Nothing More Beautiful

Year Three, Session Two

"The Church We Believe in is Holy"

Catechetical Reflection

Most Rev. Richard Smith, Archbishop of Edmonton December 9, 2010

With this particular session of Nothing More Beautiful, we continue now with our reflection upon the mystery of the Church, the beauty of the Church, the beauty of life in communion with the Lord and through him communion with one another. As we mentioned last time, we are allowing these reflections to be guided by the essential characteristics of the Church, what we traditionally call the "marks" of the Church: the Church we believe in is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Last session considered the Oneness of the Church, and now in the second session we turn to the Holiness of the Church. The Church we believe in is Holy.

Now, when we speak of the holiness of the Church, some people may hesitate and have difficulty with this, given that the unholiness of the members of the Church sometimes is only too evident to our eyes. Indeed we are often painfully aware of the unholiness of our own lives. So when we are conscious of unholiness in our own lives, and the sinful acts of other members of the Church — especially in our day the horrible abuse crises by some members of the clergy — we might wonder how we can possibly speak of the Church as holy? And yet we do. And we do so with conviction. The Church is indefectibly holy, is unchangeably holy. How can that be?

Well, let's begin with the reflection of Bishop Crosby. He said at one point in his talk that the Church is holy because the Lord loves it. This is very important to understand. The Church is holy first and foremost because it is the creation of God. God has fashioned the Church through a double movement of love. Through the Incarnation, the Son of God became one of us and through his life, death and resurrection united humanity to God the Father. The subsequent

outpouring of the Holy Spirit enables those who receive it to be drawn into communion with Jesus, to share in his communion with the Father; and this communion with Jesus brings us into communion with one another. So this double movement of love, the Incarnation and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, has fashioned the Church, and made it specifically the Mystical Body of Christ – Christ is the Head, we are its members. Because Christ is the head of the Church, and because the Holy Spirit dwells within the Church, particularly within the hearts of the believers, we say that, in virtue of the action of God and in virtue of the abiding presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the Church, the Church is holy.

There are other elements of the Church that we could call structural or constitutive elements, which also enable us to say that the Church is, objectively speaking, holy. There is the treasury of faith. We have Sacred Scripture. We have the sacraments of the Church through which the paschal mystery of Christ is rendered present, irrespective of the personal holiness of the minister. These formal elements in the Church also enable us to say that the Church is holy, and unchangeably so.

At the same time, we know that the Church is also the people of God. The Church is formed by human beings, who are called themselves to be holy. Now, of course, holiness is proper to God alone. Only God is perfect. Only God is without sin. Yet God has taken the initiative, reached out and touched people with his love and invited them to share in his holiness. The holiness of the people of God is a derived holiness. It is the love of God that makes us holy. This love has been made manifest in the gift of Jesus Christ, it has been poured into our hearts by the gift of the Holy Spirit, and it draws us into communion with all who have been touched and transformed by God's grace, that communion we call the Church.

Now while it is true that holiness is God's gift bestowed at his loving initiative, it is also true that holiness is our task. We are called to receive this gift of holiness from our Lord, yes, but also called to exercise of freedom to give a response of love to God in return, to live out that holiness, to participate consciously and allow this particular gift of God to transform our entire lives.

Often when we think of people who are holy, we instinctively will begin to think of the great saints — those who even in our own day are recognized as "heroes of the Faith." Jean Vanier and Mother Theresa are examples that come to mind. Truly these are holy people, but as both Bishop Crosby and Agnes Bedard pointed out, holiness is meant to be lived out by everyone in the day-to-day ordinary circumstances of our lives. Holiness is an extraordinary gift, an extraordinary joy and an extraordinary blessing, but it is meant to be lived out and manifested in the ordinariness of everyday life. Bishop Crosby pointed to a few examples that he has come across of people who, in the normal course of their day, took time for people they met in need, and gave up what they had hoped to do at that particular moment in order to make themselves available to the other and help them. By loving God and neighbour in this way, they made visible the holiness which resided within their hearts.

What I'd like to draw out from Agnes Bedard's presentation is what is really at the center of a life of Christian holiness. Christian holiness finds the study of Scripture and the teaching of the Church, living in accordance with that teaching, participating in the sacraments, above all the Eucharist, serving the needy, and so on. These external acts are all part of the Christian life, certainly. Yet the heart of holiness is relationship, a relationship with Jesus Christ. Following the teaching of Pope Benedict XVI, we have often said in our *Nothing More Beautiful* series that Christianity stems from a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and growth in this personal encounter. This personal relationship with the Lord remains always the wellspring of a Christian life of holiness. In our encounter with Jesus Christ we are given the gift of a participation in his holiness and, with the help of his grace, live out that holiness in the ordinariness of our daily lives.

Sadly, we know it is also true that the Church, in her members, experiences sinfulness. We are weak, fallible, vulnerable human beings and at times we fail. At times we stumble. This is all part of being what the Church herself calls a pilgrim Church. We are a people on pilgrimage, saints in potential if we can put it that way. We are blessed with the gift of initial holiness at Baptism. We are renewed in holiness as we celebrate the sacraments, and yet we continue to struggle, to face temptations and at times to fail. But the Lord is always there to heal us, to pick us up and to get us back on track by giving us his mercy and his love in the sacraments. The mystical body of Christ is a complex reality. It is perfectly and indefectibly holy by virtue of the

presence and gifts of God, and yet always in need of reform because of the weakness of its members. *Ecclesia semper reformanda*, as the Church and her theologians will often put it.

As we consider the presentations given to us by Bishop Crosby and Agnes Bedard, let us reflect deeply upon God's desire that we be holy; that we share his life, that we share his love and we share his holiness. Let's not hesitate to examine our lives with honesty and ask how we are failing in our call to holiness. Let us carry out this self-examination in hope, remembering that the Lord is near us in love. The love of the Lord makes the Church holy. The love of the Lord makes us holy. As we say in the third Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass, "All life and all holiness comes from you, Father, and through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, by the working of the Holy Spirit." Let us pray that the Holy Spirit will so work in our lives and in the lives of all members of the Church that we will all grow in holiness and thus shine forth before the world as a sign of the holiness that God wills for all people.