

Children (2)

I

Good morning, boys and girls. Today I have with me a special shirt which you can wear if you are a member of this club. (Show them the shirt.) Did you ever belong to a special club? (Let them answer.) How do you get to be a member of a club? (Let them answer.) Sometimes all you have to do is sign up and then you are a member. Other kinds of clubs are a little bit harder to join. Some clubs make you go through a special test called an initiation to prove that you are good enough to be a member. What kinds of tests do you suppose a person would have to pass? (Let them answer.) That's right. Sometimes a person would have to do a very brave thing to prove that he is good enough for the club. Sometimes a person would have to do a silly thing, like wear funny clothes or sing a silly song. A long time ago, two men stick a pin in their fingers until they got drops of blood and then they would mix the blood together -- and that would mean that they were blood brothers. They were members of a special club. Do you think that you would like to be initiated into a club, boys and girls? (Let them answer.) Sometimes it is fun, but sometimes you have to do really hard things, and then it isn't fun at all. Well, there is one kind of initiation that we have all been through and it was a wonderful one. Does anyone know what that was? (Let them guess.) We were all initiated as members of the church. Our initiation -- our test -- was our baptism. When the priest water on our heads and said "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit", then we became members of this very special group of people called Catholics and remember we are also Christians. We didn't have to sign draw blood or do anything silly or anything hard. But we did promise, through our parents and godparents, to live as Jesus wants us to live. We did promise to put away all of our bad actions and to live as children of God. Did we get a special outfit to wear when we became Catholics, boys and girls? (Let them answer.) No, we might have worn a nice baptismal dress, but we didn't get any other kind of uniform. We did get something special for our souls -- the wonderful gift of God's grace. This grace helps us to continue each day to be good members of Christ's church. It helps us to be the best Christians we can be. Let's all remember that we belong to this church, boys and girls, and that it was our baptism that made us members. God bless you all. Amen.

II

Once upon a time, there was a young girl who was very, very smart. Even when she was a baby, people knew she was unusually bright, since she was walking and talking much sooner than other babies. Everyone could see that this girl was special.

When she was only three, her mother began teaching her to read, and the little girl learned quickly. She read the easy books, like Doctor Seuss, and soon she was ready for something more difficult. But when her mother brought her some harder books to try, she said, "Mommy, I already know how to read; let me do something else."

She started taking piano lessons, and before long she was good enough to perform in a recital. Everyone marvelled at how well she played for such a young age, and they said that if she kept working at it, she would become a fine pianist some day. But the little girl wanted to stop taking lessons. "I already know how to play the piano," she said, "I want to do something else now."

Her father began teaching her how to play tennis. He took her out on the court every chance he got and she got better quickly. She won a tournament for children aged twelve and under, and everyone thought she had a great future in the sport. Her father wanted her to keep playing in order to reach the next level of ability, but the girl said, "No, Daddy, I already know how to play tennis. Let me do something else."

The little girl was too smart to learn ... or, I should say, she thought she was too smart to learn. As soon as she knew a little bit about something, she figured she "knew it all" and had nothing else to learn. She didn't want to keep growing. She was content to stay where she was.

By contrast, the Bible tells us about someone named Simeon who never stopped learning and growing. Simeon was an old man when Jesus was born; but he wasn't too old to see something new in life. He wasn't too old to be led by faith in search of something more. Simeon had heard about the birth of God's Son, and even though he was already an old man, Simeon kept searching and seeking until he saw the baby Jesus with his own eyes.

We in the church hope you will always be like Simeon, and not like the girl who thought she was too smart to learn. Don't ever let yourself stop learning and growing in life! Don't stop listening to others or respecting what they tell you because you think you "know it all" ... at home, in school, and especially in church.

I say "especially in church" because with faith more than anything else, it's important to keep learning and growing. You can never "know it all" about God. You can never know Jesus so well that you don't need to know Him better. When you are young as well as old, be like Simeon and keep searching for Jesus, in your heart and in the world. It will be the most exciting thing you do in life, and one day, as surely as Simeon, you will find yourself so close to your Lord as to see Him face to face. Amen

Adult

I

Thank you for having me here for the most important annual celebration weekend, namely the [Super Bowl](#). People were tired of calling it the Annual National AFC-NFC Championship Game. The owners were trying to think of a name. The Ultimate Bowl was considered, but one day at home, as Lamar Hunt, the owner of the Kansas City Chiefs, was thinking about it at home. His daughter asked where the SuperBall was. It was a popular children's bouncy ball. He was trying to work, and so couldn't help, and as anyone who has a young daughter can tell you they

can be determined. She asked a second time, and he told her to find it herself. At the third interruption, it was the A-Ha moment. A daughter with her favorite toy inspired the name of this annual event.

