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# A BETTER WAY

## "For This You Yearn"

### The Goal of Holiness in *A Course in Miracles*

**by Robert Perry**

The March-May 2006 issue of *What Is Enlightenment* magazine carried an article on Mother Antonia, sometimes called "the prison angel," who left behind a life in Beverly Hills to live in a Mexican prison and serve its thousands of inmates. The article, by Maura R. O'Connor, opened with these words:

When you think about it, very few of us ever come in contact with holiness in our lifetime. Most of us have to dust the word off just to use it. We may have visited sacred sites such as cathedrals in Europe that house holy relics—the ancient remains of a saint tightly sealed within a crypt, a mummified toe or a bone maybe. But authentic holiness, what the German theologian Rudolf Otto called *Ganz Andere*, "Total Otherness"—that type of holiness capable of melting our personal significance into its greatness—remains largely alien to us. No doubt, it's in part due to the times we live in. Most of us have been raised in a secular culture that avoids even the intimations of hierarchy and absolutes, perfection and reverence. Look "holiness" up in the dictionary and you'll find that someone who is holy is by definition morally and spiritually perfect; they evoke reverence in those around them as a result of their conviction and fearlessness; they are in a persistent state of godliness. Do we believe in perfection nowadays? Are we capable of reverence? Is godliness something we bother to strive for?

Is this true? Do we shrink from the word "holiness"? Are we uncomfortable with the very idea? In this article, I want to help us reconcile ourselves with the word and the idea and the central role they play in *A Course in Miracles*.

In my experience, we *are* uncomfortable with the word "holiness." I see this in the uneasy reactions I get from Course students when I discuss the word. I see it in the gulf between the Course's immense focus on the word and the virtual absence of the word in how we talk about the Course. And I see it in the speed with which we jump to redefine the word when it comes up: "Holiness is really just wholeness." It's as if the word is a bomb that must be defused before it blows something up.

### What is holiness?

Why is this word so threatening? Let's first look at what it means. The best definition of "holy" I have found is in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED):

Free from all contamination of sin and evil, morally and spiritually perfect and unsullied, possessing the infinite moral perfection which Christianity attributes to the Divine character.

Thus, for a person to be holy means (again in the definition of the OED) for that person to be:

Conformed to the will of God....Morally and spiritually unstained; free from sinful affection; of godly character and life; sanctified; saintly; sinless.

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## WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT SAYS

*A Course in Miracles* is a spiritual path. Its purpose is to train us to work miracles—to accept and extend to others the shifts in perception that awaken us to God. It consists of three volumes, which signify the three aspects of its program:

- ◆ Text : Through studying the teaching, the Course's thought system first enters our minds.
- ◆ Workbook for Students: Through doing the practice, the Course's thought system penetrates more and more deeply into our minds.
- ◆ Manual for Teachers: Through extending our healed perception to others, the Course's thought system receives its final reinforcement and becomes the only thing in our minds.

The Course's message is that the source of our suffering is not the world's mistreatment of us, but rather our egocentric attack on the world. This attack convinces us that we have defiled our nature beyond repair, that we are irredeemably guilty. Yet the Course says true reality cannot be defiled; it is a realm of pure, changeless, unified spirit. This realization allows us to forgive the world's apparent mistreatment of us by recognizing that it did not actually occur. And as we see this forgiveness come forth from us—see that we are capable of something genuinely loving and egoless—we gradually realize that we never defiled ourselves. Thus we awaken to the untouched innocence of our true nature.

