As the Beloved children of God, we are blessed. The word “blessing” has become very important for me over the past few years, and you are one of the friends who made it important for me.

Do you remember how one Saturday morning in New York City you took me to the synagogue? When we arrived, we discovered that there was to be a bar mitzvah. A young man, thirteen years old, was declared adult by his congregation. For the first time, he gave leadership to the service. He read from the Book of Genesis and gave a short sermon about the importance of caring for our environment. He was affirmed by the rabbi and his friends and blessed by his parents. It was the first time that I had witnessed a bar mitzvah, and I was deeply moved — most of all by the parents’ blessing. I still hear the father saying: “Son, whatever will happen to you
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in your life, whether you will have success or not, become important or not, will be healthy or not, always remember how much your mother and I love you." When he said this in front of the congregation, looking gently at the boy standing before him, tears came to my eyes, and I thought: “What a grace such a blessing is."

I am increasingly aware of how much we fearful, anxious, insecure human beings are in need of a blessing. Children need to be blessed by their parents and parents by their children. We all need each other’s blessings — masters and disciples, rabbis and students, bishops and priests, doctors and patients.

Let me first tell you what I mean by the word “blessing.” In Latin, to bless is benedicere. The word “benediction” that is used in many churches means literally: speaking (dictio) well (bene) or saying good things of someone. That speaks to me. I need to hear good things said of me, and I know how much you have the same need. Nowadays, we often say: “We have to affirm each other.” Without affirmation, it is hard to live well. To give someone a blessing is the most significant affirmation we can offer. It is more than a word of praise or appreciation; it is more than pointing out someone’s talents or good deeds; it is more than putting someone in the light. To give a blessing is to affirm, to say “yes” to a person’s Belovedness. And more than that: to give a blessing creates the reality of which it speaks. There is a lot of mutual admiration in this world, just as there is a lot of mutual condemnation. A blessing goes beyond the distinction between admiration or condemnation, between virtues or vices, between good deeds or evil deeds. A blessing touches the original goodness of the other and calls forth his or her Belovedness.

Not long ago, in my own community, I had a very personal experience of the power of a real blessing. Shortly before I started a prayer service in one of our houses, Janet, a handicapped member of our community, said to me: “Henri, can you give me a blessing?” I responded in a somewhat automatic way by tracing with my thumb the sign of the cross on her forehead. Instead of being grateful, however, she protested vehemently, “No, that doesn’t work. I want a real blessing!” I suddenly became aware of the ritualistic quality of my response to her request and said, “Oh, I am sorry, ... let me give you a real blessing!” I suddenly became aware of the ritualistic quality of my response to her request and said, “Oh, I am sorry, ... let me give you a real blessing when we are all together for the prayer service.” She nodded with a smile, and I realized that something special was required of me. After the service, when about thirty people were sitting in a circle on the floor, I said, “Janet has asked me for a special blessing. She feels that she needs that now.” As I was saying this, I didn’t know what Janet really wanted. But Janet didn’t leave me in doubt for very long. As soon as I had said, “Janet has asked me
for a special blessing," she stood up and walked toward me. I was wearing a long white robe with ample sleeves covering my hands as well as my arms. Spontaneously, Janet put her arms around me and put her head against my chest. Without thinking, I covered her with my sleeves so that she almost vanished in the folds of my robe. As we held each other, I said, "Janet, I want you to know that you are God's Beloved Daughter. You are precious in God's eyes. Your beautiful smile, your kindness to the people in your house and all the good things you do show us what a beautiful human being you are. I know you feel a little low these days and that there is some sadness in your heart, but I want you to remember who you are: a very special person, deeply loved by God and all the people who are here with you."

As I said these words, Janet raised her head and looked at me; and her broad smile showed that she had really heard and received the blessing. When she returned to her place, Jane, another handicapped woman, raised her hand and said, "I want a blessing too." She stood up and, before I knew it, had put her face against my chest. After I had spoken words of blessing to her, many more of the handicapped people followed, expressing the same desire to be blessed. The most touching moment, however, came when one of the assistants, a twenty-four-year-old student, raised his hand and said, "And what about me?" "Sure," I said. "Come." He came, and, as we stood before each other, I put my arms around him and said, "John, it is so good that you are here. You are God's Beloved Son. Your presence is a joy for all of us. When things are hard and life is burdensome, always remember that you are loved with an everlasting love." As I spoke these words, he looked at me with tears in his eyes and then he said, "Thank you, thank you very much."

