

FAITH NOTES

Why Did God Create Us?

Special points of interest:

- Grace is God's gracious drawing near offering us life.
- The Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist, ought to be seen as a whole.
- We need to get our minds and hearts around the fact— **there is nothing we can do to win or lose God's love.**

IT IS ALWAYS THERE!



(God).” Equally important is God’s longing to share God’s life with us. Maybe we don’t often think about this but God desires to share life and be with us. I suggest that we take time to allow this mystery/reality to become a part of us. In our Catholic consciousness, we believe that one special and important way we share in God’s life is through the sacraments.

People of a certain age will immediately respond to the question with “God made us to know Him, to love Him, to serve Him in this life and to be happy with Him in the next.” The answer, from the Baltimore Catechism, is a good one but omits an important fact.

Both the Old and New Testaments, are clear: God reached out to us first by creating us and then when our ancestors did not listen to God’s command and guidance, God continued to find ways to bring us back to Him. This ongoing story, often referred to as Salvation History, highlights the omitted piece of information: God always

takes the initiative, we are responders to God’s gracious reaching out to us offering us life with Him. This is the incredible good news of Jesus Christ!

The image to the right is a close up of Michelangelo’s creation of “Adham.” I use the Hebrew, “Adham” because it means, not Adam but human persons. I believe this image does an excellent job through the use of the outstretched hands, of illustrating two basic longings: ours for God and God’s for us. In the fourth century, Saint Augustine reminded us that “our hearts are restless until they rest in thee

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Wanted: Prayer Sponsors

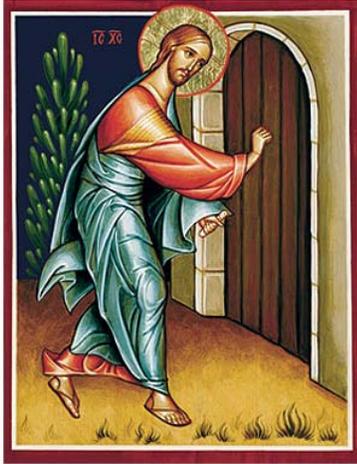
At Immaculate Conception/St. Anthony we call ourselves a parish community. We express our community spirit in welcoming newcomers and strangers, care for those in need, etc. The bonds that unite us might be through blood, friendship but there is a deeper bond to which I

would like to call attention—our faith. The deeper reason we gather in prayer, worship, social, outreach is to support each other in our faith journeys.

On Sunday, October 16 at the 10:45 Mass, some of the younger members of our faith community will be com-

mitting themselves to preparing for the celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation. They will be looking to the larger community to support them on this journey. At both the Saturday and Sunday Liturgies, there will be an opportunity to sign up as a Prayer Sponsor. At that time, the expectations of a “Prayer Sponsor” will be explained. Thank you in advance.

Sacraments: Encounters With The Risen Christ



In the first issue of “Faith Notes” we saw that our understanding of Jesus Christ impacts our understanding of what is happening when we celebrate any of the sacraments.

Our faith tells us that Jesus Christ is risen and is present to us in a new and empowering way. In each of the sacraments we are met by him as he offers us life, healing, forgiveness, a mission,

etc—all that we need to grow into our full stature as child of God and heirs with Jesus Christ.

In the past we have used a definition for a sacrament—“an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace.” This formulation fails to express our meeting with Christ. Furthermore, the expression “to give grace” can lead to thinking of grace as a thing or a commodity; thus, I celebrate the sacra-

ments in order to get grace.

A more helpful way to think about grace, which means gift, is grace is the gracious drawing near of our God offering us life.

The image of Christ knocking at the door (Rev. 3:20) without a handle captures Christ’s desire to meet and gift us. We need to be open to his presence and be ready to respond.

Sacraments Are Celebrations of the Community of Faith

“ Grace is the gracious drawing near of our God offering us life!”

No doubt we have all heard stories about a young couple who in planning their wedding desired to celebrate their commitment to each other at a beach or some other place having romantic meaning for them. Then, we learned that when the couple approached the priest to witness their exchange of vows in this hoped for location, he refused. Perhaps we questioned, “Why?”

The priest and the couple are coming from two different perspectives on sacraments. For the couple, the sacrament is seen as a personal event, celebrating their love for and commitment to each other. The priest speaking for the faith community

understands that the sacrament of marriage is Liturgy. Our faith tells us that this sacrament is a celebration of a loving covenant relationship. The church is celebrating the loving covenant of both the couple and Christ; the couple sign Christ’s loving covenant with the church.

Sacraments as liturgy are not private celebrations but are the work of the faith community. We gather to celebrate and worship God in the church building. Thus, the insistence on the church building as the place for the celebration of sacraments.

In the Sacred Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Bishops at the

Second Vatican Council, underscored this belief by clearly stating that whenever a sacrament is celebrated, the communal form is preferred. This is because it better expresses that the sacraments, like all liturgy, are the work of the faith community.

For example in the Anointing of the Sick, it is far more appropriate for the community to gather and pray with the sick person than for the anointing to take place between just the priest and the sick person.

How often do I think of my role as a member of the faith community in these celebrations? My presence at sacramental celebration is not as a spectator. What is my role?

