

## CHAPTER VI

### A Holy Nation

*But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and his own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.<sup>1</sup>*

#### **The “Setting Apart”- A History of a Unique Identity- The Holy Nation**

Before the beginning of time, God was neither “set apart”<sup>2</sup> nor part of anything. God was the Whole<sup>3</sup>- the Entire - the Only One- by His unique presence,<sup>4</sup> the presence of a unique identity that is exclusive to God as the sole identifier, by His ceaseless work and movement toward His Self. God was only known to Himself and not to man, because the latter was not yet created. When God breathed life into man, He became known to him and was automatically set apart by His uncreated divine nature and exclusive identity. He remained the “All in all” among the created, general human nature.

Nevertheless, this general human nature and common identity that humanity shares are a unique identity to man that distinguishes him from the rest of creation. It is an identification related to God. Man was identified with God and was set apart from the whole creation. Man was created in the image and unto the likeness of God. The image of God was embedded in him. God has set man apart for a special work, a fixed (unchangeable) idea and task,<sup>5</sup> which resembles His ceaseless agapetical work through caring, loving and ministering to the whole of creation. As such, man is identified with

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter 2: 9.

<sup>2</sup> “Set apart”, Holy and Saint are the meanings of the Latin word *Sanctus* and the Greek word *hagios*, ἅγιος. F.W. Danker, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), entry for ἅγιος esp. definition 2.d.β.

It is meant that a person is “set apart” to do a special work which identifies the one who has set him apart.

<sup>3</sup> The word *holy* appeared around the 13th Century with the [Old English](#) word *hālig* derived from *hāl* meaning *health, happiness and wholeness*. As “wholeness”, holiness may be taken to indicate a state of religious completeness or perfection.

<sup>4</sup> It is a “no-static” presence, a presence of continuous work, movement and love among the Three Persons of the Triune God.

<sup>5</sup> L’abbé L.-E. Duchaine, *La Foi en l’Amour de Dieu*, Providence Maison Mère p. 27 « *Un saint est un homme qui a une idée fixe.* » Eng. Trans « the saint is the one who has a fixed idea.”

the “Holy”- the wholeness- who has transmitted holiness and uniqueness unto the identification of man.

Following the refusal of man to be identified with God, the common identification of sainthood diverged, and God sought His people and made a covenant with them. He called them back to their true identity which is related and attached to His own identity. He called them to restore their holiness, their “set apart” status, firstly through Noah who had found favor in the eyes of God.<sup>6</sup> God set apart Noah from the whole creation and commanded him to do a special work, a fixed idea and task - an agapetical salvific work. And through Noah, God has established a covenant to every future generation,<sup>7</sup> a covenant of love from one side (the side of God) which consists of sparing the destruction of man due to his wickedness and corruption.<sup>8</sup>

The nation, the generations of Noah (the walker with God),<sup>9</sup> was blessed and was set apart. It restored its sainthood by the one-sided agapetical covenant and through the agapetical work of Noah, who had accepted to take upon himself this fixed task and to be identified with the Holy. He accepted to be a means of transmitting love and holiness.

God continued His initial setting apart work after Adam and Noah<sup>10</sup> with Abram. He set apart Abram and his father’s house<sup>11</sup> by charging him with a fixed idea and task, to walk with Him to a new land and “to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice (the agapetical work of God).”<sup>12</sup> He asked him to enter amidst other nations and to stay distinguished from them with the identification of the flesh - circumcision in the flesh<sup>13</sup> - after He changed his name from Abram to Abraham, the father of multitude of nations.<sup>14</sup> It is a fleshly distinction that recognizes Abraham and his children among other nations as the favored people of God, who should be doing the works of

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<sup>6</sup> Gen. 6: 8.

<sup>7</sup> Gen. 9: 12.

<sup>8</sup> Gen. 6: 5 - 8.

<sup>9</sup> Gen. 6: 9.

<sup>10</sup> This is according to the written tradition. God didn’t cease His Theurgy at any moment. His Theurgy is His normal status.

