

# TRAINING IN HOLINESS

BY DANIELLE PETERS

Bergognone (Ambrogio di  
Stefano da Fossano),  
*The Assumption of the  
Virgin*, detail (15th c.);

Image ©The Metropolitan  
Museum of Art; courtesy of  
Images for Academic Publishing  
(IAP), [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org).

On the last day of the Jubilee Year 2000, Pope John Paul II (Karol Józef Wojtyła, 1920–2005) outlined the path the Church is to adopt in the third millennium. His Apostolic Letter written especially for the occasion, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (NMI), can be likened to a compass guiding the Church towards the exploration of the newest epoch. At the same time, it also serves as a navigational device for an assessment of the world in miniature—a person’s interior realm—often unknown and unexplored. In a world deprived of a society guided by a Christian system of values, *NMI* intrepidly highlights that holiness “expresses best the mystery of the Church” (§7). Fourteen years after its promulgation, this letter is an excellent guide in exploring the following questions:

- *In the estimation of St. John Paul II, what exactly is holiness?*
- *How can it be attained?*
- *What presuppositions are necessary to aspire to a life of holiness in a secular environment?*
- *Who can best teach us to reach this spiritual height?*

We turn to the recently canonized St. John Paul II not only because of his eloquent message on sanctity but above all because of his personal holiness, to which the persistent call for *santo subito* at his funeral, the opening of his beatification process less than three months after his death, and his canonization in record time all attest.<sup>1</sup>

## Holiness is for Everybody

As one of the youngest bishops to attend the Second Vatican Council, Bishop Wojtyła, shaped by his experience of a communist Poland, was interested in methods of practicing “asceticism in the world.”<sup>2</sup> In his estimation, the crucial question for the Council was how the Church could assist the human person—Christian or not—in need of direction and formation, in order to combat a growing materialistic environment with its scientific, positivist, and dialectical trends. Hence, when “The Universal Call to Holiness of the People of God” was schematized during the Council’s fall session of 1963, Bishop Wojtyła insisted that maximum care should be given to explain to the faithful “this first vocation to sanctity clearly.”<sup>3</sup> In particular, one anthropological principle, found in article 24 of the Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, captured the keen interest of the Bishop of

Kraków with its emphasis on the nature of each human vocation. Alluding to a certain likeness between the union among the Divine Persons and the communion among the children of God in truth and charity, the Council Fathers teach: “This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for Himself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself (Lk 17:33)” (*Gaudium et Spes*, §24). John Paul II would later affirm that in this article “is found the true synthesis to which the Church must always look when in dialogue with the people of this or of any other age; she is aware of possessing a message which is the vital synthesis of the expectation of every human being and the response that God addresses to each one.”<sup>4</sup>

The anthropological notion laid down in *Gaudium et Spes* identifies human fulfillment, i.e. holiness, as a person’s self-gift to God. Through Baptism, Christians are incorporated in Jesus Christ, the archetype of self-gift, manifested most perfectly in his paschal self-donation. By participating in the self-gift of Jesus Christ, all Christians perceive of holiness as a vocation and an aspiration, leading to never-ending communion with God, the origin of holiness (cf. *NMI* §46).

In accord with this conviction, then-Archbishop Wojtyła expounded on the idea of self-gift in his two main post-conciliar works, *The Acting Person* and *Sources of Renewal*.<sup>5</sup> The former was addressed to a pluralistic audience, highlighting a person’s interior disposition or personal sphere as irreducible and irreplaceable. To the extent that a person succeeds in integrating all levels of the human microcosm in

action, Wojtyła argued, he or she will experience self-fulfillment or felicity. Archbishop Wojtyła’s *Sources of Renewal* served as a pastoral guide for his diocese. It emphasized the supernatural dignity of the Christian person—God’s personal gift to his child—by which human nature is elevated and restored to its proper value, the image and likeness of God. The Christian’s gift in return occurs in accepting and participating in redemption. Wojtyła’s instructions included faith and conscience formation as well as the right application of freedom in action, from which results “a Christian life style, a way of thinking and acting.”<sup>6</sup>

