Holiness germinates from the concrete life of Christian communities. The Saints do not come from a “parallel world”; they are believers who belong to God’s faithful people and are integrated into everyday life made up of family, study, work, social, economic and political life. In all these contexts, the Saint walks and works without fear or preclusion, fulfilling God’s will in all circumstances. It is important that each particular Church be attentive to grasping and appreciating the examples of Christian life that have matured within the People of God, which has always had a particular “nose” for recognizing these models of holiness, extraordinary witnesses of the Gospel. It is therefore necessary to take into due consideration the consensus of the people around these Christianly exemplary figures. The faithful, in fact, are endowed by divine grace with an undeniable spiritual perception to identify and recognize in the concrete existence of certain baptized persons the heroic exercise of the Christian virtues. The *fama sanctitatis* does not come primarily from the hierarchy but from the faithful. It is the people of God, in its various components, the protagonist of the *fama sanctitatis*, that is, the common and widespread opinion among the faithful about the integrity of the life of a person, perceived as a witness to Christ and the Beatitudes of the Gospel.

However, it is necessary to confirm that such a reputation for holiness is spontaneous, stable, lasting and widespread in a significant part of the Christian community. Indeed, it is genuine when it resists the changes of time, the fads of the moment, and always generates salutary effects for everyone, as we can see in popular piety.

In our day, proper access to the media can promote knowledge of the Gospel experience of a candidate for beatification or canonization. However, in the use of digital media, especially social networks, there can be a risk of forcing and mystification dictated by less than noble interests. What is needed, therefore, is wise and discerning discernment by all those concerned with the quality of the reputation of holiness. On the other hand, one element that proves the *fama sanctitatis* or *fama martirii* is always the *fama signorum*. When the faithful are convinced of the holiness of a Christian, they have recourse - even massive and passionate recourse - to his or her heavenly intercession; the fulfilment of the prayer by God is a confirmation of this conviction.

Dear brothers and sisters, the Saints are precious pearls; they are always living and relevant, they never lose their value, because they provide a fascinating commentary on the Gospel. Their life is like a catechism in images, the illustration of the Good News that Jesus brought to humanity: that God is our Father and loves everyone with immense love and infinite tenderness. Saint Bernard used to say that, thinking of the saints, he felt himself burning “with great desires” (Disc. 2; *Opera Omnia Cisterc.* 5, 364ff). May their example enlighten the minds of the women and men of our time, reviving faith, animating hope and enkindling charity, so that each one may feel attracted by the beauty of the Gospel and no one may get lost in the mists of meaningless and despair.

I do not want to conclude without mentioning a dimension of holiness to which I dedicated a small chapter in *Gaudete et Exsultate*: the sense of humour. Someone once said: “A sad saint is a poor saint”. Knowing how to enjoy life with a sense of humour, because taking the part of life that makes you laugh lightens the soul. And there is a prayer that I recommend you pray - I have been praying it every day for more than 40 years - the

prayer of Saint Thomas More. It is curious, he is asking something for holiness but he starts by saying: "Grant me, O Lord, good digestion, and also something to digest". He goes straight to the point, but really takes the humour from there. The prayer is in footnote 101 of *Gaudete et Exsultate*, the prayer is there, so you may recite it.

I hope that the insights and solicitations of your conference may help the Church and society to grasp the signs of holiness that the Lord never ceases to inspire, sometimes even in the most unexpected ways. I thank you for your work! I entrust it to the maternal intercession of Mary, Queen of all Saints, and I bless you from my heart. And then, Cardinal Semeraro has already involved you to pray for me; therefore I will not say it, as he has said it! Thank you.