<sup>11</sup> Gen. 12:1.

<sup>12</sup> Gen. 18:19.

<sup>13</sup> Gen. 17:13.

<sup>14</sup> Gen. 17:5.

righteousness and justice. Therefore Abraham became the friend of God, the receiver of God's revelations and visitations, and the intercessor between God and His people.<sup>15</sup>

God's seeking for men's understanding of their true identity – sainthood - did not cease. His revelation and interference continued through Isaac,<sup>16</sup> Jacob (Israel)<sup>17</sup> and Moses whom God has set apart since his childhood.<sup>18</sup> Through Moses, God revealed His Name, "I AM WHO I AM",<sup>19</sup> to his holy nation in order to be remembered by His name, and not by the flesh. In such, God is reminding His people that their unique identity is through a personal God, a God who named Himself so he would communicate, so that they may identify themselves with Him. He is no longer a stranger. He is their identity. They belong to Him. They can call upon His Name and become friends with Him. Alas, they feared this revelation and they even feared to pronounce His Holy Name. They kept their distance by fear, rather than by approaching and trusting Him.<sup>20</sup>

Through Moses God saved His holy nation and set them apart from the Egyptians and other nations. He made for them "a statute and ordinance" and He became their healer.<sup>21</sup> He travelled with them in the desert and nurtured them with the Quail and Manna,<sup>22</sup> and filled their thirst with water.<sup>23</sup> He gave them the opportunity to become His holy nation and His kingdom of priests<sup>24</sup> by hearing His voice and keeping His covenant. He called them to the foot of the mountain and gave them the Ten Commandments - the Law - the statute for their life.

God restored sainthood through favored and chosen men who accepted to identify themselves with the Saint par excellence, and to perform the one fixed task (the will of God). They themselves and their generations became saints as well, but without recognizing their status and purpose. They did not recognize their potentiality and their role; they limited their identification to the flesh and to the Law rather than walking with

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<sup>15</sup> See Gen. 18: 20 – 33.

<sup>16</sup> Gen. 26: 2 – 5.

<sup>17</sup> Gen. 35: 1 - 4 and 10 - 12

<sup>18</sup> Ex. 2: 2 – 3.

<sup>19</sup> Ex. 3: 14.

<sup>20</sup> Exodus chapters 3 and 4, and 14:11 "what have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt?", and 14: 30 and 31 and many others.

<sup>21</sup> Ex. 15: 25 and 26

<sup>22</sup> Ex. 16: 13.

<sup>23</sup> Ex. 17: 6.

<sup>24</sup> Ex. 19: 6.

God in righteousness and justice.<sup>25</sup> Although God had performed the agapetical deeds with them, they murmured against Him, they doubted His presence among them and they mistrusted Him. Their walk with Him was always under examination and testing, and it was never without an intermediary, though He talked with them personally and showed them His mercy and power. They perceived Him as an Alien God who comes to help them when they are in need and to save them from their enemies. They never recognized Him as the Saint from whom they themselves become saints.

Thus, the story of the “Set Apart” nation has continued until the Incarnational entry of the Lord into His nations and His living among them. The One who was set apart according to His nature came and dwelled among His holy nation. He showed them the role of the saint by His saintly agapetical actions. He opened their hearts and minds to understand the books (the scriptures) concerning God, and their role as the nation of God and the kingdom of priests. This relationship and interaction with the actual life of the nations has changed the meaning of sainthood and the concept of the holy nation as related to a fleshly identification. The fleshly identification was transformed and transcended to a different and deeper level of identification that touches the essence of created things, through participation and partaking of the identifier’s identity.

The “set apart” nation is no longer limited to preservers of Law and fleshly observers, nor is sainthood restricted to a few numbers of people. Rather it becomes open to anyone who believes in Jesus Christ, is baptized in His Name, and becomes a participant in the mystical assembly.

