

LEADER



WHO YOU ARE

A Retreat Guide on the Sacrament of Baptism

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FIRST MEDITATION

CREATED, REDEEMED, AND CALLED BY GOD

INTRODUCTION

Jesus was having a heated debate with the Pharisees in the Temple in Jerusalem, and he was winning the debate, causing great frustration to the Pharisees. In one of their exchanges, Jesus used a comparison that reveals the first crucial aspect of our identity, as God himself understands it: we belong to God in a special way. Here is how St. Mark describes the incident in Chapter 12 of his Gospel:

“They sent some Pharisees and Herodians to him to ensnare him in his speech. They came and said to him, ‘Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you are not concerned with anyone’s opinion. You do not regard a person’s status but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or should we not pay?’” Knowing their hypocrisy he said to them, ‘Why are you testing me? Bring me a denarius to look at.’ They brought one to him and he said to them, ‘Whose image and inscription is this?’ They replied to him, ‘Caesar’s.’ So Jesus said to them, ‘Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.’ They were utterly amazed at him.

—Mark 12:13–17

CREATED IN GOD’S IMAGE

In ancient times, emperors put their own image on the coins used in their empire. This symbolized their authority over the lives of their subjects, who used the coins for all the activities necessary for survival and prosperity.

In this exchange with the Pharisees, Jesus uses that example to remind his listeners of the image that we, as human beings, find emblazoned on our souls: the image of God himself. This is how the Book of Genesis describes it:

“God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them...”

—Genesis 1:27

Being created in his image means we belong to God in a special way; he cares about us and is interested in us and calls us into a personal relationship of mutual love with him and with each other. As the Catechism puts it:

“Being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone. He is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons. And he is called by grace to a covenant with his Creator, to offer him a response of faith and love that no other creature can give in his stead.

—CCC 357

This is who we are and where we come from: We are created by God, in the image of God; his own identity is stamped on our very souls. This separates us from every other creature in the visible universe—only we were created in God’s image.

COMING FROM GOD AND GOING TOWARDS GOD

And this also reveals where we are going in life, where we will find happiness. Here again is how the Catechism puts it:

“The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for...”

—CCC 27

We come from God, and we are going to God, and in living that relationship of communion with God we find the fulfillment that we all long for.



This is what it means to belong to God, to be created in his image, to bear his stamp on our souls. Our hearts are just like that Roman coin that Jesus showed to the Pharisees, but instead of being stamped with a mortal emperor's image, we are stamped with the image of everlasting love and truth and beauty—with God's image.

REDEEMED BY JESUS CHRIST

That was God's original and glorious plan for the human family. But we all know that this plan was disrupted by sin. The image of God in us was distorted and our dignity was corrupted. Our human identity was obscured, and human nature was set adrift in a fallen world.

And that's why Jesus came to redeem us. God wanted to reclaim us, to rescue us, to bring us back into his embrace. But in his plan of redemption, God didn't just repair and reestablish our original identity; he actually enhanced it. He elevated us from being merely his especially beloved creatures to being his dearly beloved children: he adopted us into his own family.

The New Testament reveals this and celebrates it on almost every page. Jesus teaches us to call God "Father" when he instructs us in prayer; the New Testament Letters come back again and again to the amazing gift of grace that Christians receive, to the "glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:21), as St. Paul puts it. In that same passage, St. Paul points out that as God's children, we are also called to receive the divine inheritance of everlasting life. He writes:

The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

—Romans 8:16–17

In Christ, we have been, as it were, created all over again; the image of God in our souls has now taken on new depth and brilliance, and the fulfillment we can look forward to is far beyond anything that we could have imagined.

CALLED TO DIVINE FRIENDSHIP

Created by God in his image, redeemed by Christ and adopted into the family of God: this is who we are; this is our identity. And yet, it doesn't stop there.

During the Last Supper, before Jesus suffered his passion and death to make all of this possible, he revealed yet another dimension of who we are. Not just beloved creations of God; not just adopted children of the Father; but actual friends of the Lord. From creature, to child, to friend—this is the fullness of our human and Christian identity. Here are the words of our Savior:

I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father. It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you.