Friday, I went and heard a talk at the MAC conference, a meeting of the Catholic book publishers in Baltimore, given by Bob McCartney, who is a leading authority on youth ministry, but his focus was a very fitting thought for this the feast of the presentation of our Lord. The Lord is presented as an infant to the Temple; now, the Temple will nevermore be the same. The abiding presence of God, the Holy of Holies, is now transferred from the inner sanctuary to the child in Simeon's arms. We all were presented to the Church as infants for our Baptism. The Church will never again be the same. Now a special presence of the Holy of Holies, the presence of God's intimate life, dwells within the newly baptized.

Every child born and baptized, every single one of us, presented to the Lord, carries within himself or herself a unique image of the Holy of Holies. Each one of us is called to seek that image within us, to develop it. We are called to allow God to take over our lives. Our lives are taken over as individuals and put with other individuals we call the Church. The Church has certain elements that all of us are called to, in some degree or another build-up.

One thing I think we can all agree is that there are certain things we don't like to do alone. I, for one, don't like eating alone. Teenagers definitely don't like going to the movies alone. As I will tell you, it's more fun to be there with friends because you can laugh together, cry together and groan together. That is because scripture notes we are social beings. "It is not good for man to be alone. That is why we are put into a church. It is a place where elders can show us that while they are not perfect they can show us how to avoid mistakes. Young people can show is the excitement that comes with being a Christian. It is the place where Saints and sinners gather as young and his old as happy and it said. One time a college chapel met with the students and they were complaining after the holiday of the masses at their home parishes bass at the college. The priest explained that it was easy to preach to students because at exam time they were all worried about their abilities and needed prayer. During sports events beforehand, they were hopeful, and afterward, they were sad or joyous. But in the Parish as a priest looks out he can see a woman we just shared her joy at discovering that she was pregnant. She was hopeful. Her life had a new meaning. But sitting next to her in the same pew was another woman. The priest saw her just yesterday when he presided at the burial of her husband of 52 years. How do you preach a sermon to such a diverse congregation? But that is what the churches it is a gathering of many generations many backgrounds in many different histories but we are all one. We have been made one to the sacrament of baptism part of that body of Christ called the Church. It is God who has made us. We did not make ourselves the body of Christ. We need the Church . As much as we are social we are also comprehensive. When I was young and living in New Jersey just three days after its founding. The Catholic Church in the United States tried to provide for all of the needs we started schools to educate our young. We built up hospitals to take care of our sick. Organizations like the Knights of Columbus we're created to support men in the Church. For women there were groups like the Catholic women of the chapel and the Legion of Mary. The Church was concerned with orthopraxy, which means doing the right things. The sister with her roller yielded a tool to help children become good children and heaven for bed you went home and said that you got in trouble in school because she got in trouble again. When we became teenagers there was the CYO to regulate the injury action between

teenagers outside their homes. And then we had church groups like the nights I kept us good by giving us other adults to help entered got. Nowadays the concern seems to be orthodoxy meaning having the right to beliefs. Ouisie splits in our Church today, for example, the issue of immigration. Catholics stand on both sides of the fence shouting at each other. Each side saying it represents the Catholic Church and the teachings of Jesus. Catholics are divided on many political issues. But it is in this political debate that Christ works informing his people. We need to be open to one another and to listen to the Holy Spirit speaking within us. There're only certain beliefs that Ari central for being a Catholic like the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist or that there are three persons in one God

