

REMEMBERING WHO WE ARE (Reflections on Holy Baptism)

I sometimes forget that I am not alone.

I sometimes forget that even before I was born, God knew me, and loved me, and desired me to flourish. That God was with me and in me, even then.

I sometimes forget that God is **really present** with me and in me now, in the present moment. I almost always accept the **idea** that God is with me, but I sometimes forget that God is **really here**, *not merely as an idea in my mind*, but a Living Presence within me and surrounding me, in all of the situations that are unfolding in my life.

Often, what goads me into forgetting that I am not alone is the past. When I look back on the many experiences that I have had in my life up to the present day, I naturally recall not just the *good* things but the *bad* things -- the harmful things that have happened to me and to those I love. We all have such bad things in our past.

But what seems to keep them painfully present, what seems to keep them from becoming normal, healthy scars -- are certain very harsh and harmful words that often reverberate in our minds. Words like those of the faithless critics who frequently taunted the psalmist, saying, "*Where was your God (when **that** happened)???*" And when I join in with that cruel chorus about the past, I quickly forget the truth of my life in the present. I quickly begin chanting to myself in the present, "*Where is my God?*"

And then, God seems to have abandoned me **not only** in the past but in the present as well. I quickly begin to feel that I am alone, unloved, unprotected, unsafe. This dark cloud can very quickly and easily overshadow us when bad things happen. It was overshadowing Jesus on the cross when he cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And so, I know that I am not alone in this.

Is it any wonder that we sometimes forget that even before we were born, God knew us, and loved us, and longed for us to flourish?

Is it any wonder that we sometimes forget in the present moment that God is **really here** -- *not merely as a lifeless idea in our minds* -- but as a Living Presence within us -- surrounding us -- in all of the situations, good and bad, that are unfolding in our lives?

We all seem to need regular, potent reminders to help us recognize and get in tune with God's presence in our lives. And this is the purpose of the sacraments in our lives.

The sacrament of Holy Baptism is not for everyone. It is actually only for those who sometimes **forget** that they are not alone and need **help** remembering. In other words, *it is only for the consciously vulnerable*. Our sacred tradition teaches us that this is the only "right disposition" for receiving the grace of the sacraments, beginning with the sacrament of baptism.

This is a very tall order for most adults, because it means they have to consciously **be who they truly are**, which is truly vulnerable. This is why baptism traditionally requires extraordinary preparation for adults -- because when adults come to the font (or the river or the lake), they have already been highly educated by what Jesus called "the world." They have already become accustomed to "seeming" rather than "being." They have already learned how to **feign** maturity rather than actually growing up, how to let their lives just "float along" on the surface of things, how to just "go through the motions" of life, without understanding what is actually happening at a deeper level within themselves... within others... within the world. They have already become practiced at hiding who they really are by wearing a "mask" -- a false self -- which they trust will protect them from feeling alone and unloved. And so they cannot discern between what is truly helpful and what is truly harmful. They have to train. They have to walk with Jesus for quite a while before they'll be ready to "take the plunge" of Holy Baptism.

But it is easier and quicker for some adults than for others. It is easier for the "poor in spirit," for those who have learned through experience that what Jesus called "the world" actually promotes suffering, not flourishing. It is easier for those who either **cannot** or **will not** gloss over things and play the game of "seeming." It's easier for them because they retain more awareness of their original vulnerability. So, for them, having the "right disposition" for baptism requires less un-covering, less un-learning.

And you can probably guess, at this point, who are the **most** prepared, the **most** "properly disposed" for baptism **of us all**.

Infants.... For them, it is still no great task to consciously **be who they truly are**, which is vulnerable. Jesus severely warns his adult followers not to spoil this precious consciousness of theirs. "Let the little children come unto me! Do not put stumbling blocks in their way!"

And, not just that: He totally turns the tables on their **pseudo-maturity** and tells them: "Unless you become like little children, you will never see the kingdom of God." Unless you become like them, you will never really "get" the gospel -- the "good news" will remain unintelligible to you. Of course, Jesus is not saying that adults are to abdicate their roles to wisely and lovingly protect & guide & nurture the young. But at another, more subtle level, it is **we** who are to follow **their** lead, *not the other way around*.