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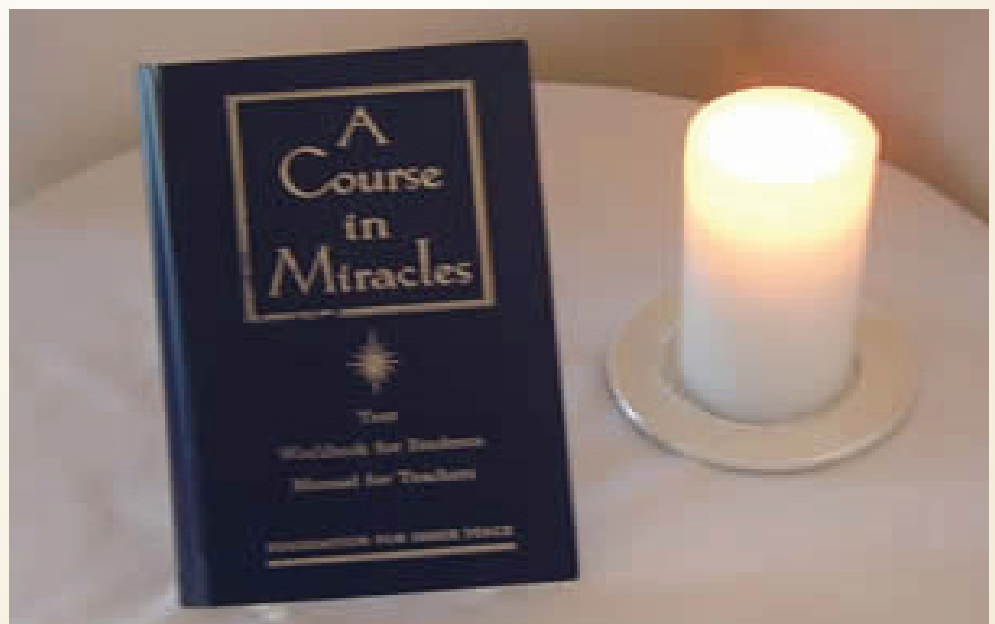
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Do we as Course students see our goal as “possessing the infinite moral perfection” of God, as taking on a “godly character and life,” as actually becoming “saintly”? No wonder we have been keeping “holiness” at arm’s length. As we read this, we may understandably feel our anxiety start to rise, and we may be tempted to quickly respond, “Well, surely the Course has redefined holiness.”

But has it? I don’t think it really has, at least to any significant degree. In the Course, just as in the OED, we find “holiness” again and again contrasted with “sin,” as you can see in the following passages:

Only two purposes are possible. And one is sin, the other holiness. (T-20.VIII.9:1-2)

For holiness is merely the result of letting the effects of sin be lifted. (T-20.VII.4:3)

What faith you give to sin you take away from holiness. And what you offer holiness has been removed from sin. (T-21.III.3:6-7)

All the means that once served sin are redirected now toward holiness. (T-21.III.7:1)

Holiness can not be found where sin is cherished. (W-pI.140.5:2)

There is a sense of holiness in you the thought of sin has never touched. (W-pI.164.4:3)

In the Course, the contrast between holiness and sin is so basic that “sinlessness” (100 refs.) is a common synonym for “holiness,” and “sinless” (61 refs.) a common synonym for “holy.” In the Course, then, “holy” and “sinful” are opposites—just as they are in conventional usage. Here is my attempt to define both “sinful” and “holy” as the Course uses those terms:

To be *sinful* is to have a corrupt, contaminated, impure nature, a nature that does not merely *feel* guilty but truly *is* guilty. This nature hates, attacks, and withdraws from others for the sake of personal gain, and thus acts directly contrary to the Will of God.

To be *holy* is to have a pure, untainted, saintly nature, a nature so radiantly pure that it partakes in the Divine nature. This nature inherently loves, blesses, and unites with others, and thus acts exactly like the Will of God.

I believe the above definitions are true to the Course, but as I look at them, I think they also basically fit the conventional definitions. There are a couple of differences. First, in our culture, “holy” can include a focus on outward religious trappings—having the robes, the beads, the lifestyle that one typically associates with godliness. The Course, however, sees holiness as a matter of content, not form: What is the real *content* of our lives? What essential *purpose* are we expressing in our dealings with others? Those are the crucial questions.

Second, in conventional thought, holiness is acquired. We have made ourselves sinful but we can also make ourselves holy. In the Course, however, God created us forever holy, and so we have only *appeared* to become sinful and thus need to merely *remember* our innate holiness. This is a significant difference, yet whether you say that holiness is acquired or eternal, you are still talking about the same thing. It’s still holiness.

Thus, as long as we adjust for the Course’s holiness having nothing to do with religious trappings and being eternal rather than acquired, the word “holy” in the Course means the same thing as in conventional usage. In either place, it means “free from all contamination of sin and evil.”