Invigorated by the principle of the self-gift inherent in the pursuit of holiness, Archbishop Wojtyła decidedly helped promote the causes for beatification and canonization of candidates under his jurisdiction, among them Maximilian Kolbe and Faustina Kowalska. Moreover, as is well known, during his twenty-seven year pontificate, John Paul II raised more candidates to the honors of the altar than any pope in history and beatified hundreds of servants of God. Although this practice met at times with criticism, he hoped to draw attention to the fact that the “universal call to holiness” (*Lumen Gentium*, ch. 5) has been embraced on every continent and among people of every walk of life. Accordingly, he also firmly prioritized the Church’s future pastoral praxis by “saying that all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to holiness” (*NMI* §30, emphasis original). For the 263rd successor of St. Peter, sanctity was not just a vocation for a few “specialists,” but meant for everyone who seriously embraces this call to a holy life within the Church (*NMI* §40). Thus, it is not surprising that all of his magisterial texts allude to holiness.<sup>7</sup>

## Training in Holiness

*Novo Millennio Inuente* addresses holiness six times as the goal of the Christian’s earthly pilgrimage.<sup>8</sup> The letter draws attention to the primacy of the interior life and to charity as the primary virtue of a holy people.<sup>9</sup> In addition, it clarifies that the pursuit of holiness must include a “spiritual path” without which “external structures . . . will serve very little purpose” (*NMI* §43). Concretely, the Pope who so enjoyed skiing and biking turns a familiar sports image into a spiritual charge by urging everyone to engage in an all-inclusive and rigorous “training in holiness” (*NMI* §§31–32).<sup>10</sup> At issue is a timely education towards sanctity “adapted to the peoples’ needs” (*NMI* §§31–32).

Traditionally, striving for holiness was above all concerned with the person’s rational or spiritual nature. John Paul II, however, emphasized that “the Church has always considered the act of entrusting oneself to God [i.e. self-gift] to be a moment of fundamental decision which engages the *whole* person” (*Fides et Ratio*, §13, emphasis added). In his philosophical treatise *The Acting Person*, he noted that the soul is more likely to soar when enlightened and disciplined (self-)education takes into consideration the laws of the body by means of adequate nutrition, protection from weather and harm, suitable work, and sufficient sleep.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, he emphasized that a person’s psyche effects the bodily condition and vice versa. Wojtyła explained that an appropriate formation of the psychic dynamisms—the psyche in action and collaboration with the body and emotions—requires submission to truth, which in turn makes possible authentic freedom in self-determination and thus transcendence in action.<sup>12</sup>

From the theological point of view, the Pope stressed that in order to “attain all the fullness destined . . . by the Creator,” the education of the *humanum* is essential in view of the *divinum* since the latter

depends, builds on, and perfects the former.<sup>13</sup> In other words, an effective training for holiness needs to take into consideration the individual’s physical and emotional condition so as to provide the most suitable presuppositions for grace. St. John Paul II argued that “this theology of the body is the basis of the most suitable method of the pedagogy of the body, that is, the education (the self-education) of man.”<sup>14</sup> Following this training plan, the Pope was convinced that “in earthly life, the dominion of the spirit over the body—and the simultaneous subordination of the body to the spirit—can, as the result of persevering work on themselves, express a personality that is spiritually mature.”<sup>15</sup> His proposal for the human formation of candidates to the priesthood is applicable to all states of life: “Human maturity, and in particular affective maturity, requires a clear and strong training in freedom, which expresses itself in convinced and heartfelt obedience to the ‘truth of one’s own being,’ to the ‘meaning’ of one’s own existence, that is to the ‘sincere gift of self’ as the way and fundamental content of the authentic realization of self” (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, §44; citing *Gaudium et Spes*, §24).

## Exercising the Heart

John Paul II considered God's personal gift to each human being "a constant exhortation to act in such a way as to be worthy of such a gift."<sup>16</sup> The divine gift thus becomes a mission: its recipient assumes the responsibility "of the moral and spiritual commitments involved."<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, accepting God's gift becomes visible and effective in a person's "need of permanent conversion that knows how to accept the gift of God in the act of overcoming one's selfishness" (*NMI* §31). This insight in turn should lead to an "authentic conversion of the heart," i.e. "the evangelical *metanoia*" (*NMI* §45). It is through this personal and therefore integrated experience of one's true condition that God's gift can become effective.

This ongoing "laborious effort of the human heart" is a "process whereby reprobation is transformed into salvific love, a love which is capable of suffering" and necessary for a sincere self-gift (*Dominum et Vivificantem*, §45). Here we touch upon the core of all educational efforts towards holiness: the human heart with its capacity to love. While the heart is the recipient and locus of the gift, it also accommodates the vices of the flesh, of the senses, and of pride. John Paul II likened the dispositions of the human heart and its countless possibilities of becoming to the stage of the *dramatis personae*. Each person assumes responsibility as actor in the drama of his or her love. An effective training of the heart needs to aim at "the purity of the man of

lust" who allows himself to be entirely permeated by God's gift.<sup>18</sup> It hopes to achieve a profound spiritual transformation culminating in a new heart. Each Christian is called to this radical transformation while ascending to the heights of sanctity through the continuous exercise of love freely given.