Little Francis is ready this morning for what he is about to receive.

Are we?

It has been a great joy for Rishi and I to meet with Jesse and MacKenzie and Francis this past month to prepare for the baptism. It was not hard work at all. It was quite easy and light, *because Francis was already ready*, and because Jesse and MacKenzie were really present. They came and they conversed without masks; with a desire to not just "go-through-the-motions" and "get the baby done," but a desire to understand what's really going on in this whole process. I admire them and the work they've done to become who they are today. And I'm very happy that Francis is in their care, and the care of their chosen godparents. They are ready to receive and to keep receiving this amazing state of grace that will remind them, again and again, from one context to another, that they are not alone, that they are well loved, and that they can love well.

Are the rest of us ready for the three of them? Are we ready to build relationships with them that do not merely go through the motions? Relationships in which we will put our worldly masks aside and cultivate the desire to truly understand them and care for them as they are? These are vows that are not to be lightly undertaken. But, at the same time, if we are **not** ready for this level of involvement in their lives, *there is no shame in that*. We can vow to **become** ready with God's help. We can vow to **pray** for them behind the scenes, with God's help. We don't have to bite off more than we can chew. By grace, we can all have a powerful, helpful influence in the lives of Francis, Jesse, and MacKenzie, each in our own unique way.

One thing is most certain. God is ready -- here and now -- to meet each one of **them**, and to meet each one of **us**, wherever we are at. And to give us the grace to move forward... in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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FURTHER REFLECTIONS FOR PARENTS & GODPARENTS

A helpful way of thinking about baptism is that it is both a baptism "into" something and a baptism "out of" something.

We are baptized **into** the Life of the Trinity. That is the short answer. *But what does that mean ???* -- since we know that Francis is **already** in the loving embrace of the Trinity -- and always **has been**, from before he was born -- and always **will be**.

The longer answer is that baptism is baptism **into life as a *conscious sacred journey***, a life in which we keep growing into an ever more conscious and active participation in the Love of the Trinity. Baptism is baptism **into life as a *sacrament*** -- a life in which we come to see the Unseen World of God in the midst of our ordinary, visible, tangible, smellable, hearable earthly experiences -- a life in which the invisible (but real) connections between ourselves and God and all of creation become increasingly apparent. This is our true, baptismal, identity.

So if that is what we are baptized "into," what are we baptized "out of" ???

We are baptized "out of" the illusion that creeps in and seeks to overtake us from the moment we are born -- the illusion that we are fundamentally alone, unloved, unprotected, unsafe. The illusion that we are disconnected from God, from one another, from creation. This illusion is so formidible that our tradition considers it to be the root of all evil, the ground out of which all harmful acts and attitudes grow, for it cultivates in us the false identity that we call "original sin."

At the same time, we are baptized "into" what our tradition calls "the Mystical Body of Christ," which is the community of persons who are consciously, actively participating in the divine life and love of the Trinity -- mirroring that life and that love in their daily lives. This is something much larger, much broader than any particular congregation, since any particular congregation can become quite spiritually unconscious and inactive. The Mystical Body which we are baptized into can be found both inside and outside of church buildings, wherever two or three are gathered who are consciously, actively participating in the life of God and not merely going through the motions.

At the same time, we are baptized "out of" what Jesus called "the world," which is not creation, not the planet earth, not the natural environment, not human society as such. What Jesus called "the world" is the collective of human beings who believe the illusion that we are all fundamentally alone and unloved. This is the only "world" that makes persons and societies and the planet itself unsafe.

But, again, not everyone outside the walls of the church belongs to what Jesus called "the world." There are many "out there" who are persons of genuine good will -- a will that is good *not just on the surface*, but that has real personal depth. They belong to the Mystical Body of Christ. They can nurture others -- they can nurture **us** -- in faith, hope, and love, whether or not they physically go to church.

So you see, it can get quite complicated. But Francis, and those like him, will help us to see the great simplicity of it all, if we will humble ourselves and follow their lead.