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DEEPENING FAITH

EXPLORING OUR CONNECTIONS
THROUGH THE
SIGNS OF GOD'S LOVE

“...put out into the deep water...” (Lk. 5:4)

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Fr. Frank DeSiano, born in New York City, was ordained as a Paulist priest in 1972. He has served as pastor in downtown New York and in Chicago. In 1990, he earned a D. Min. from Boston University, completing his dissertation on "Parish Based Evangelization." He served as consultant for the US Bishops' Committee on Evangelization for over a dozen years. He has written numerous books on spirituality, discipleship and evangelization, and is frequently published in periodicals like *The Priest*, *Catechetical Leader*, and *Deacon Digest*. In 1994 he was elected President of the Paulist Fathers. He presently lives in Washington where he is president of Paulist Evangelization Ministries. He travels widely, conducting parish renewals (missions), presenting to Catholic clergy at convocations and retreats, and discussing the relationship of evangelization and catechesis. He designed and wrote "Awakening Faith," as a process to help Catholics re-connect with their faith. Among his latest books are: "Mission America: Challenges and Opportunities for Catholics Today," "Faith and Culture in Catholic Education," and (e-book) "New Perspectives: A Report on the Synod on the New Evangelization."

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SESSION 1:

The Basic Connection

BAPTISM AND CONFIRMATION

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The group gathers, perhaps with refreshments, and welcomes each other. The facilitator orients the group for this session. Each participant briefly shares something that happened during the past week. Then there is a moment of silence while the facilitator asks the question:

Can you say what Baptism or Confirmation has meant in your life? Can you imagine your life without the sacrament of Baptism?

SCRIPTURE

A reading from St. Paul's letter to the Romans (6: 1-6)

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.

ESSAY

A young couple has just had a baby girl. They are thrilled. They've been searching for a name from before she was born, going over various lists they have found on the Internet. They have also decided to baptize their daughter, even though they do not go to church as often as they should. They are nervous about what the priest will say. . . .

William, a thirty-year old has decided to become a Catholic. He once had a Catholic girlfriend, but that relationship didn't go anywhere. Still, he went to Mass a few times with her and found it enriching in his life. William has begun the process of becoming a

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Catholic, gone through the beginning phases of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, and now he cannot wait to be baptized. What is going on in his heart?

At first glance—the couple bringing their newborn daughter and the thirty-something who wants to join the Catholic Church—seem to be of two different worlds. We think of infant baptism as something almost entirely different from adult baptism. After all, adults experience something like conversion, but babies do not. We note the hesitation of the married couple, and the enthusiasm of the thirty-year old—what a contrast, we think!

Yet the couple and the young man are essentially doing the same thing—initiating connections that will shape a life. That’s what Baptism does, no matter how it is received. In one case, the connections will come about through parents; in the other, they come about through the relationships someone has cultivated. In both cases, however, the baptized person will be radically connected to Jesus—and to the people of Jesus, his Church.

St. Paul tells us that our relationship to Jesus in Baptism has a strong connection with our relationship with each other. Death and resurrection, Paul says, form the heart of our Christian life. Just as Jesus died and rose, and we are identified with him in that process, so we die and rise by the kind of lives we live. Our lives call us to reflect our relationship with Jesus. The way we live with others reveals what our true relationship with Jesus is.

In some ways we get more excited about an adult’s Baptism than a baby’s. We see the one as perhaps “more real” than the other because of the adult’s particular decision and experiences. Yet, from the point of view of relationships, both Baptisms should cause excitement. Is not Jesus related to both the baby and the adult—and they to him? Has not Jesus pledged redeeming love to both? Has not his Spirit begun to live in a more powerful way in both?

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What is different is how the relationships evolve. In the baby's case, it will take place slowly, almost coincidental with her growth. In the adult's case, it will take place through the gradual responsiveness of the baptized to the ongoing call of Jesus. The Church will ask the parents to be committed to Jesus no less than an adult experiencing conversion—for the child will be able to respond only to the faith shown her by her parents and the environment they expose her to.

Perhaps there is a part of all those baptized as babies that wishes they could have been adult converts. They envy the clarity, the excitement, the consciousness. But, in reality, should not all the baptized have the same excitement as the adult convert? Is not the adult joining the same community where most were baptized as children? Should not all of us be disciples? And should not Baptism excite us again and again as followers of Jesus?

Baptism brings us into relationship with Jesus and his people; confirmation “finishes” the development of this relationship, completing discipleship. Confirmation, when celebrated apart from Baptism, provides an opportunity to reaffirm our basic relationship to Christ—something particularly helpful for teenagers and young adults. Confirmation emphasizes the power of the Holy Spirit that allows us to carry on the mission of Jesus.

These two sacraments call for a radical identity with Jesus, and a radical transformation of our lives with others—with other believers who are our brothers and sisters in faith, and with all the world which true disciples care for. Baptism means that, whether baptized as infants, children or adults, we all have a mission, the mission of Jesus Christ.

DISCUSSION

People give their reactions to the reading.

FURTHER DISCUSSION

- 1. Describe your feeling when you attended a baptism, of a child or an adult—or both? Describe what you saw and felt. Or do you remember being baptized as an adult?*
- 2. Do you see yourself connected to Jesus in his dying and rising? In what ways have you been invited to die and rise in your Catholic life?*
- 3. What do you think can help all the baptized renew their sense of fervor, the experience of being connected to Jesus?*

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Catholics understand Baptism as the basic and entry sacrament of Christian life. Baptism not only frees us from the heritage of sin which dominates human existence (which we call “original sin”), it makes us part of Christ’s holy people. It makes us disciples, followers of Jesus, who grow by experiencing the other sacred signs, sacraments, of the Church. Confirmation, which can be received at Baptism or later in life (in the case of most Catholics baptized as infants) signifies the power of the Holy Spirit completing our process of discipleship.

A sacrament is an external, formal rite of the Catholic Church through which we encounter the saving power of Jesus in our present lives. They are signs of God’s grace, God’s unmerited love, and God’s powerful presence in our lives.

United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, chapters 14-15, pp. 165-201.

PRAYER

(If possible, have a bowl of holy water which the participants can use to bless themselves after the prayer.)

Lord, God, you show us unbounded love in the death and resurrection of Jesus, your Son; you pour out the Holy Spirit upon us when we identify with his saving love. Renew in each of us our baptismal grace and the call we received to live as disciples of Jesus. Help us feel the power of the Holy Spirit once again as we recommit ourselves to you and your Kingdom. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

ANNOUNCEMENTS AND HOSPITALITY.

APPENDIX

PRAYER FOR DEEPENING FAITH

Loving God,
create in us an ever-growing faith,
with hearts open and centered in you.

Deepen within us the fire of your Spirit,
so that your love may fill us more fully,
and flow throughout our lives.

Increase within us a desire to reach out,
to invite and to share,
to welcome and accept.

Deepen the faith of all your children,
especially those who have grown distant from you,
those ready to hear an invitation
to the love you alone can bring.

Deepen our faith, loving God,
to see the fullness of your grace and peace.

We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

About Paulist Evangelization Ministries

Paulist Evangelization Ministries is an apostolic arm of the Paulist Fathers. Our goal is to help reach those who are not involved in a family of faith—whether seekers who are looking for faith, or Catholics who have halted the regular practice of their faith. Through the development of programs and various publications, we want to reach people to invite them to re-experience Jesus Christ in the richness of our Catholic tradition, and equip parishes to reach out more fully in invitation and welcome. Please visit us at www.pemdc.org, and support our efforts through by inviting others to come to know Jesus Christ.