—John 15:15–16

You and I have been chosen, individually and personally, to be friends of Jesus Christ, the Lord of life and history. Our relationship with God is destined to flourish in a relationship of everlasting friendship.

CONCLUSION: WHAT WE SHOULD NEVER FORGET

This is who we are. This is where we come from and where we are going. This is our identity. And it all traces back to the moment we were baptized, because it was through baptism that God's saving action restored our fallen nature and planted the seed of grace that made us his children and that impels us towards his friendship.

It's no wonder that Christianity has been able to transform so many lives and so many cultures, even in the midst of this fallen world; there is power in who we are. And it's no wonder that Pope St. Leo the Great, back in the fifth century, when the civilized world was collapsing, was able to say:

Christian, recognize your dignity and, now that you share in God's own nature, do not return to your former base condition by sinning... Never forget that you have been rescued from the power of darkness and brought into the light of the Kingdom of God.

—Pope St. Leo the Great



In the next meditation, we will look at how the symbols surrounding baptism evoke these dimensions of our human and Christian identity. But for now, take some time to reflect prayerfully, and joyfully, on who you truly are. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/ GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How often do I reflect on my true human and Christian identity? What kind of impact does this identity have on my daily life? What kind of impact do I think it should have?
2. Practically speaking, what do I tend to base my identity on: My achievements? My possessions and physical qualities? Fitting in with other people? Some kind of worldly “success”? My level of holiness?
3. If I habitually thought about myself the way that God thinks of me—as his especially gifted creature, his beloved child, and his intimate friend—how would that affect my attitudes and actions?

THREE QUOTATIONS TO HELP YOUR MEDITATION

The net of the Gospel pulls us out of the waters of death and brings us into the splendor of God’s light, into true life. It is really true: as we follow Christ in this mission to be fishers of men, we must bring men and women out of the sea that is salted with so many forms of alienation and onto the land of life, into the light of God. It is really so: the purpose of our lives is to reveal God to men. And only where God is seen does life truly begin. Only when we meet the living God in Christ do we know what life is. We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary. There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know Him and to speak to others of our friendship with Him.

—Pope Benedict XVI
Inaugural Homily, 24 April 2005

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.

—John 3:16–21
NABRE

I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father. It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you. This I command you: love one another ... In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins.

—John 15:11–17, 1 John 4:9–10
NABRE

NOTES



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SECOND MEDITATION

SYMBOLS OF THE BAPTISMAL CEREMONY

INTRODUCTION

These then, are the three dimensions of our human and Christian identity: we are created in the image of God, redeemed from the original sin that obscured that image and adopted into God's family, and called to intimate friendship with the Lord. The ceremony surrounding the sacrament of baptism beautifully symbolizes these dimensions. That's the case with all the sacraments. The physical materials and gestures used in their celebration reveal and make present their spiritual meaning—just as, through the Incarnation, the human nature of Jesus Christ revealed and made present God himself. Let's take some time now to reflect on five of the symbols used in the baptismal ceremony, so as to discover and savor even more who we are in God's eyes.

WASHED CLEAN OF ORIGINAL SIN

The most obvious symbol is the actual material used to administer this sacrament, the water itself.

When we are baptized, whoever is baptizing us, usually a priest or deacon, pours or sprinkles water on our heads as he declares that he baptizes us in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

In the ancient Church, and even today in some places, the person being baptized would actually be submerged under water three times—dunked, in a sense. Whether through sprinkling, pouring, or dunking, the water itself calls to mind some of the most dramatic events in the history of salvation: the flood at the time of Noah, for example; the parting of the Red Sea and the escape of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery; the stopping of the Jordan River when the Israelites finally crossed into the Promised Land after their long Exodus in the wilderness.

These and other Old Testament events involving water all foreshadowed the cleansing and saving waters of baptism. Pouring the water three times, in the name of the Trinity, calls to mind the three days that Jesus spent in the tomb, and his resurrection on the morning of the third day.

Through baptism, the redemption that Jesus worked through his loving self-sacrifice is applied to our lives—it plugs us in, so to speak, to Christ's own passion, death, and resurrection.