Moreover, holiness in the Course is no sidelight. It is central. Forgiveness (which we all know is central) is defined by the Course as the transition from seeing a brother as sinful to seeing him as holy. This enables you to convey to him—through your thoughts, words, and deeds—that he is holy, which is a holy act on your part. By consistently demonstrating holiness in this way, you then remember your own holiness. The logic is obvious: “You must be holy if you offer holiness” (T-15.I.13:8). This is how the goal of the Course is accomplished. The Course, then, is all about *seeing* holiness in our brothers, which leads to *manifesting* holiness in our lives, which leads to *remembering* holiness in ourselves. It is all about holiness. The theme is so central that “holy” and “holiness” are mentioned a total of almost 2,000 times! That’s nearly three times as often as “forgive” and “forgiveness.”

## What is the problem with holiness?

It is not hard to see why we shy away from all this, why we are quick to redefine holiness and why we leave it out of our speech about the Course. How can we possibly lead the life of a saint? The idea seems to stretch us past the breaking point. Yet I think there is a further reason for our discomfort: Our contemporary concept of spirituality is mainly about internal *feelings* and *states*. It is not primarily about *character* and our *effect* on others. Thus, in today's spirituality the central goal tends to be gaining peaceful feelings and blissful inner states. It is not gaining a purified character that has a truly beneficial effect on others and on the world. That latter goal sounds too "old school." It smacks of religion and church, of authority and "shoulds," of the very things we have been trying to get away from.

From within this framework, we virtually worship blissful states. If, for example, we hear that someone consistently experiences higher states, that almost automatically elevates that person to an exalted spiritual status. It's the spiritual equivalent of finding out that someone has an M.D. We may then seek to get close to that person, hoping that some of his magic bliss will rub off on us. We probably don't ask, "What is this person's character as exemplified in his close relationships, in his business dealings, in his off-stage life?" In contemporary spirituality, states are worshipped, character is downplayed.

This same mindset—which is essentially what I have written about elsewhere under the heading of "[boomeritis](#)"—then becomes the lens through which we read *A Course in Miracles*. We read that the goal of the Course is peace and we say, *yes!* We read about experiencing holy instants and we say, "I want those." But we read about helping our brothers and we say, "That must be something I do with my thoughts." We read about doing our part to save the world and we think, "That must mean saving my *perception* of the world." We read the word "holiness" and our eyes just brush over it, as if it wasn't even there.

And so it has become conventional wisdom that the Course is all about gaining peace for myself. It goes without saying that the Course is not about manifesting holiness in my mind and in my life. This was brought home to me when my book *Path of Light* came out several years ago. Two of the most intelligent reviews that appeared on Amazon.com, and which were otherwise quite favorable, took me to task for characterizing loving behavior as part of the Course. One of them, written by William J. Kelleher, Ph.D., makes comments that are particularly relevant to the topic of holiness:

Finally, Perry nods to the extent that he characterizes the Course as proscribing [sic] a life of Christian ethics. ACIM is concerned with cause and effect, and is not a pious guide to living the life of a "good Pilgrim" [not a quote from *Path of Light*]. Perry's last two chapters are especially tainted with the fallacious suggestion that we must force ourselves to engage in gentle and generous behavior, if we are to achieve our full spiritual potential. This notion entails several problems. One is that the Course is not about behavior, it is about changing meanings so as to experience a better quality of life. Also, slipping ethics into a reading of the Course invites the very dogmatism and judgementalism [sic] that the Course virtually curses....

In the same vein, Perry sets up a moral model, or what I call a "spiritual hero," which is quit [sic] contrary to the Course. Boosting a saintly model of behavior that no mere mortal can live up to risks encouraging the very profound self-loathing, that Perry correctly says the Course wants to replace with a compassionate self-understanding.

