

I think that perhaps we sometimes do not realize the enormity of the gift that God has given us in the Sacrament of Baptism. When we are baptized, the stain of original sin is washed away, sanctifying grace is restored to us, and we become members of the mystical Body of Christ.

I know you have heard that before, perhaps so many times that it has lost its meaning. But take a moment to think about what it means to become part of the Body of Christ.

When Jesus is in Heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father, we are there with Him. When we live our lives here on earth as faithful Christians He is here with us.

In the Gospel today, Jesus is not only telling us how to live, but He is also giving us insight into how He lived while He walked among us. It does not have to do with great theological knowledge, personal charisma, or worldly success. It does not have to do with prayerful ecstasies, visions, or extreme penances.

The sign that sets Christians apart from the world is how we treat our brothers and sisters. We treat them the way God treats them, the way God treats us.

God is kind and merciful, even to the ungrateful and the wicked. If we are part of His body, how can we do any less?

We must be quick to forgive, we must avoid judging and condemning others. We have no idea what is going on in the life of another person. We must always work to think the best of each other. That also means speaking well of others and treating them like our beloved brothers and sisters, even if they sometimes act in ways that distress us.

Jesus doesn't simply tell us what we should do, He tells us why we should do it. We are created in the image and likeness of God, and God is love. True eternal love is self-forgetful and self-giving. When we express anger or displeasure or annoyance over the actions of another person, we only hurt ourselves.

How can we be angry at our foot when we stub our toe, or annoyed at our hand when we smash our fingers?

The more we accept this aspect of our nature, the desire to love everyone as true sons and daughters of God, the more we will grow into spiritual maturity, and become the person that God intended for us to be.

It has been said that when God first created us, as a divine thought, he gave each one of us a name. It is a name known only to God, and it will be revealed to us when we finally become that person that God conceived us to be.

And the better we get at treating people as God would have us treat them, as God would treat them, the easier it becomes. Because a mature, healthy, human soul overflows with joy, enthusiasm, and peace. This is the Gift that Jesus promises to those who give. It is a gift of true, lasting happiness.

Christ is sometimes compared to the sun, radiating the warmth of Truth and Justice. As members of His body, we are called to be like Him, mini-suns. Our lives may be turbulent and active on the inside, but outside we radiate warmth, light and stability.

We struggle daily to know God better. We plead with Him, asking what He wants of us and praying that we are acting in accordance with His will. We engage in a seemingly endless battle against our own weaknesses and frailties; selfishness, greed, lust, and arrogance. We suffer in our hearts every kind of cross; loneliness, pain and confusion.

But all of that, all of that inner turmoil and struggle, is used by God to make us more like Him, to purify us, to help us cultivate an inner peace. If we can deal with all of the troubles and anxieties that we bring upon ourselves, if we can overcome them and find an interior peace, then how can we be disturbed by anything that comes to us from without?

Each one of us then becomes like a miniature sun, bringing the light of God's goodness, mercy, and wisdom into the world. Every Christian gives the light of Christ to everyone else, friends, enemies, family, strangers, and even competitors.

That is how God fills the world with goodness and love, through bright, shining Christians.

When we take the other path, and allow the devil to exploit our weaknesses, then we become spiritual black holes. Black holes are stars that have collapsed in upon themselves. They produce a gravitational pull that is so strong it sucks in everything around them, even the light of other stars. Black holes spread darkness.

There is no middle ground. We either live Christ-centered lives or self-centered lives. We become either bright stars, shining like the sun, or pits of darkness and despair.

I do not pretend that this journey is easy, it is not. The last two years have done an incredible amount of damage to our interpersonal relationships. People have shut themselves off from each other, often hesitating to even hug each other or simply shake hands. The result is that to a large extent we have neglected the empathy that allows us to consider the needs or pain of the other person. We have become masked and faceless.

On top of that we have had a generation of experts telling us to indulge in our own personal feelings and emotions. When you're angry, express yourself. When you're sad, let it flow. When you're in the mood for fun, go with it. If you don't, the modern psychologists tell us, you will "repress your inner self".

But on this point, the psychologists are wrong. We can govern our emotions. We can choose how we respond to them and not let ourselves be ruled by them. Instead we can choose to live our lives by the

principles of our faith. Our emotions can be affected by all kinds of things. They can change like the wind. But our principles do not change. They are true and dependable. Living lives of Christian principles, leads us to wisdom, stability, and maturity.

When reality does not match our expectations, we become frustrated. When we become frustrated we let our emotions take over and we often lash out at those closest to us. It is pointless to become frustrated over things we cannot control. But how often do we do just that on a daily basis? How often do we think the worst of people when they do something that angers or annoys us?

Do we consider what may be going on in the lives of that other person that may cause them to act that way? Do we pray for them that God gives them peace?

When you feel that inner peace slipping away from you, take a moment, take a deep breath, and pray that the Holy Spirit fill you with its presence, and release from you all that is not of God.

If we can find that inner peace of God within ourselves, then all that the world throws at us will wash over us like waves on a sandy shore.

Have you ever walked on a beach just at the edge of where the waves reach? When you stop and look back, you see the sand disturbed by the footprints you left. But then the turbulent waves wash over your prints, leaving the sand smooth and clear once again. Cultivate a peace that allows the daily anxieties and frustrations of the world to wash over you and smooth your rough spots.

Someone once said that the person who annoys you most in life, may be here for the sole reason of smoothing over your rough edges, to make you a saint. And, by the way, you may be here solely to smooth over the rough edges of someone else.

So let us pray that God strengthen us to be more like Him every day. Let us pray for the peace and tranquility of spirit that is not affected by our daily struggles. Let us pray for each other, that we will all come together again in joy and friendship when all things are made new.

May the peace of Christ, which is beyond all understanding, be with you all.