The water itself also symbolizes being cleansed and renewed—we are being cleansed from original sin and restored into communion with God; God himself, through grace, comes to inhabit our souls, and he plants the seed of divine life within us.

CLOTHED WITH LIGHT

Another symbol used in the baptismal ceremony is the new garment, the white garment given to the newly baptized person. Clothes can be a powerful expression of one's identity—just think, for example, of the uniform of a soldier or robes of a queen. Through giving the newly baptized a white garment, the Church expresses that the Christian is now a child of light.

When Jesus was transfigured on Mount Tabor, the Gospels tell us, his clothes shone a brilliant white, so bright that his disciples couldn't even bear to look at them. When God's grace is poured into our hearts, restoring and elevating our true identity, we become sharers in this divine glory.

In the ancient Church, when baptisms usually occurred on Holy Saturday, the new Christians would wear their white garments to Mass every day for the whole week following Easter, showing off, so to speak, their new identity as children of God, children of the light.

In the Book of Revelation, the saints in heaven are described as wearing white garments, and Jesus himself explains how this symbolizes our sharing in his own divine nature, our taking on a renewed, deeper, and everlasting identity in Christ. He says:

 *The victor will thus be dressed in white, and I will never erase his name from the book of life but will acknowledge his name in the presence of my Father and of his angels*

—Revelation 3:5



In the Bible, one's "name" refers to one's deepest identity—being "dressed in white" and having the lord "acknowledge" our name symbolizes the intimate relationship with Christ that we receive through grace, our being known and loved and welcomed by him into his Kingdom.

This identification with Christ and his eternal Kingdom is also symbolized when the baptized person is anointed with the special oil of catechumens after a prayer of exorcism: Through baptism, we are liberated from the power of the devil and brought under the protection of Christ the King—so much so that we share the same anointing that in the Old Testament was given to royalty. That's the third symbol.

CALLED TO SHINE

The fourth most eloquent symbol of the baptismal ceremony is that of light.

The godparents of the person being baptized are given a candle that the priest or deacon lights from the Paschal Candle. The Paschal Candle symbolizes Christ's resurrection, and spreading the light from that candle to a candle belonging to the newly baptized person calls to mind the tongue-like flames that spread and descended on the Apostles at Pentecost.

This transfer of light is an especially eloquent expression not only of our restored human nature and divine adoption, but of our intimate friendship with Jesus. Friends do things together; they share the same interests, projects, and priorities in life. One of the greatest signs of Christ's desire for our friendship is how he invites us to share in his mission of spreading salvation. Jesus established his Church and commissioned his apostles for this purpose. In fact, his last words on earth, before he ascended back into heaven after his resurrection, were all about this shared mission. He told his followers:

 *Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.*

—Matthew 28:19–20

The flame of our baptismal candle symbolizes our mission to be lights in this dark world, to share with others the illumination and the warmth that we ourselves have received from God, to conquer the powers of darkness and sin and make a real, everlasting difference in salvation history.

Jesus wouldn't share that mission with us if he didn't love us, if he didn't believe in us. That too is an essential part of our identity: in Christ, through our friendship with him, we are called and equipped to be his messengers and missionaries, to become his partners in building up the only kingdom that will last forever, the Kingdom of God.

MEMBER OF A NEW FAMILY

We don't carry out that mission all by ourselves—Jesus accompanies us with his grace, and also through making us members of his Church. This too is symbolized during the baptismal ceremony, right at the very beginning, when all the family members and friends who have come to the baptism gather with the sacred minister at the entrance to the church building. There, the celebrant welcomes everyone and begins the ceremony by questioning the parents and godparents about their intention. Then he makes an initial sign of the cross on the child's forehead, pronounces the child's name, and says: "The Christian community welcomes you with great joy." At that point, the welcome is made tangible by everyone entering into the church building and continuing with the rest of the celebration.

When we are baptized, we are born again spiritually, born into the family of the Church, and all the Christians and all the saints and martyrs from every time and place become our brothers and sisters.