When he refers to the final chapters which talk about "gentle and generous behavior," he seems to mainly be focusing on a lengthy section in the last chapter called "Ten Character Traits of the Spiritually Advanced," two of these traits being *gentleness* and *generosity*. Yet of course, these character traits are lifted straight out of the Course. They are the ten "characteristics of God's teachers" from the Manual (which, of course, include *gentleness* and *generosity*). One wonders what we are supposed to do with that section. It promises to describe the person who is advanced on this path, and then describes someone who is radically trusting, honest, tolerant, gentle, joyous, generous, patient, faithful, and open-minded. Such traits carried to an extreme would yield a person who is indeed "free from all contamination of sin and evil, morally and spiritually perfect," a person who is *holy*. Should we just act like that section isn't there?

Yet, of course, it's not just that section. If you want to put the *Course in Miracles* peg into the boomeritis hole, you have to engage in constant mental editing while you read the Course. You have to reinterpret or erase all those places that talk about extending help and healing to our brothers (roughly on every other page), all those places that talk about the body being used to do this (and only this), all those places that talk about us being called to play a part in saving the world, all those places that say we receive only through giving. In the end, the call to let our hidden holiness rise to the surface and infuse our thinking *and* behavior is on virtually every page of the Course. Our ability to read it out of there is, in my view, a stark testament to the principle that "projection makes perception."



## Embracing the goal of holiness

What do we do now? For starters, to the extent that we have believed that the Course is really just about *me* finding peace, about *my* blissful inner states, I think we should be willing to question that. Maybe we have misunderstood the goal. Huston Smith has said, “The heart of religion is not altered states but altered traits of character.” Maybe the Course is not a spokesman for today’s boomeritis, but is rather at one with that perennial heart of religion. Isn’t that a possibility?

How, then, should we understand the goal? Yes, the goal is peace, but where does peace come from according to the Course? Real peace with the world comes from no longer waging war upon the world, and only the holy are not at war with the world. Real peace with ourselves comes from a complete absence of guilt, and only the holy have left all guilt behind. Therefore, peace with the world and peace with ourselves come from one and the same place. As the Course so beautifully puts it, “Holy child of God, when will you learn that only holiness can content you and give you peace?” (T-15.III.9:1).

If we truly embraced “the goal of holiness” (five refs.), how would we conceptualize that? Really, the entire Course is an answer to that question, but I’ll base a relatively brief answer on a Text section suitably titled “The Reflection of Holiness” (T-14.IX). It makes four crucial points about holiness.

### *1. Your mind can become a spotless mirror reflecting the Holiness of God*

The section says, “In this world you can become a spotless mirror, in which the Holiness of your Creator shines forth from you to all around you” (5:1). What a promise! To take hold of this promise, all we need do is clean off the dark and murky images we have drawn on the mirror of our mind. Once the mirror is clean, “God will shine upon it of Himself” (5:6). Try to imagine this. Try saying to yourself, slowly and positively, “*In this world I can become a spotless mirror, in which the Holiness of my Creator shines forth from me to all around me.*” How does that feel?

### *2. Everyone will see in you the same holiness, rather than their own different interpretations*

In the dark, it is hard to make out the reflections you see in a mirror. You are thrown back on your own “shifting interpretations” (6:2), and as a result, different people will have different interpretations. The same is true of us when the mirror of our mind is dark, which is why different people see us in such different ways. But when we clean the mirror and it begins to reflect God’s Holiness, people will not need to guess at what they see. The holiness there will be as plain as day. “Its meaning to those who look upon it is not obscure, for everyone perceives it as the same” (7:3). This is why the world responds to truly holy people, even when it disagrees with their views. It can see the holiness there as clearly as sunlight bouncing off a clear mirror.

### *3. You respond to everyone’s errors and problems in exactly the same way: with healing*

Of course, while in this holy state, we will still encounter people weighed down by problems and churning out errors. Yet we will respond in a way that is fundamentally different than we do now. Rather than our response being proportionate to how that problem or error impinges on us, our response will always be exactly the same: “The response of holiness to any form of error is always the same....Its one response is healing, without regard for what is brought to it” (8:1, 3).

Taken to its extreme, this means that we respond to everyone—friend, “foe,” family, stranger, young, old, attractive, unattractive—with the exact same love. Our love makes room for everyone: “the sick, the weak, the needy and afraid, and those who mourn a seeming loss or feel apparent pain, who suffer cold or hunger, or who walk the way of hatred and the path of death” (W-pI.195.5:2). We have learned the meaning of love, that there is no love but God’s. And we give that love to everyone, regardless of all the things that used to modify, mutate, compromise, and extinguish our love.