Through Jesus Christ, the nations became One Nation. The “set apart” is no longer reserved for a group identified in their flesh but to those who identify themselves as members of the Body of Jesus Christ which was broken for them. They are the chosen people who became the holy generation by transforming their earthly kingdom into a kingdom of love, peace and mercy. They are those who are establishing and foretasting the heavenly Kingdom here and now in this life. They are not those who are searching for a piece of land to be attached to, but they are those who are organically connected to God. They are those who are living the “now eschatological”. They are those who are

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<sup>25</sup> Abraham obeyed the commandment of God and he circumcised “Ishmael...the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner with him.” (Gen. 17:27). But he lied a few times, fearing the judgment of man rather than the judgment of God (Gen. 10:13 and 20: 2).

sanctified and are sanctifying the moment and the place by making the King of All, the Holy One, and the Sanctifier, reside, bestow His Banquet, and celebrate the Feast with them. They are those living people who heard the calling to the Feast and accepted the invitation. They are those who have put on Christ<sup>26</sup> in Baptism and wear the wedding robe and come to celebrate the wedding with the King and His Son, the Bridegroom.

The starting point and the goal of the people of God, the Holy Nation, is the Trinitarian God, the Creator, the Alpha and the Omega. The aim of this people of God is to find themselves in the bosom of God and to participate in an intimate relationship with His Love and Mercy. They are those who are convinced that as the Divine Liturgy states, “Thine own of Thine own should be offered back to Thee on behalf of all and for all.”<sup>27</sup> They are those who acknowledge and submit themselves freely, obediently and voluntarily to God, and partake in the agapetical meal. They are those who unite themselves to Him by participation and partaking of His Sacraments, for they are His Own and His inheritance.

Many may question what is the development that Jesus Christ brought to those who wish to become members of the Holy Nation. The Jews, indeed, were recognized as the holy nation by their circumcision, the Muslims by their confession of the “*al-shahadatein*,”<sup>28</sup> and the Christians by their baptism. They all believe that God is the One who called them out of darkness to become His people. So why then do the Jews and Muslims not identify themselves as saints, as we have discovered previously in their Holy Books and in some of their literature?

Nothing has been changed throughout the history and the theory of the Holy Nation. God is always the initiator, originator and provider of sainthood regardless of people’s actions and deeds. Therefore, what has Jesus Christ changed to enable Christians to call themselves saints and to fight<sup>29</sup> in order to preserve the icons of their departed saints?

The answer is simple. Jesus Christ is “of one essence with the Father by whom all things were made. God of God, Light of Light, etc.,” as the Creed states, and to this

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<sup>26</sup> Gal. 3: 27.

<sup>27</sup> The Orthodox Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil the Great.

<sup>28</sup> *Al-shahadatein*: “there is no God but God (*La ilaha illa llah*) and Mohammed is the Prophet of God (*Mohammed Nabiyyu llah*)

<sup>29</sup> This concerns the Iconoclastic Controversy that led to the 7<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council.

person the Orthodox Christians relate and belong. He is not a mere human being, nor an alien God but He is “Emmanuel”, God with us. His participation in the life of His people made the difference. He died out of love for His people and overcame what is inevitable, death through His resurrection. This rendered the ability for us to become saints.

This change in understanding was made clear in Paul’s letters. Paul was a circumcised<sup>30</sup> member of the holy nation, but he addressed the Christian communities as saints after his personal encounter with God on the road to Damascus<sup>31</sup> and his receiving the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands by Ananias.<sup>32</sup> He called them saints though they were still like babies looking for guidance and for mothers to feed them the milk of the faith, unable to digest yet a heavy meal. Without hesitating, he named them saints after the Saint – Jesus Christ - because he had experienced the effect and power of his encounter with Him in his personal life. Paul realized that he became a saint with no obligation on his part, but to commune, identify and call upon His Name. This awareness ignited his sparks and built up a fire that would consume him if he did not live up to the level of sainthood. He found that he was filled with a powerful agapetical ministry to fulfill and to become an imitator of His Lord and Savior.<sup>33</sup> His life was totally transcended to another level, to the above normal. Hence, the normal understanding of the heavenly saints that were attached to the Heavenly God was transformed and became related to the Incarnated God by identifying with Him.