## Personal Training Plan

In order for grace to become fruitful, John Paul II proposed that the faithful abide by “a particular style of life” which provides them with “a special source of spiritual and supernatural energy” and aids them “to live . . . [a] moral life in a way worthy of . . . [their] sublime vocation as ‘sons in the Son’” (*Redemptionis Donum*, §7). Such a style of life could be considered the Christian’s personal training plan, adjusted to his or her particular need of self-education. The training program should aim at making the gift of self available in everyday circumstances and through its continuous practice, facilitate acceptance of and cooperation with the gift. In short, it corresponds to John Paul II’s anthropological formula: make of yourself a gift to God and others in and through the circumstances of everyday life.

A lifestyle geared towards becoming a gift to others demands a kind of commitment which aims at integration of faith and morals in the everyday life. Such a lifestyle “consists in making practical choices—at the personal, family, social, and international levels”; furthermore, it is based on a Christian set of values which stresses “the primacy of being over having, [and] of the person over things” (*Evangelium Vitae*, §§34, 98). For John Paul II, it is self-evident that a lifestyle seeking holiness is manifested “in doing ordinary things in an extraordinary way, that is, as lovingly as possible” in “our usual occupations.”<sup>19</sup>

Being a Christian and practicing the Catholic faith have always taken courage; however, having sainthood as a goal in today’s society borders on the exotic. A Christian lifestyle almost inevitably meets with ridicule and dire scrutiny in a world that is continuously challenging traditional identities. In fact, we can observe that people at all stages in life perennially need to clarify for themselves: Why do I live this way? Could there perhaps be yet a better, more gratifying way for me? Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, a compatriot of John Paul II, characterizes the *dramatis personae* generated in our present culture as *flâneur*, *vagabond*,

*player*, and *tourist*.<sup>20</sup> Bauman’s characters capture well the condition of the heart and the educational needs of those embracing the call to and subsequent training for holiness today.

The *flâneur*, meaning “stroller,” prefers to wander incognito; he masters the art of seeing without being caught looking. While he is not asocial—he needs the crowds to thrive—he does not blend in, preferring to savor his solitude. He is a stranger among strangers: he avoids lasting commitments, bathes in events, information, and contacts which change quickly. The *flâneur*’s “ultimate freedom is screen directed, lived in the company of surfaces, and called zapping.”<sup>21</sup>

The present-day acceleration of life’s processes is accompanied by a hastening of the pace of life. People are continuously driven, rushing and anxious. Zygmunt Bauman has named this unsettled type of person *vagabond*. In order to achieve more things in less time, vagabonds take advantage of fast food and speed dating; they take power naps and cut breaks. They are experts in multitasking. Psychologists diagnose this state as “hurry sickness,” the precursor of a burnout.

A culture which refuses to rely on truths from yesterday, and where the experts and scientists of today contradict each other in almost all major existential questions, produces a type of person whom Bauman identifies as *player*. He writes, “In the life-game of the postmodern consumers the rules of the game keep changing in the course of playing. The sensible strategy is therefore to keep each game short. . . . Not to wed one’s life to one vocation only. Not to swear consistency and loyalty to anything and anybody.”<sup>22</sup> In fact, players are experts in adjusting to new situations by inventing new rules to achieve victory.

The phenomenon of migration in the present age results in a meeting and mixing of cultures, potentially contributing to the erosion of basic reference points to life.<sup>23</sup> Bauman compares the nomads of our time to *tourists*, who seek the charm of new and exotic adventures with no intentions to settle. In fact, the tourists are afraid of being home-bound, of being tied to a place and barred from exit. They only feel comfortable in the mainstream.