CONCLUSION: WHO ARE YOU?

Cleansed and renewed; clothed in white; anointed; set aflame with the Holy Spirit; and welcomed into the family of the Church—this is what happens at baptism, when our true identity is restored and revealed. This is what happened at your baptism. Let's take some time now to contemplate these powerful, inspired symbols, and to enjoy everything they tell us about who we truly are. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.



QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/ GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Of all the symbols used in the baptismal ceremony, which one speaks most deeply to my heart? Why?
2. Which is more important, my birthday or my baptismal day? How should I celebrate my baptismal anniversary every year?
3. How deeply do I feel identified with the Church and its mission of spreading Christ's message and grace? How firmly do I believe that the call to participate in this mission is an expression of Christ's desire for my friendship, and that my generous response to this call is one sure way to deepen that friendship?

THREE QUOTATIONS TO HELP YOUR MEDITATION

The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them. When they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted. Then Jesus approached and said to them, "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."

—Matthew 28:16–20
NABRE

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you are doing unless God is with him." Jesus answered and said to him, "Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a person once grown old be born again? Surely he cannot re-enter his mother's womb and be born again, can he?" Jesus answered, "Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of spirit is spirit."

—John 3:1–6
NABRE

O God, who by invisible power accomplish a wondrous effect through sacramental signs and who in many ways have prepared water, your creation, to show forth the grace of Baptism; O God, whose Spirit in the first moments of the world's creation hovered over the waters, so that the very substance of water would even then take to itself the power to sanctify; O God, who by the outpouring of the flood foreshadowed regeneration, so that from the mystery of one and the same element of water would come an end to vice and a beginning of virtue; O God, who caused the children of Abraham to pass dry-shod through the Red Sea, so that the chosen people, set free from slavery to Pharaoh, would prefigure the people of the baptized;

O God, whose Son, baptized by John in the waters of the Jordan, was anointed with the Holy Spirit, and, as he hung upon the Cross, gave forth water from his side along with blood, and after his Resurrection, commanded his disciples: "Go forth, teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," look now, we pray, upon the face of your Church and graciously unseal for her the fountain of Baptism. May this water receive by the Holy Spirit the grace of your Only Begotten Son, so that human nature, created in your image and washed clean through the Sacrament of Baptism from all the squalor of the life of old, may be found worthy to rise to the life of newborn children through water and the Holy Spirit.

May the power of the Holy Spirit, O Lord, we pray, come down through your Son into the fullness of this font, so that all who have been buried with Christ by Baptism into death may rise again to life with him. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

—Blessing and Invocation of
God Over Baptismal Water
Roman Missal



CONFERENCE

FOUR WAYS TO FOSTER SPIRITUAL GROWTH

INTRODUCTION

Now that we have refreshed our understanding of who we are and who we are called to be, we are ready to get practical.

Any living organism already possesses the essential elements of its identity in its DNA. As it grows and develops, all those elements gradually reach maturity, unless some obstacle appears that impedes its natural development.

As human beings, however, we have received the gift of freedom, of free will. And so, the spiritual DNA that was given to us when God created and redeemed us will only develop to maturity if we freely cooperate with it. Each one of us, in a real sense, is responsible for our identity, in a way that minerals, vegetables, and animals are not.

STAYING IN SHAPE FOR THE SPIRITUAL BATTLE

But because of our fallen nature, and because we live in a world inundated with spiritual enemies, exercising this responsibility is not easy. Baptism truly did restore and elevate our identity, but it didn't remove all the difficulties that come from living in a fallen world. This is really important for us to remember. Here's how the Catechism puts it:

Baptism, by imparting the life of Christ's grace, erases original sin and turns man back toward God, but the consequences [of original sin] for nature, weakened and inclined to evil, persist in man and summon him to spiritual battle.

—CCC 405

That spiritual battle has many different manifestations, some of which we have already discussed in past Retreat Guides. In this conference, we will review four things that all of us need to do in order to stay in shape for that ongoing battle; they aren't the only Christian activities that should become part of our lives, but they are four simple, basic activities that we should all engage in so that our human and Christian identity will

flourish; four ways to give continuity to what occurred at our baptism.

