



# Boston Catholic Journal



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DEDICATED TO MARY MOTHER OF GOD

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## The Imputation of Holiness

**By denying what we affirm, we affirm what we deny**

**Ostensibly, we esteem ourselves neither holy nor wise.** Indeed, we are much more likely to say, “I am a sinner”, than, “I am holy.”

We recognize a terrible presumption in the latter statement, and the even greater likelihood that our uttering this would be a clear sign that we, indeed, are not holy — *even* as we secretly relish what we publicly repudiate: being esteemed holy. We are so clever, so subtle in our pretensions that *we ourselves* inwardly hold it to be true — by virtue of our repudiating it. By denying what we affirm, we affirm what we deny.

- **Truly holy people do not deem themselves holy**
- **I do not deem myself holy**
- **Therefore I must be truly holy**

It is logic itself — in its most seductive ... and subreptive ... form. This form of reasoning is called *Modus Ponens*. The problem with this type argument, however, is that while the *form* is indeed valid, it does not, simply for this reason, give us warrant to hold that the statements within it are necessarily true. In this case, the *form* of the

argument is completely valid — it is sound reasoning. However, while it is the case that the first premise is true, it is also the case that the conclusion is false.

The argument presented above is really a paradigm for Catholics. And the great deception within it is not so much that we succeed in deceiving others, but that we succeed in deceiving ourselves.

## How can we succeed in deceiving ourselves?

Now, we must think on that a moment. *We deceive ourselves*. It is almost an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. How can we succeed in deceiving ourselves? One cannot deceive without being aware of the deceit ... right? This is the great deception. *We* deceptively deceive *ourselves*. It is, in other words, deception as a duplexity: it is a double negative, A negation of a negation – which is always its opposite: an affirmation. "I am not "not-X" – which is to say, "I am X". It is a false negation. It is the mere *appearance* of a negation, and that is why it is the greater deception. It is not that we simply deceive others by appearances (in this case, in the the form of words), but by another and involuted turn of appearances we attempt to deceive *ourselves*.

Of course, it never comes off. It remains an oxymoron. While we may have succeeded in our attempt to deceive others, we also recognize that we have attempted – and failed – to deceive ourselves. *We believe* ourselves holy although we are not. In fact, we sometimes even honestly strive to believe that we are *not* holy ... but even that effort itself only serves to reinforce our belief that we *are* holy. After all, who but one holy, would seek to think themselves otherwise? One who is holy. It is circular, and because it is, truth cannot enter into the closed confines circumscribed by that self-perpetuating circle of deception.

We nevertheless ascribe holiness to others (and deem this a virtue, a kind of largesse) – but in reality do not, or seldom, sincerely believe it. We are reluctant to concede to others what we do not possess ourselves. The circle of deception grows wider, consuming others in that incessant consumption of itself. "So and so is holy ... *but* ..." We distrust holiness because we are not genuinely acquainted with it.

The real question involves the question itself. **Why**. *Why* are we asking the question of others, or more importantly, why are we asking it of ourselves? Something is amiss.

## *God alone is holy*

It is worth repeating: *God alone is holy.*

Only inasmuch as we participate in God Himself, do we participate in holiness. We do not possess it. Another does not possess it. Neither ever will. Only God does. We can only *participate* in that holiness that *is* pre-eminently *God*.

Perhaps an analogy will suffice:

We are not what we participate in. It is distinct from us even as we participate in it. A golfer is one who participates in golf, in the activity of golfing. But he is not “golf”. We may even understand his identity as a golfer as descriptive of *who* he is, and even *what* he is. To some extent this is true. He *is* a golfer: that is to say, the “what” and the “who” of the golfer is, to a greater or lesser degree, tethered to the activity in which he participates. But remove the ball and the club and he is no longer a golfer. Whatever else he *is*, he is *not* a golfer because he no longer participates in golf. While it *is* an activity into which he enters, in which he participates, the activity is not the man.

In much the same way it is absurd of us to conceive of holiness as a possession, as something which can be predicated of us in an ontological sense, that is to say, in and of ourselves, or, for some, through meritorious association. We cannot secretly pride ourselves on our holiness (which, notwithstanding, we methodologically deny). *We have none*. None of our own. We can no more pride ourselves in its possession, than disdain another for lacking it. *It is not ours. It is not theirs. It is God's*. And He participates it to Whom He wills – and even then ... even then, it is not their possession.

We *participate* in God's Holiness – and only insofar as we participate in God Himself.

This frightful arrogance that presumes to judge of itself and others – this audacity to impute holiness to oneself or to others as something *commendatory* – as though it were rigorously acquired and assimilated, much as we acquire and assimilate learning – as though it were possessed *in part* from a greater whole to which it either measurably contributes or from which it substantively derives – this immense hubris goes beyond deception, and encroaches on something ancient and evil.

How often Jesus admonishes us not to judge! Of ourselves or others! Nor does He delimit the terms, confining them to pronouncements of perdition only. *We have no*

*credentials to judge whatever ... on any terms!* Not concerning others. And not concerning ourselves. But most especially not concerning ourselves – and eminently concerning our own presumed holiness.

**The Publican had it right.** He had nothing and he knew it. The Pharisee judged both the publican and himself and found himself wrong before God on both counts. He thought he knew what was holy and believing himself to possess it, set the benchmark for sanctity before which the Publican fell woefully short ...

If it is your wish to make pronouncements on holiness then go to Him Alone Who Is Holy. But do not be hasty. Those eager to be magistrates in the Courts of the Almighty must themselves pass through the dock before they go to the bench...

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