Through Jesus Christ, the holy nation became a nation of priests, prophets and kings. Every person became a saint because of his organic relationship, encounter and identification with the Incarnated God through the work of the third person of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit, Who mystically and sacramentally transforms the lives of believers. As opposed to having the intercession of a single individual on behalf of the entire holy nation, while the rest remain as bystanders solely fulfilling their fleshly duties,

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<sup>30</sup> Acts 21: 39: “*I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cicilia...*” also Acts 19: 34: “*when they found that he [Paul] is a Jew...*” and Acts 22: 3.

<sup>31</sup> Acts 9:3: “*As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light has shone around him from heaven.*”

<sup>32</sup> Acts 9: 17: “*And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’*”

<sup>33</sup> 1 Cor. 11:1: “*Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.*”

every baptized person became an intercessor and a sanctifier, living his or her earthly life with one fixed idea and purpose. Through Emmanuel, the holy nation became the Nation of the Holy Spirit. Every person became a temple of the Holy Spirit.<sup>34</sup> The Entry of Christ into the world has allowed man to communicate with the Trinitarian God, and thus, man became a son and an inheritor of the Father and a receiver of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the baptized do not go through formal obligation of the Law but rather, baptized in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the one God, has his or her the internally dormant and distorted sainthood renewed and rejuvenated.

This is what Christ has brought to the holy nation. He has sanctified man who wished to be a member of his holy nation. By His active role, the fixed idea and task, the agapetical ministry of salvation, he has commanded those who belong to Him to have a ministry of perpetual love that has no limits and no laws to govern it, but the imitation of the Saint par excellence. This command of loving each other is a commandment that is tailored for each person in accordance to his or her gifts and skills that God has bestowed on him as a blessing to bless and to be blessed.

Jesus Christ through His earthly life has commanded man to *“deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow him.”*<sup>35</sup> Yet he ordered those who followed Him- the twelve<sup>36</sup> and the seventy<sup>37</sup> - to *“cast [the unclean spirits] out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease,”*<sup>38</sup> and to *“preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons,”*<sup>39</sup> and to *“preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.”*<sup>40</sup> Thereafter, following His Resurrection, He addressed the remaining eleven and established the sacramental service of Holiness and sanctification by the work and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in creation as it is described clearly in John 20:21-23,<sup>41</sup> Matthew 28:8-20,<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> I Cor.6:19: *“Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?”*

<sup>35</sup> Mark 8: 34, Luke 9: 23 and Matthew 10: 38, 16: 34.

<sup>36</sup> Matthew 10: 1, Mark 3:14 and Luke 9: 1.

<sup>37</sup> Luke 10: 1.

<sup>38</sup> Matthew 10: 1.

<sup>39</sup> Mark 3: 14 - 15.

<sup>40</sup> Luke 9: 2.

<sup>41</sup> *“So Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.’ And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”*

Luke 24:48<sup>43</sup> and Mark 16:15, 16.<sup>44</sup> He sent them to do these mighty tasks after He had given them the power that will enable them to fulfill His commandment of love. Therefore, the Holy Nation became a nation of saints sanctifying and fulfilling the work of Christ. They became Christians so that they should be Christ-like.

It is important to notice that Moses and Mohammad, or any other religious “prophet and teacher,” never dared to breathe and give the Holy Spirit to their disciples. This is because they lacked the authority and the awareness of the Holy Spirit’s Divine existence. By His breath, Jesus Christ has set apart His Nation to continue His work with a divine power, a power that will sanctify and transform mystically creation into a heavenly kingdom.

Since Pentecost, the flames of sainthood are kindled in each member of the assembly, the Nation of the Holy Spirit. Those who are already called saints are to live up to their identity, and then they will honor and glorify the reason for their existence and sainthood.

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<sup>42</sup> “And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age. Amen.”

<sup>43</sup> “And you are witnesses of these things.”

<sup>44</sup> “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.”