And it just so happens that these four things correspond, in a sense, to four negative consequences of original sin. By engaging in these activities, we will be doing our part to give God's grace room to correct and heal the deviations and wounds obscuring our true identity, so that we can grow closer to him through a better prayer life and be better messengers of his salvation in this fallen world.

These four activities are: self-reflection, self-discipline, treasure hunting, and fellowship. Let's look at them, briefly, one by one.

SELF-REFLECTION

In the first place, we need to carve out time in our lives for self-reflection. One of the most dramatic results of original sin was how it drove Adam and Eve into hiding. They hid from God "among the trees of the garden," they hid from each other by making garments out of fig leaves, and, most importantly, they hid from the truth of their own actions by blaming someone else for their sin—Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed the devil.

If we are going to live according to our true identity, we have stop hiding. We have to expose our lives, our thoughts, our souls to the healing light of God's truth. Jesus put it like this:

For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.

—John 3:20–21

Coming out from hiding means making space in our lives to reflect on what's happening to us, within us, and around us. It means shutting out the noise and the ongoing avalanche of distractions—busy-ness, Internet, entertainment, social media—and simply looking in the spiritual mirror to see what's happening in our souls.



Doing that gives us a chance to detect behaviors, attitudes, and decisions that contradict our identity and impede our spiritual growth. It also gives us a chance to gaze with satisfaction at the good that God's grace is working in our lives.

A good way to form the habit of self-reflection is by doing a daily examination of conscience—something we have explained in another Retreat Guide. Keeping a spiritual journal can be helpful too—we don't need to write every day, as if it were a diary; but taking some time each week or every few days to write down what's going on in our lives and how we are responding to it can help us live in the light of truth, and walk briskly along the path of authenticity and integrity—key elements in the development of our true identity.

SELF-DISCIPLINE

Another result of original sin is what the Catechism calls “concupiscence,” our weakness of will and inclination to sin (cf. CCC 417). Our fallen nature is attracted to sin, and there is a part of us that always leans in the direction of sin. The capital sins of gluttony, anger, sloth, lust, pride, envy, and greed are always “lying in wait at the door,” as the Bible puts it (Genesis 4:7), and we have a tendency to want to let them come in.

These tendencies go against our true identity as children of God, and whenever we give in to them we feel the internal division and remorse that comes from having acted against our authentic selves. But concupiscence doesn't just go away all by itself. We have to resist it. God's grace will help us, and indeed without his grace we won't even feel a desire to resist these impulses. But his grace requires our cooperation in order to be fruitful. That's where self-discipline comes in.

We have to learn to govern these impulses—to resist them when they drive us towards what is contrary to the fullness of life in God's Kingdom, and to direct the energy behind them towards what is good, towards what truly nourishes the good life, the life of grace within us.

Practicing self-discipline means just that. It's like cultivating a garden. You have to plant, fertilize, water, and prune, but you also have to pull up the weeds, put in protective fencing, and otherwise guard against

noxious influences. In the spiritual life, we need to intentionally cultivate good behaviors, like patience, perseverance, chastity, kindness, and courage. And we need to rein in our sinful tendencies. That takes effort and decision, and many times it requires self-sacrifice.

It's the kind of thing that we engage in every year when we “give something up for Lent.” We have to govern our impulses in order to be faithful to those commitments. But we should also be seeking greater order, balance, and virtue in our lives during every season of the year. Self-discipline, undertaken out of love for God and a desire to follow him and be close to him, is one way of being true to our identity and allowing it to flourish, just as athletes and musicians bring their natural talents to maturity through hard work and self-mastery.

TREASURE HUNTING

Original sin not only wounded our will and gave us an inclination to sin, but it also darkened our minds. Ignorance and intellectual confusion are other obstacles to spiritual growth that God will help us overcome, if we let him.

This kind of ignorance isn't simply a lack of knowledge. It refers to a distorted understanding of God, ourselves, and the world around us. Jesus came not only to pay the price for our sin, but also to teach us about the true meaning of life and of the universe, the true path to happiness and fulfillment.