### *4. Therefore, people are drawn to you; they bring their problems to your healing light*

If everyone sees the same light in us, and if that light responds to every problem only with healing, then the conclusion of this story is obvious: People will flock to us. We will become like the shrine at Lourdes. “All bring their different problems to its healing light, and all their problems find but healing there” (7:4). Are we ready to be a sanctuary for the sick? Are we ready to become “a temple of healing; a place where all the weary ones can come and rest” (T-19.III.11:3)? Perhaps not. Yet that is our calling. That is our goal.

The section we have been examining is clearly modeled after Helen’s priestess vision, an apparent past-life memory

she had in the period just before the Course started coming through:

I was a priestess again....[The priestess] was hidden from the world in a small white marble temple, set in a broad and very green valley....[She] never came further into the world than the doorway of a little room containing a plain wooden altar against the far wall....The priestess stayed close to the altar, sitting on a low wooden stool, praying with closed eyes for those who came to her for help.

...Sometimes I saw only the green valley outside the white temple. Sometimes there seemed to be no one there, but at other times the valley was filled with a huge column of people marching joyously together in rows that seemed to extend endlessly in both directions. I could feel a deep sense of freedom and unity in each one as he marched ahead to certain victory.

I was not sure of the exact role the priestess had in their happiness, but I knew her prayers somehow made a vital contribution. I was also sure that people came to her for help from all over; some, in fact, from very far away. They did not, however, speak to the priestess directly. They knelt one by one at the ledge that ran around a low wall separating the inner and outer parts of the temple, stating their needs to a man who seemed like a sort of intermediary between the priestess and the world. He stayed in the enclosed space between the priestess and those who came for help. The man conveyed their needs to her....

When people told him what they needed, he went to the door of her room and said: "Priestess, a brother has come to your shrine. Heal him for me." She never asked anyone's name, nor for the details of their request. She merely prayed for him, sitting very quietly beside the flame on the altar. It never occurred to her that help would not be granted. She prayed for everyone in the same way, and never really left God's side, remaining peacefully certain of His presence there in the room with her. (*Absence from Felicity*, pp. 103-104)

This vision of Helen's is saturated with holiness. You can feel it as you read it. This priestess *is* the person from "The Reflection of Holiness," whose mind is a spotless mirror giving healing to all who come, "without regard for what is brought to it."

So does this mean that we all have to start looking for an affordable white temple? No, the Course clearly expects us to lead normal, active lives in the world (see Lesson 155). Yet the Course also clearly sees Helen's priestess vision as carrying crucial significance for us. For that vision not only inspired "The Reflection of Holiness," but also was the basis for paragraph 8 of Lesson 109 (read it—you'll see). That only leaves us with one position: We are called to lead lives that are outwardly normal yet inwardly embody the essence of the priestess. The form will be active engagement of the world, but the content will be that of the priestess.

In other words, we won't be hidden away in a temple, sitting by ourselves next to the altar. We will be out there among people, working, raising children, living an outwardly normal life. But the content that we express through those normal forms will still be that of the priestess. Thus, our prayers will be our compassionate help for a co-worker, our forgiving hug to our child, our loving glance to our spouse, our holy encounter with a stranger. Our prayers, then, will be our *interactions with people*, interactions infused not by the usual anxiety and petty self-interest, but by the same universal love that infused the prayers of the priestess. At that point, even without the robes and the beads and the white temple, we would be manifesting *holiness*, in the best sense of the word. And thus we would naturally become that shrine of healing, that "haven where the weary can remain to rest" (W-p1.137.11:3), that little garden "offering rest to those who lost their way and wander in the dust" (T-18.VIII.9:3). People would feel our holiness, even from afar, and they would be drawn to it, like bees to honey. We wouldn't be able to stop them. And we wouldn't want to.

I find this model of spiritual advancement to be far more attractive than the "higher states" model. I don't know about you, but I am tired of the masters of higher states who turn out to be no better than you or I when it comes to romantic relationships, doing business, handling power, or dealing with money. It's such an odd and jarring combination: spiritual masters who turn out to be unholy. What is wrong with this picture?