As we go through the issues of climate change, war and peace, impeachment, the Middle East Anna Marriott of other world issues we have to remember that we are called to be like Christ. Our Lord was in the world but his kingdom is not of the world. In our Baptism, we became members, and we became citizens of the kingdom of God. The phrase is used by Jesus into ways one about heaven and the other about the Church on earth. Now to be really controversial and this is my personal statement because there is no church statement on this, I do not believe in a separation of Church and state. For 18 ½ years as a Chaplain in the United States Army and Armando was pro Deo at pro Patria for God and country. I cannot separate myself into a Catholic and to an American I am both to the churches benefit I bring being an American into the Church. And into the United States of America I bring in my Catholicism. When I vote I vote according to my conscience. It is my political job to make this country a better place, a place of peace and a place of love. These two things have the same one source throughout the world and that is God because it is only God's love that can bring peace into this world. We are the hands of God bringing peace into the world in World War II American bombers bomb an Italian church the American soldiers were nearby. When they came into the village, they found this somewhat usable Church one of the soldiers worked before the war in making cemetery monuments. He saw the broken altar he saw the broken statues, and he saw the broken hearts of the faithful. With his commanders support and his battle buddies helping he put together the altar any put together the statues And the soldiers paid but when he came to the last dad you the biggest of the statues that of the Sacred Heart he couldn't find the hands of Christ hey didn't have enough stone material to make new ones and so he hung the sign where Christ hands would be, and it read in English and Italian my hands are your hands; your hands are my hands. Together not just Catholics but all the people of God, we could change the world.

As some of you may know, I am a Byzantine Catholic, and we have a phrase that we use. Byzantines have a much stronger monastic tradition then you have in the west fully realize that all persons are not called to be monks and nuns. So we use the phrase monks in the world. We do not separate ourselves from the world, nor unless we become hermits or space travelers can we leave the world, but we bring our monastic values into that world we are called to engage the world. We are called to build heaven on earth. We Byzantines take that somewhat serious in terms of our churches. I invite you to go to an Eastern Catholic or Orthodox Church and to see the beauty inside because the church building is heaven on earth. The teaching of the Church is when we enter the Church, we leave the world and its problems outside as we stand around the throne of God. This attitude is truly a Christian attitude, and I invite you to change the world first by changing yourself then by changing your family then by changing your neighbor And then by changing the country. We can only do that if we let the Spirit placed in us at our Baptism freely

move our lives, our thoughts, our hearts, and our hands to the God to whom we were presented to at our Baptism each and every day.

III

I want to begin with a football story, but you don't have to be a football fan to appreciate it. It's about a young man named Kyle. Kyle Maynard was born with some of the birth defects that every parent fears--stunted arms and legs and misshapen hands and feet. Most people would consider him to be handicapped. But most people don't know Kyle Maynard. This young man, who chooses not to use prosthetic limbs, constantly challenges himself to break physical barriers. He played middle school football alongside much bigger kids. In high school, Kyle began weight training and joined the wrestling team. He and his coach developed moves that made the most of Kyle's physical assets. Kyle advanced so much that he earned the title, Strongest Teen, for his weight-lifting feats.

In fact, Kyle Maynard has such a positive attitude that a juvenile court judge once sentenced a troublesome kid to spend the day with Kyle. The judge wanted the teen to understand that our lives are shaped much more by our attitude than by our circumstances. After spending a day with the troubled teen, Kyle commented, "People think I have a bad life. Look at my life compared to this kid's. I have a beautiful family who loves me. Everybody has struggles. My struggles are just more apparent." (1)

Isn't that amazing? You and I see people every day with perfectly good bodies, healthy in every way, who are mired in unhappiness. And then we run into a Kyle Maynard with his stunted arms and misshapen hands and feet, and he is so positive. How does that happen? Obviously it helps to have people who love you and believe in you.

I read something recently about actor Kirk Douglas' mother. Douglas, for years one of Hollywood's most prominent stars, but now known chiefly as Michel Douglas' father, remembers his mother as a woman who overflowed with encouragement for her children. When he was in his mother's presence, Kirk never doubted that he was special and beloved. He recalls a visit he made to his mother's house not long after his first big movie came out. Kirk's mother had invited all her friends over to meet him. When she introduced Kirk, she announced, "This is my son. The earth trembles when they mention his name." (2)

Now that's a proud mother. Does it make a difference when people love you and believe in you and encourage you? Of course, it does. I feel for children brought up by negative parents--critical, demanding, quick to admonish, slow to praise. I see people every day who are scarred by parents who could give them everything except what they needed most--unconditional love and acceptance.