Though we tend to speak of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist as three separate sacraments, this way of talking was not always the case. In the early days, adults joining the Church after a period of intense preparation, sometimes lasting for years, came to the Easter Vigil. That night in the presence of the Bishop, they were plunged into the baptismal waters, rubbed with oil as they emerged from the pool and then brought to the table to join in the celebration of the Eucharist for the first time. This marked their entrance into the faith community and the beginning of the lifelong process of conversion—becoming more deeply and fully committed as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

As the number of faith communities expanded and infant baptism became normative, it was no longer possible for the Bishop to preside over all the initiations. The presbyter, the ordained priest, became the minister of the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. Since the bishop remained the ordinary minister of Confirmation, this sacrament was separated from the other two and postponed until the bishop could visit.

With the practice of infant baptism, the Western Church fixed an

age for Confirmation and first Communion. (In the Eastern Church infants are baptized, confirmed and receive first Eucharist!) For centuries the order of initiation remained Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. It was only in the 20th century, that Pope Pius X changed the order to allow children as young as seven (“the age of reason”) to receive first communion.

Typically today, a person is baptized as an infant, receives first communion at around age seven and then is confirmed around 12-18 years of age depending upon the diocese and parish. For adults, the person is welcomed into the Church through the Rite of Christian Initiation (RCIA) and celebrates Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil.

How do we understand Confirmation? If we look at how the Church celebrates this Sacrament, we can get a better grasp on what it is we believe.

Whether Confirmation is celebrated within the Mass or not, these elements are present:

1. Proclamation of the Word
2. Renewal of Baptismal promises
3. Laying on of hands
4. Anointing with chrism
5. Exchanging the gift of

peace.

We believe that when God's word is proclaimed, God is speaking to us today and we listen with open ears and hearts so as to respond to God's invitation. By renewing our Baptismal Promises we rekindle our faith in Christ and our promise to live as his disciple.

When the Bishop lays on hands, he is calling down the Spirit on the candidate and invoking a mission. The Bishop then anoints the candidate with chrism with the words, “_____be sealed with the Holy Spirit. The blank space is for the Confirmation name the candidate has chosen. Being called by name signifies the personal nature of what is happening. The oil of chrism consecrates for mission and seals in the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The exchange of the greeting of peace reminds us that it is Christ's peace, his fullness, that we are wishing for the other and that this peace and harmony is what we bring to the world.

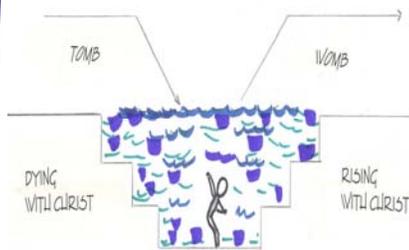
“The Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist, ought to be seen as a whole. The first two can never be repeated. The only repeatable Sacrament of Initiation is the Eucharist!”

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How Baptized Are You Today?



We need to get our minds and hearts around the fact— **there is nothing we can do to win or lose God's love. IT IS ALWAYS THERE!**



Our first sacramental encounter with the Risen Christ takes place at our Baptism when we were brought into the Body of Christ. Today the Church calls us to a deeper appreciation of our Baptism and its significance for living a mature Christian life, being disciples in mission,

Every year at Easter the Church invites us to renew our baptismal promises. This experience can be simply a part of the ritual or an opportunity to renew a personal commitment to what happened to us twenty, thirty, forty or even eighty years ago.

For a better understanding of what happened at our Baptism, we must return to Jesus' Baptism. You recall that Jesus went to John who submerged him in the Jordan river. The Gospel accounts speak then, of the descent of the Holy Spirit and the voice from heaven, claiming Jesus as God's beloved Son. As we pray with this event, we realize that what happened at Jesus Baptism, happened at ours. When we came out of the water, no one heard the voice saying, "This is my beloved child upon whom my favor rests." But just as surely as the Father said it of Jesus, the Father says it of us. We need to get

our minds and hearts around the fact— there is nothing we can do to win or lose God's love. It is always there!

Similarly as we were anointed with the oil, the Spirit came to us, to abide in us as the Spirit abided in Jesus.

St. Paul in his letter to the *Romans* explicitly connects our Baptism with Baptism into Christ's death. Further, when the Church blesses the baptismal waters, she recalls significant events in salvation history and sees in those waters both death and life. And regularly at Eucharist, we profess our belief in this mystery in the Eucharistic Acclamation, "Dying you destroyed our death. Rising you restored our life. Lord Jesus come in glory."

In the first centuries of the Church, the baptismal pool was referred to as a tomb and a womb. As those to be baptized descend into the waters, they are plunged into the death of Christ and as they rise from the waters, they are raised to new life in Christ. The figure on the left illustrates this.

Our initiation into the Body of Christ begun at Baptism is meant to be an on-going dynamic in our life—we are meant to become more Christ-

like, rooted in God, the Father, serving our brothers and sisters, and eager to share the joy of the gospel. This conversion process is guided and strengthened by the Holy Spirit. At Confirmation, we celebrate the "sealing" of the Holy Spirit.

Neither Baptism nor Confirmation can be received a second time. This faith perception gave rise to the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Penance); more on this in a couple of weeks. The only repeatable Sacrament of Initiation is the Eucharist. By doing and receiving Eucharist and allowing Eucharist to have its effect in our lives, we renew and deepen our baptismal identity (child of God and heir with Christ) and mission. May the Spirit continue to lead and guide us to where God wants us to be!

Questions for Reflection

1. How can I make my baptismal identity and mission more a part of my life?
2. Do I believe that I am precious in God's eyes.
3. How am I a disciple in mission?