That evening I recognized the importance of blessing and being blessed and reclaimed it as a true sign of the Beloved. The blessings that we give to each other are expressions of the blessing that rests on us from all eternity. It is the deepest affirmation of our true self. It is not enough to be chosen. We also need an ongoing blessing that allows us to hear in an ever-new way that we belong to a loving God who will never leave us alone, but will remind us always that we are guided by love on every step of our lives. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Leah and Rachel, they all heard that blessing and so became the fathers and mothers of our faith. They lived their long and often painful journeys without ever forgetting that they were the blessed ones. Jesus, too, heard that blessing after John the Baptist had baptized him in the Jordan. A voice came from heaven saying: "You are my Beloved Son, on you my favor rests." This was a blessing, and it was that
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blessing that sustained Jesus through all the praise and blame, admiration and condemnation that followed. Like Abraham and Sarah, Jesus never lost the intimate knowledge that he was “the blessed one.”

I tell you all of this because I know how moody you and I can be. One day we feel great, the next we feel miserable. One day we are full of new ideas, the next everything looks bleak and dull. One day we think we can take on the whole world, but the next even a little request seems too much for us. These mood swings show that we no longer hear the blessing that was heard by Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Leah and Rachel and Jesus of Nazareth and that we, too, are to hear. When we are thrown up and down by the little waves on the surface of our existence, we become easy victims of our manipulative world, but, when we continue to hear the deep gentle voice that blesses us, we can walk through life with a stable sense of well-being and true belonging.

The feeling of being blessed is not, it seems to me, the feeling that we generally have about ourselves. You have lived many hard moments in your life, moments in which you felt more cursed than blessed. And I can say the same. In fact, I suspect that many people suffer from a deep sense of being cursed. When I simply listen to what people talk about during dinner, in restaurants, during work breaks, I hear much — much blaming and complaining in a spirit of passive resignation. Many people, and we too at times, feel like victims of a world we cannot change, and the daily newspapers certainly don’t help much in coping with that feeling. The sense of being cursed often comes more easily than the sense of being blessed, and we can find enough arguments to feed it. We can say: “Look at what is happening in the world: Look at the starving people, the refugees, the prisoners, the sick and the dying… Look at all the poverty, injustice and war. … Look at the torture, the killings, the destruction of nature and culture… Look at our daily struggles with our relationships, with our work, with our health… ” Where, where is the blessing? The feeling of being accursed comes easily. We easily hear an inner voice calling us evil, bad, rotten, worthless, useless, doomed to sickness and death. Isn’t it easier for us to believe that we are cursed than that we are blessed?

Still, I say to you, as the Beloved Son of God, you are blessed. Good words are being spoken to you and about you — words that tell the truth. The curses — noisy, boisterous, loud-mouthed as they may be — do not tell the truth. They are lies; lies easy to believe, but lies nevertheless.

Well, if the blessing speaks the truth and the curse speaks lies about who you and I are, we are faced with the very concrete question: How to hear and claim the blessing? If the fact of our blessedness...
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Is not just a sentiment, but a truth that shapes our daily lives, we must be able to see and experience this blessing in an unambiguous way. Let me offer you two suggestions for claiming your blessedness. These have to do with prayer and presence.

First of all, prayer. For me personally, prayer becomes more and more a way to listen to the blessing. I have read and written much about prayer, but when I go to a quiet place to pray, I realize that, although I have a tendency to say many things to God, the real "work" of prayer is to become silent and listen to the voice that says good things about me. This might sound self-indulgent, but, in practice, it is a hard discipline. I am so afraid of being cursed, of hearing that I am no good or not good enough, that I quickly give in to the temptation to start talking and to keep talking in order to control my fears. To gently push aside and silence the many voices that question my goodness and to trust that I will hear a voice of blessing...that demands real effort.

Have you ever tried to spend a whole hour doing nothing but listening to the voice that dwells deep in your heart? When there is no radio to listen to, no TV to watch, no book to read, no person to talk to, no project to finish, no phone call to make, how does that make you feel? Often it does no more than make us so aware of how much there is still to do that we haven't yet done that we decide to leave the fearful silence and go back to work! It is not easy to enter into the silence and reach beyond the many boisterous and demanding voices of our world and to discover there the small intimate voice saying: "You are my Beloved Child, on you my favor rests." Still, if we dare to embrace our solitude and befriend our silence, we will come to know that voice. I do not want to suggest to you that one day you will hear that voice with your bodily ears. I am not speaking about a hallucinatory voice, but about a voice that can be heard by the ear of faith, the ear of the inner heart.