A few years ago, Rabbi Marc Gafni gave a talk at a children's camp in New York. At one point in the afternoon, Rabbi Gafni asked the children, "When was the last time someone told you that you were beautiful?" The children's response devastated him. Few of them could recall true, encouraging words from their parents. So many of them heard only words of condemnation and shame. One young girl said, "My mother told me on Saturday that I was the ugliest little girl she knew." Another boy related a heartbreaking conversation with his mother. He said, "My mother was in the Holocaust. And she says that if she had known that I would be her son, she wouldn't

have worked so hard to survive." (3) A parent like that needs to stop and consider the impact of their words. It is hard to imagine a more hurtful thing to say to a child.

Sometimes, because we think of Jesus as the Son of God, we may not give Mary and Joseph enough credit as his earthly parents. They were not wealthy people, as today's story from the Gospels makes clear. But they gave him what he needed. They helped him know he was loved. And they taught him about God. The 22nd verse of the second chapter of Luke reads like this:

"When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord . . ."

This was the custom in New Testament times. Couples brought their first born and presented them at the temple [just as parents in our church bring their children and present them to God. Fortunately we do not restrict this important occasion to our first born. This is an important time for parents with every child.]

Mary and Joseph presented Jesus as an infant to God and they lived godly lives when they returned home. Note how Luke sums up Jesus' childhood years, "When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him."

I wish every child could be surrounded by the kind of love and understanding Jesus received from his parents. Let me tell you another story from Rabbi Marc Gafni. Gafni recalls one of the first bar mitzvahs he ever performed. It was for a boy named Louis. Louis was awkward and sad. His insensitive parents did little to encourage his self-esteem. They implied that he was too dumb to learn the traditional Hebrew passages a boy recites for his bar mitzvah.

Rabbi Gafni was determined to bring out the best in Louis. He spent extra time teaching him the songs and prayers. He discovered that Louis was smart, and had a fantastic singing voice. On the day of his bar mitzvah, Louis performed beautifully. At the end of the ceremony, Rabbi Gafni stood and spoke directly to Louis. He said, "Louis, this morning you met your real self. This is who you are. You are good, graceful, talented, and smart. Whatever people told you yesterday, and Louis, whatever happens tomorrow, promise me one thing. Remember . . . this is you. Remember, and don't ever lose it."

A few years later, Louis wrote to Rabbi Gafni. The boy whose parents predicted that he was too dumb to perform a traditional bar mitzvah was studying for his medical degree at an Ivy League university. He was also engaged to be married. Louis ended his letter by saying, ". . . I kept my promise---I always remembered my bar mitzvah morning when you said that this is who I am. For this, I thank you." (4)

I wish everybody could have an affirming adult like that in their lives. Some of you know about that kind of love. That was the kind of love you experienced from your parents. And you know how precious it is.

But some of you didn't receive that kind of positive love. Your parents were good people. But somehow they were not able to affirm you the way every child deserves to be affirmed. You never

got the message that you are beautiful and smart and worthy. And there is something missing in your life. A confidence, a sense of self-worth, what is often termed by psychologists, healthy self-esteem. And so you are continually sabotaging yourself. And you find yourself withholding love from your children and your spouse and other people important in your life. You were never really presented to God--not as a person of worth, of value, a person who deserves to enjoy abundant life. Is it too late? Are you doomed to always feeling a terrible sense of inadequacy? Are you doomed to a lifetime of being on the outside looking in at the lucky people who did receive this precious gift?

The answer is no. There is hope--if you realize that you and I have been presented to God--by Christ. This is the meaning of the atonement. Christ has presented us to the Father. He has placed his seal of approval on each of us. He has presented us unblemished and complete before the Father and said, "These beautiful people are my beloved. They are those for whom I laid down my life." And the Father looks upon us not as the flawed people we see ourselves, but as a new creation in Christ.

One couple in modern times has reaped more scorn and ridicule than any other in the Christian community--former televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. Their son, Jay Bakker, now leads a ministry for teens in Atlanta, Georgia. He says that he never heard messages of God's love and grace in his childhood church. He grew up believing that God was just waiting to catch him in his sins and to condemn him. He remembers his father's first church. On the church wall was a painting of a giant eye. This eye represented the all-seeing, all-knowing nature of God. To Jay, the eye symbolized God's constant judgment on him. He was scared to death of not living up to God's standards, of not being holy enough to earn God's love.

