

Homily011220

WHAT REAL DIFFERENCE DOES BAPTISM MAKE?

Today is a special family Mass where we celebrate our young people who participate in sporting events in the parish through Saint Anthony Youth programs. Soccer. Basketball. Volleyball. Track and more. When I was younger I too was involved in parish sports activities but being short of stature and not particularly strong and not particularly fast I was a bit of a disadvantage. However, I did have some good eye/hand coordination.

One year for Christmas our family got a pool table for our downstairs family room. It was not a full sized pool table. Nor did it have a real slate top. It was made of ply wood and it actually had some quirks. For example, when it would rain outside the plywood got a little warped and curved. You could actually play the curve of the table on some pool shots. The more we played the better we got. Then when I went into the Seminary one of the happy moments was when I learned that their recreation hall had five regulation size pool tables. I played a lot of pool during recreation times. I got to be pretty good.

Each year there was a pool tournament. Each class played until there was one winner and then the winner of each class played until there was a house champion. I made it into the finals. I was 17 and the other seminarian was 21. He was a better player than I was. The championship game was the first to pocket seventy-five balls was the winner. At one point he was leading 71 to 48 and I was pretty despondent. But I said a little prayer and then I sank 12 balls in a row. 71 to 60. Then he missed. I sank 8 more. All of a sudden it was 71 to 68. Now it was very close. He sank a couple then missed. I sank a couple then missed. Finally, he sank one more and missed. And I sank five more and that secured the championship for me 75 to 74.

So many people helped me, encouraged me, rooted for me. Part of the competition was doing my best. Let me unpack that a little. There was all the practice. All the support. All the effort. But there was that little prayer. I called on the Lord—not to win. But to do my best. To be my best self. I asked the Lord to help me to do my best. And I won. That time. But I did not always win. I never won another house championship. I remember in the eighth grade I was battling with my best friend for the highest average and he beat me about by one-tenth of one point. I was the first to congratulate him. That is all part of the competition Congratulating the other for doing their best even when you lose. But it wasn't just me. The Holy Spirit within me prompted me to salute him. The Holy Spirit is the power within me that enables me to be the best me I can be.

In the moment of baptism into Jesus Christ the Father places us in his own family and places the Holy Spirit within us. The Spirit washes us clean of sin—original sin and personal sin. The Holy Spirit enlightens us, enabling us to see. See

what? See that which is true. See the workings of God's grace in a particular situation or person. See the moments of God's abiding presence. But here's the thing. How do we know when what comes into our minds and hearts is from us or from the Holy Spirit? Good question. Real Question. Important question.

So. How can you tell? A couple of ways. 1) When you hear yourself say something in a conversation where a friend or family member is asking for your advice or counsel and what you say is right on target and helpful but you don't ever remember thinking that before and you find yourself asking, in your own mind, where did that come from? That's the Holy Spirit. That's often how the Spirit works. Something comes from within me but not exactly from me. From whom? The Spirit.

2) You know how sometimes you are in a situation where you hear something or experience something and all of a sudden you get the chills. This feeling runs down your arms or sometimes it starts from your shoulders and flows down through your body in a kind of body flush? What is that? It's not the chills. It is called an anointing. That is the Holy Spirit. You are in a moment when the truth is right there, very real—and you know it. That too is the Holy Spirit. That is an anointing of the Holy Spirit. When we are baptized we are actually anointed with olive oil twice. Once on the breastbone over our hearts so that they belong to Christ. The next time with chrism on the crown of the head indicating we are part of the family of God by adoption. Why does this body flush happen? It is an affirmation of goodness or truth. It is a sign that God is present and with us and we can actually feel this presence in our bodies.

The family of God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is invisible but real. Love is invisible but real. Hope is invisible but real. Being part of God's family by receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit changes us—for the better. The Holy Spirit is a power given to us, a power we do not have on our own. A power that flows from God's love and leads us into love both of God and neighbor. In every baptism I trace the sign of the cross on the forehead of the little one and I say: "I claim you for Christ our Savior by tracing the sign of the cross on your forehead. I ask your parents and Godparents to do the same.

The Father anointed Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan and sent the Holy Spirit upon him. Jesus in turn sent out his disciples to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is not something we invented. Baptism is from God and of God. It was begun by God and established in and through Jesus Christ. My friends, you belong to Christ. His Spirit lives in you. And that same Spirit prompts us, inspires us, guides us, and strengthens us. Today's feast is a reminder both to believe and to hope. To receive what the Lord has chosen to give. May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.