Often you will feel that nothing happens in your prayer. You say: "I am just sitting there and getting distracted." But if you develop the discipline of spending one half-hour a day listening to the voice of love, you will gradually discover that something is happening of which you were not even conscious. It might be only in retrospect that you discover the voice that blesses you. You thought that what happened during your time of listening was nothing more than a lot of confusion, but then you discover yourself looking forward to your quiet time and missing it when you can't have it. The movement of God's Spirit is very gentle, very soft — and hidden. It does not seek attention. But that movement is also very persistent, strong and deep. It changes our hearts radically. The faithful discipline of prayer reveals to you that you are the blessed one and gives you the power to bless others.
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It might be helpful to offer here a concrete suggestion. One good way to listen is to listen with a sacred text: a psalm or a prayer, for instance. The Hindu spiritual writer Eknath Easwaran showed me the great value of learning a sacred text by heart and repeating it slowly in the mind, word by word, sentence by sentence. In this way, listening to the voice of love becomes not just a passive waiting, but an active attentiveness to the voice that speaks to us through the words of the Scriptures.

I spent many of my half-hours of prayer doing nothing but slowly repeating the prayer of St. Francis: “Lord make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred let me show love....” As I let these words move from my mind to my heart, I began to experience, beyond all my restless emotions and feelings, the peace and love I was asking for in words.

In this way I also had a way to deal with my endless distractions. When I found myself wandering away far and wide, I could always return to my simple prayer and thereby listen again in my heart to the voice I so much wanted to hear.

My second suggestion for claiming your blessedness is the cultivation of presence. By presence I mean attentiveness to the blessings that come to you day after day, year after year. The problem of modern living is that we are too busy — looking for affirmation in the wrong places? — to notice that we are being blessed. Often, people say good things about us, but we brush them aside with remarks such as, “Oh, don’t mention it, forget about it, it’s nothing...” and so on. These remarks may seem to be expressions of humility, but they are, in fact, signs that we are not truly present to receive the blessings that are given. It is not easy for us, busy people, to truly receive a blessing. Perhaps the fact that few people offer a real blessing is the sad result of the absence of people who are willing and able to receive such a blessing. It has become extremely difficult for us to stop, listen, pay attention and receive gracefully what is offered to us.

Living with people who have a mental handicap makes this clear to me. They have many blessings to offer, but when I am forever busy, forever on the way to something important, how can I receive those blessings? Adam, one of the members of my community, cannot speak, cannot walk alone, cannot eat without help, cannot dress or undress himself, but he has great blessings to offer to those who take the time to be present to him, holding him or just sitting with him. I have yet to meet anyone who spent much time with Adam and didn't feel blessed by him. It is a blessing that comes from simple presence. But you know, too, how hard such simple presence is. There is always so much that still has to be done, so many tasks to finish and jobs to work on that simple presence can easily seem useless and
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even a waste of our time. But still, without a conscious desire to “waste” our time, it is hard to hear the blessing.

This attentive presence can allow us to see how many blessings there are for us to receive: the blessings of the poor who stop us on the road, the blessings of the blossoming trees and fresh flowers that tell us about new life, the blessings of music, painting, sculpture and architecture — all of that — but most of all the blessings that come to us through words of gratitude, encouragement, affection and love. These many blessings do not have to be invented. They are there, surrounding us on all sides. But we have to be present to them and receive them. They don’t force themselves on us. They are gentle reminders of that beautiful, strong, but hidden, voice of the one who calls us by name and speaks good things about us.

Well, I truly hope that these two suggestions, prayer and presence, can help you to claim the blessedness that is yours. I cannot stress enough the importance of making this claim. Not claiming your blessedness will lead you quickly to the land of the cursed. There is little or no neutral territory between the land of the blessed and the land of the cursed. You have to choose where it is that you want to live, and that choice is one that you have to keep making from moment to moment.

Before concluding these thoughts about our be-

Blessed

ing blessed, I must tell you that claiming your own blessedness always leads to a deep desire to bless others. The characteristic of the blessed ones is that, wherever they go, they always speak words of blessing. It is remarkable how easy it is to bless others, to speak good things to and about them, to call forth their beauty and truth, when you yourself are in touch with your own blessedness. The blessed one always blesses. And people want to be blessed! This is so apparent wherever you go. No one is brought to life through curses, gossip, accusations or blaming. There is so much of that taking place around us all the time. And it calls forth only darkness, destruction and death. As the "blessed ones," we can walk through this world and offer blessings. It doesn’t require much effort. It flows naturally from our hearts.

When we hear within ourselves the voice calling us by name and blessing us, the darkness no longer distracts us. The voice that calls us the Beloved will give us words to bless others and reveal to them that they are no less blessed than we.

You live in New York. I live in Toronto. As you walk down Columbus Avenue and I down Yonge Street, we can have no illusions about the darkness. The loneliness, the homelessness and the addictedness of people are all too visible. Yet all of these people yearn for a blessing. That blessing can be given only by those who have heard it themselves. I now feel ready to write to you about the hardest
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truth to put into words: the truth of our common brokenness. We are chosen and blessed. When we have truly owned this, have said "Yes" to it, then we can face our own and others' brokenness with open eyes. Let's do that now.