After Jay's father, Jim, faced scandal and disgrace in his own ministry, Jay became even more convinced of God's judgment on sinners. Christian friends and colleagues turned their back on the Bakker family. They became the butt of jokes in Christian circles. Once again, Jay felt like a failure in God's eyes. But Jay saw a transformation take place in his father's life after Jim was sentenced to prison. In prison, Jim Bakker experienced God's overwhelming love and presence and peace. He realized what God's grace is all about. He was able to let go of his past, and to forgive those who turned their backs on him. Through his father's changed life, and through the love and acceptance of a few kind Christians, Jay writes, "I discovered the shocking secret: God loves me just the way I am." (5) God does love us just as we are.

"When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord . . ." Christ, in turn, has presented you and me to the Lord. Give thanks and go from this place as one accepted and loved by God.

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1. "The Contender" by Derek Burnett, Reader's Digest, January 2005, pp. 119-125.
 2. Kirk Douglas, My Stroke of Luck (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 124.
 3. Marc Gafni, The Mystery of Love (New York: Atria Books, 2003), pp. 120-121.
 4. Ibid., pp. 123-124.

5. Jay Bakker in *Stories of Emergence*, edited by Mike Yaconelli (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003), p. 182.

II

This weekend we celebrate a feast that seems to bring us back to Christmastime. The feast is the Presentation of the Lord. This Feast used to be called the Purification of Mary, remembering an ancient rite when women went to the Temple to be prayed over after childbirth. This same custom, by the way, continued in the Church up to the fifties in a blessing that used to be called Churching.

A number of years ago the Church changed this feast from a Feast of Mary, the Purification, to a Feast of the Lord. Because Simeon called Jesus the Light of the Nations, this feast is also the day that candles are blessed. It is sometimes called Candlemas. In the Eastern Church, this feast was called the Feast of the Encounter, the first encounter of the Old Testament, represented by Simeon and Anna and the Temple, with the New Testament, represented by the Lord. Jesus is presented in the Temple following the ancient Jewish laws. In the New Law of the Kingdom of God, Jesus' own body would become the New Temple.

The image that keeps occurring at me in this feast is that of a young mother and father and their new baby. So many times I've enjoyed watching our young couples bringing their new baby to Church. They are so excited about the birth of their treasure, so grateful to God for this child that they cannot wait to bring the child before the Lord to thank God properly. I really believe that is what Mary and Joseph were doing when they walked into the Temple with Jesus. Simeon, like all of us, wanted to hold the new baby. When he does, a spirit of prophecy comes upon him. He realizes that in this child he is in the presence of God's salvation, the Light of the Nations.

Simeon also prophesies the pains that Mary would have as she witnessed God's plan being worked out in this child. The devotion to the seven sorrows of Mary grew from this: the Prophecy of Simeon, the Flight into Egypt, the Three Days' Loss of the child Jesus in the Temple, Meeting Jesus with the Cross, the Crucifixion, the Taking Down from the Cross, the Burial. The encounter with the Lord would demand continual sacrifice from all including Mary. The reward of this encounter is great, the presence of the Savior.

The Lord is presented as an infant to the Temple, now the Temple will never more be the same. The abiding presence of God, the Holy of Holies, is now transferred from the inner sanctuary to the child in Simeon's arms. We all were presented to the Church as infants for our baptism. The Church will never again be the same. Now a special presence of the Holy of Holies, the presence of God's intimate life, dwells within the newly baptized.

Every child born and baptized, every single one of us, presented to the Lord, carries within himself or herself a unique image of the Holy of Holies. Each one of us is called to seek that image within us, to develop it. We are called to allow God to take over our lives. This presentation with its resulting purification results in sorrow, for to follow the Lord means to sacrifice our own material inclinations and our physical desires for the sake of the cultivation of the spiritual within us. This presentation results in joy, for when we live with the Lord we have meaning in our lives.

"Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears from death into life." The encounter with the Lord is a step into the spiritual. All that we have will be lost by the end of our lives, but Christ and his love and the way we love him in others, that is the life that is forever.

On this Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, we ask God to transform us from people tied to the material to those whose encounter with Christ leads us to live for the spiritual.