

For the last number of years I have made a habit of saving the most recent birthday or Christmas card given to me by my mother. These cards are special for two reasons. First, my mother takes special care in selecting them for the message she wishes to express. Secondly, and most importantly, she adds a few handwritten words along with the pre-printed text. Holding the card in my hands, reading its message, and especially seeing and reading the words written in her own hand are a source of comfort and sign of her enduring love.

Today’s gospel story of Jesus’ baptism as told by St. Luke contains not only the account of the physical act of Jesus’ baptism by John, but also John’s testimony that now he was to recede into the background and give way to Jesus whose way he was sent to prepare. The account concludes with the sealing of God the Father’s identification of Jesus as his Son, and then of his ratification of Jesus as the Holy Spirit descends upon him in bodily form like a dove (a symbol of gentleness) accompanied by the Father’s “personalization” as he utters the words, “You are my beloved Son; with whom I am well pleased.”

Like the birthday or Christmas card I receive and hold as a treasured message and memory from my mother, the experience of Jesus at his baptism in his human nature was an experience he, too, treasured and recalled as he went forth from the Jordan River to the mission the Father had given him.

To be called a son or daughter is more than just a statement about a biological relationship. It implies a communion of life. A child is a living “sacrament” of the life and emptying love of its parents. Now, by extension, the parents are seen and experienced through their child. The term “Son” as applied to Jesus can also be translated “servant”. Jesus is revealed today as God’s “Servant-Son”. As “Servant-Son” his mission, as stated in the first reading from Isaiah, is to “give comfort”, to speak “tenderly”, to proclaim that “guilt is expiated”, to, like a shepherd, “feed the flock” and “bind up the wounded”—to bring God’s saving love into the world. Week after week,

season after season, feast after feast in the liturgy we continue to touch, be touched, and internalize God's love given us in Jesus.

Most of us do not have a personal memory of our baptism since most of us may have been baptized when we were a few days (as was my case) or a few weeks or months old. Whether we were baptized as infants, older children or adults, our baptism, like that of Jesus is both our affirmation by God as being his beloved daughters and sons in his Son as well as our experience of the Holy Spirit descending and filling us with divine life, which we call sanctifying grace. Like the baptism of Jesus our baptism, while personal, was not a "private revelation" a private grace. Like Jesus, we too, now in him, are sent as God's beloved sons and daughters to continue the work begun by Jesus. To what is our baptism calling each of us? What are our expectations? Even more, what does God expect?

These are not questions with simple answers. In one sense we can begin to answer them with St. Paul's admonition in the second reading to reject anything that turns us from God and embrace whatever strengthens our relationship with God and each other. Baptism and living its call is a life-long vocation to turn again and again to God. Especially when confronted with situations where we must choose between following Christ as we have learned of him through the Scriptures, the Sacraments, and the teaching of the Church, or following the enticements or values of world, we need to remember and call upon the help of that the same Spirit who indwelled Jesus indwells in us giving us the strength to face our cross as Christ faced his trusting in the power of God to bring life out of death.

As we bring the liturgical celebration of Christmas to a close I invite you to again take a look at the person you see in the mirror, the mirror being that personal "greeting card" sent each of us by God, to read its "message" to behold its "personalization" in the image we see reflected back to us, that each of us is a beloved son or daughter of God and then go forth to continue the mission of Jesus today.