Bauman’s survey of the present day *dramatis personae* matches the observation of the 2012 Bishops’ Synod deliberating on “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith.” The Synod’s *Instrumentum Laboris* proposes that the “charm and seductive character” of the world and of culture have become “not just an external threat . . . but one inherent to everyday life” (§53). For the superficial onlooker, the resulting lifestyles manifest themselves as the ultimate freedom to pick and choose. Yet, those who investigate more closely speak of being infected by the bacillus of the mainstream and the concurrent frightening prospect of a “running on empty” of the

interior life. On account of this grave spiritual crisis, people are “tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph 4:14). From pope to toddler, it appears that nobody is exempt from this emptiness of heart which weakens the ability of participation in the creative and self-giving activity of God. Consequently, each one of us may see as if in a mirror certain characteristics of the *flâneur*, *vagabond*, *player*, or *tourist* in ourselves: for example, an overly critical intellect, a will submerged in the mainstream, a reluctance toward or even fear of commitments, and an underdeveloped compassion. Yet, consciously or not, the *flâneurs*, *vagabonds*, *players*, and *tourists* in us yearn for an authentic and reliable compass instead of being a follower of “a false concept of man’s autonomy.”<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, today’s restlessness discloses the soul’s profound longing for a fuller life. Experts tell us that an efficient training for holiness is most effective when it includes Christian rituals, symbols, mystery, and sensory appeal in order to saturate emaciated hearts.<sup>25</sup> In his Apostolic Exhortation *Rosarium Virginis Mariae (RVM)*, St. John Paul II recommends in particular that we enter “the school of Mary” (§§1, 3, 14, 43), where this spiritual dimension of the human heart and its vocation to self-gift are prioritized ideals of the curriculum.<sup>26</sup>

## Training in the School of Mary

As with any training, the choice of a school and of a teacher for the spiritual life is of crucial importance.<sup>27</sup> Not only must the educator possess the qualities necessary to lead (*e-ducare*) his students to the appointed goal, the teacher should also embody its ideal and make it transparent. John Paul II saw in the Blessed Virgin Mary the teacher *par excellence*, whose self-gift surpasses that of all other human beings. Like many other holy men and women before him, John Paul II was convinced that whether a person's drama turns into tragedy or bliss depends on whom or what he loves. "More concretely, the choice is one . . . between Nietzsche's self-assertive *übermensch* (overman), or the *Theotókos* (Mother of God), with her receptivity to the will of God."<sup>28</sup> As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (who would succeed John Paul II as Pope Benedict XVI) stated: "It may just be the task of Marian piety to awaken the heart and purify it in faith. If the misery of contemporary man is his increasing disintegration into *mere bios* and *mere* rationality, Marian piety could work against this 'decomposition' and help man to rediscover unity in the center, from the heart."<sup>29</sup>

Mary's maternal love is the key which unlocks hearts even when the religious organ in a person seems to have died. Moreover, her inner harmony, peace, and gratuitous love attract like a magnet. Committing to Mary's educational activity, however, does not lead to an infantile subservience or soft pampering. On the contrary, her training "mirrors the loftiest sentiments of which the human heart is capable: the self-offering totality of love" (*Redemptoris Mater*, §46). Acknowledging the austere education she received in the school of her Son, John Paul II posed the rhetorical question: "Could we have any better teacher than Mary?" (*RVM* §14). Naturally, all that will be said about Mary as teacher must be evaluated in light of her unique gift, her divine motherhood, through which she is united with her Son and "his singular graces and offices" (*RM* §42). Only in this context of communion between Mother and Son through whom "the Blessed

Virgin is also intimately united with the Church" (*RM* §42) can we be assured that her school brings forth saints (cf. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, §62). Mary's lesson plan includes instructions on faith, silence, and attentive listening, which are necessary presuppositions to grow in conformity to Christ and to make a gift of self to God (cf. *RVM* §24 and *GS* §§22, 24). Her method of teaching transports students spiritually "in her arms and in her heart" whereby she introduces them to the "blessed fruit of her womb" (cf. Lk 1:42) and "the inseparable bond between Christ and her" (*RVM* §24). Mary's pedagogy of holiness thus becomes fruitful through her maternal mediation and example which invites imitation. John Paul II observed that Our Lady's school of life imprints a "Marian dimension on the life of a disciple of Christ" (*RM* §45)<sup>32</sup> which "has its beginning in Christ but can also be said to be definitively directed towards him" (*RM* §46).

There exists a certain parallel in St. John Paul II's teaching between the school of Mary and its alumni, the saints. It was essential for him during his 104 pastoral visits outside of Italy to make a pilgrimage to the National Marian Shrine. Equally important to him was the acknowledgement of candidates who had successfully trained for holiness in the country he was visiting. It was a joy for him to celebrate 147 beatification ceremonies for 1,338 servants of God and 51 canonizations for 482 saints. In doing so, he wished to foster a nation's pride in its own sacred places and persons, "a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind" (*RM* §28; cf. *LG* §1). At the same time, he wished to highlight the efficacy of Mary's school in each country.