The gift of faith, poured into our souls at baptism, gives us the ability to accept and digest that true teaching, but it is up to us to seek and strive after a deeper and deeper understanding of what Jesus has taught us.

Treasure hunting is that. It's actively looking into the vast treasure house of Christian doctrine, searching for pearls of wisdom where we know they are to be found: in the Bible, in the teachings of the Church, in the teachings and the lives of the saints, in the unfolding of Christian history.

If we nourish our minds through reading and learning about our faith, and put into practice what we learn, little by little, with the help of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we will actually become wise. We will learn to understand other people, and ourselves; we will learn to interpret the events around us from the true perspective, the perspective of God himself.



The ignorance we inherited from original sin will be replaced by the science of the saints.

We can't just nourish our minds on the latest gossip, or even the latest headlines. We need to nourish our minds on what will truly feed the life of grace within us, and that means treasure hunting—seeking an ever wider and ever deeper knowledge of God's revelation.

It's okay to read comic books for light entertainment, just as it's okay to eat popcorn for an enjoyable snack. But you wouldn't want to try to live on just popcorn; our bodies need more nourishment than that. Well, our minds do too.

FELLOWSHIP

Another consequence of original sin was the breakdown of interpersonal relationships. The Bible speaks of this in regards to Adam and Eve themselves, and it also illustrates it in the familiar story of Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve's first children. Though brothers, they quarreled, and the result was murder and estrangement (cf. Genesis 4).

Interpersonal conflicts will always be part of our human experience in this fallen world. But the life of grace, life in harmony with our true identity as children of God and followers of Christ, is always moving us to be builders of community, not merely isolated and self-absorbed individuals.

In Greek and Latin the word for "Church" is "ecclesia," which actually comes from two words meaning "to summon" or to "call out of." The very core idea of the Church that Jesus founded is the formation of a community of people who are called out of the dispersion and brokenness of fallen humanity and into a new brotherhood: the fellowship of the baptized, of those who have received God's grace and come to believe in the Lord.

To be true to our Christian identity, then, involves actively living out this call to communion, this fellowship of grace.

We can find and build this fellowship in many ways: through giving ourselves generously to family life; through being committed and active members of our parish; through getting involved in Bible studies or service projects or ecclesial movements and associations, or simply through faith-based

friendships... There is no shortage of forms of fellowship: the Holy Spirit has always been creative and prolific in coming up with enough varieties to satisfy any personality. But all of them, sooner or later, require us to go out of our comfort zones. That's why good Christian fellowship always involves making a conscious choice, just like self-reflection, self-discipline, and treasure hunting.

CONCLUSION: BEING TRUE TO YOURSELF

We all want to develop to the full our true identity; we all want the grace we received in baptism to flourish and bring us to the fulfillment we desire. And God wants that too.

Through these four simple, basic activities, we can actively contribute to making that happen, we can actively cooperate with the grace of God within us. They really are essential elements for all of us, if we want to be true to our deepest selves.

Take some time now to reflect prayerfully on the personal questionnaire, which will help you review and reform these activities in your own daily life.

PERSONAL QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is the role of silence and reflection in my life right now? How often do I feel frazzled or chaotic? Why?
2. How deep is my self-knowledge? How thoroughly do I really understand the roots of my personality flaws? How thoroughly do I understand and appreciate my personal gifts and talents?
3. What activity helps me relax and regain focus in a healthy way? How intentionally and regularly do I make that activity a part of my life?
4. What areas of my life need more self-discipline—in other words, where does my behavior tend to become sinful, or at least unbalanced and unproductive: conversation and communication; entertainment and relaxation; sexuality; work-rest equilibrium; order and organization; punctuality and responsibility?



FURTHER READING

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

- *A Handbook of Spiritual Perfection*
by Fr. Philip E. Dion
- *Christian Self-Mastery*
by Fr. Basil Maturin
- *Victory Over Vice*
by Archbishop Fulton Sheen
- *Seeking First the Kingdom: 30 Meditations on How to Love God with All Your Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength*
by Fr. John Bartunek, LC

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