I keep seeing a photo of a currently popular "enlightened" teacher. I know little about him or his teachings, and if I did, I might feel quite favorable toward him. But the picture captures a contemporary mood. The picture is of him leaning back with his hands behind his head, looking into space with a serene, far-off look. The message I get is that enlightenment is about "kicking back," about pure, unruffled enjoyment. Maybe this man truly is enlightened; I don't know. But I am tired of our ideal being kicking back in pure, unruffled enjoyment. Can't we aim higher than that?

I think the Course does aim higher than that. As we advance along its path, we are expected to experience much of what we associate with the "higher states" model: blissful experiences, paranormal powers, otherworldly peace, visions and voices. And yet these are portrayed as just the frame around the real picture: personal character that is growing toward holiness. As that process advances, we will become like Helen's priestess. We will reach a state in which blessing

and healing pour from us to others indiscriminately, spontaneously, without us weighing up their merit first. We will have become like a transparent glass, a person who takes no thought for self-interest in the usual sense. What began as normal human goodness will become so intensified that it becomes a divine quality. It becomes an earthly receptacle of the character of God Himself.

I believe that something in us yearns for this. Yes, we yearn to taste spiritual bliss. But I think that deeper than that is the yearning to not just *feel* good, but to *be* good, so good that we are actually holy. It's scary, true. It's threatening. We wonder if we will survive the transition. We wonder if being empty of ego will mean that we are empty, period. We wonder if pouring out healing to everyone we meet will drain our batteries until we stop working.

And yet, in the end, we cannot silence this yearning. Lesson 182 speaks of a memory that keeps haunting us, "a persistent feeling, sometimes not more than a tiny throb, at other times hardly remembered, actively dismissed, but surely to return to mind again" (1:6). As the lesson proceeds, it clarifies that this desire which haunts us is the desire to once again be "the holy Child" (12:5), the Christ Child, Whose innocence is so untouched that it "will endure forever" (4:4), Whose Holiness is so brilliant that it "lights up Heaven, and...brings to earth the pure reflection of the light above" (4:6). "Where this Child shall go," it says, "is holy ground" (4:5). The lesson then ends by telling us that we cannot stop wanting this:

You have not lost your innocence. It is for this you yearn. This is your heart's desire. This is the voice you hear, and this the call which cannot be denied. (12:1-4)

Holiness. This is the memory that haunts us. *This* is the voice we hear, and *this* the call which cannot be denied. Somewhere inside that voice is calling to us right now. Perhaps we can hear it. Even though holiness is not the same as wholeness, perhaps we can hear that voice whisper to us that we will only feel *whole* once we know that we are *holy*.



E-mail your comments to the author at: [robert@circleofa.org](mailto:robert@circleofa.org)

**Robert Perry.** He is the author or co-author of twenty books and booklets, including *Path of Light: Stepping into Peace with 'A Course in Miracles'*.

## CIRCLE NEWS

### THE CIRCLE COURSE COMMUNITY ITS CELEBRATES FIRST ANNIVERSARY

Happy Anniversary!!! The Circle Course Community is now 1 year old—and 150 members strong! We feel a solid foundation has been laid this year to carry us forward into the new year, and beyond. And we couldn't have done it without the dedicated and heartfelt participation of all the members. We have been deeply moved by their willingness to open their journeys to us and to each other, even when it wasn't comfortable, or easy, or ego enhancing. Because of this we've been able to relate to and connect with one another in ways that have helped us grow in our journey with the Course. With everyone's participation, it truly feels like something new and unique is emerging here, and we couldn't be happier.

We wanted to celebrate by inviting members to [share](#) their most memorable CCC experiences. If you're a member, please use this space to describe anything that stands out about how your experience in the CCC has been meaningful to you. It might be an important breakthrough or turning point. It might be an exchange with another member or some way in which you were touched by someone else's journey. It might be something more general, like the value you've received from the PathMap, the blog, or the classes. Just help us celebrate by sharing how your spiritual journey has been enriched from being part of this community.