The Universal Call to Holiness

Chapter Five, “The Universal Call to Holiness”, of the Vatican II document Lumen Gentium (the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) takes up the matter that all who believe in Jesus Christ regardless of their vocation in life are called to holiness. At first, this might not seem to be so radical a concept; however, prior to the Council there existed within the Church a certain consensus among priests, religious and the laity that only the first two groups were specifically called and set aside to attain holiness. Chapter Five put an end to this line of thought.

United to Christ as his bride, the Church is “indefectibly holy” and, therefore, everyone who is part of the Church “is called to holiness.” Holiness is expressed in many ways in each individual’s particular way of life. (39) Significantly, the document states that it is through the sacrament of baptism, and not holy orders, that all are called to “perfection in charity” and to be holy people. (40)

What Does it Mean to be Holy?
Following in Jesus’s footsteps in order to become more like Jesus is the path to holiness. Every Christian must seek God’s will in all matters and devote themselves to love of God and service to their neighbor by utilizing their own personal gifts in the duties, circumstances and conditions of their life.

To be holy, then, is to be about God’s business above all else. It is about opening oneself to the desires of God and placing oneself in the hands of God. In holiness each person comes to realize that one’s life is not about her/his self but about following the projects and plans of God. In other words, we set aside our hopes and dreams in order to attend to God’s business.

Knowing What God Has Planned for Us
It surely is impossible to ever know for certain what plans God has for us. In the words of Thomas Merton, “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me … and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.”

The Church in Lumen Gentium tells us that in order to know God’s will we are to hear the Word of God, use the sacraments, participate in liturgy, pray, give of ourselves in self-giving love and exercise the virtues. (42) For each person the voice of God can be heard in whatever prompts that person to greatest love, greatest justice, greatest truth and greatest self-gift. Again Merton: when faced with a difficult decision, the voice of God can probably be found in the one that calls for greatest self-gift.

Married Life
Of special concern to the Council was that married couples and parents follow their own proper path to holiness. Married couples and parents are “a sign and a participation in that very love with which Christ loved his bride,” the Church as they sustain one another in grace throughout their lives, welcome their children in love and teach them their faith. (41)

Elsewhere, the Council says in Gaudium et Spes (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) that Christians are called to holiness through engagement with the world. In a particular way the well-being of individuals and society is intimately connected to the health of marriages and family life. Families can achieve holiness when together they hear the Word of God and heed it in their daily activities.

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For additional reading:

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