John Paul II truly believed—and his life poses an excellent example—that in this school of holiness we have in Mary the best compass and a relentless teacher, who with great solicitude will "train us and mold us . . . until Christ is 'fully formed' in us (cf. Gal 4:19)" (*RVM* §15; cf. *LG* §60).



## NOTES

1 On May 9, 2005, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI waived the required five-year waiting period for a beatification process to begin. There are only two other cases under the auspices of present canon law for whom the waiting period has been cancelled: Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Sister Lucia, the last survivor of the seers of Our Lady at Fatima.

2 *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani Secundi* (Roma: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1973), II-4, 342.

3 *Ibid.*, 340.

4 John Paul II, "Address to the Conference Studying the Implementation of the Second Vatican Council" (27 February 2000) in *L'Osservatore Romano*, English ed. (8 March 2000), 11.

5 Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, trans. and rev. Andrzej Potocki (Boston: Dordrecht, 1979). *Ibid.*, *Sources of Renewal: The Implementation of the Second Vatican Council*, trans. P.S. Falla (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

6 Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal*, 18.

7 His teaching highlights: "Holiness and Mission," "Holiness and the Practice of Virtues," "Holiness in Seeking Perfection," "Holiness and Witness," and "Yearning for Holiness." Descriptive terms for holiness are: conversion of heart, the formation of the human character, gift of self, human dignity, the transcendence of the human person, love of God and neighbor, martyrdom, morality, and the example of the saints.

8 Cf. *NMI* §§7, 30–32, 38–39, 48.

9 *Ibid.* §§37–39, 49–50, 59.

10 The call for "training in holiness" is evoked three times in *NMI* §§31–32. Of the nine translations of this document available online from the Vatican, all but the English use *pedagogy* of holiness (*sanctitatis peadagogia*).

11 Cf. Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, 230.

12 *Ibid.*, 224.

13 John Paul II, *God, Father and Creator: A Catechesis on the Creed*, vol. 1 (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1995), 43.

14 John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997), 214.

15 Ibid., 241.

16 John Paul II, *Jesus, Son and Savior: A Catechesis on the Creed*, vol. 2 (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 1996), 404.

17 Ibid.

18 See *Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*, 212f.

19 John Paul II, “Holiness: Doing the Ordinary as Lovingly as Possible: Address to Pilgrims and Devotees of Four More Saints” (26 November 2001) in *L’Osservatore Romano*, English ed. (28 November 2001), 3. Cf. *NMI* §58.

20 Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1995).

21 Zygmunt Bauman, “From Pilgrim to Tourist—Or a Short History of Identity” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 18–36. Here 28.

22 Ibid., 24–25.

23 Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum Laboris* for the XIII Ordinary General Assembly: The New Evangelization or the Transmission of the Christian Faith (Vatican City: 27 May 2012), 55.

24 Benedict XVI, “Discourse at the LXI General Assembly of the Italian Bishops’ Conference” (27 May 2010) in *L’Osservatore Romano*, English ed. (27 June 2010), 3–4.

25 See John Flynn, LC’s interview with author Phil Cooke, “Getting Your Story Heard: Considering How Christians Can Get People to Listen” *Zenit.org* (10 May 2013).

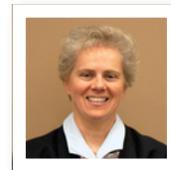
26 See John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, §§7, 53, 58. See also Benedict XVI, “Encounter with Men and Women Religious, Seminarians, and Representatives of Ecclesial Movements” in *L’Osservatore Romano*, English ed. (31 May 2006), 6.

27 Cf. John Paul II, “Culture and Holiness: a Winning Combination: Address to the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart” (9 November 2000) in *L’Osservatore Romano*, English ed. (22 November 2000), 7.

28 Tracey Rowland, “Reclaiming the Tradition: John Paul II as the Authentic Interpreter of Vatican II” in *John Paul the Great: Maker of the Post-Conciliar Church*, ed. William Oddie (London: Catholic Truth Society & The Catholic Herald), 35.

29 Joseph Ratzinger, “Thoughts on the Place of Marian Doctrine” in *International Catholic Review Communio* 30 (Spring 2003), 160.

30 See The Pontifical International Marian Academy, *The Mother of the Lord: Memory, Presence, Hope*, trans. Thomas A. Thompson (Staten Island: Alba House, 2007), 70–71 for a discussion on this “Marian dimension.”



*Danielle Peters is a post-doctoral research fellow at the Institute for Church Life, specializing in Mariology.*

