

INTRODUCTION

*“Do not conform yourselves to this age but
be transformed . . .”*

Romans 12:2

Transformation is an essential part of our lives as Christians. To grow spiritually, each one of us must undergo a radical process of dying and rising. Shedding the deceptive lies that keep us bound in sin and shame, we are called to embrace our true identity and unique mission in Christ. This journey is radical because it reaches the deepest roots of our brokenness, moving us out of the dark prison of our self-centeredness and into the glorious freedom of communion with the Blessed Trinity.

Over the years, as a therapist, teacher, and ministry leader, I have often reflected on the nature of this spiritual journey and how transformation is accomplished in each of our lives. Drawing on the wisdom of scripture and Church teaching, I have come to realize that the sacraments play a much more vital role in this process than I ever imagined. As a lifelong Catholic, I have not always appreciated the sacraments or comprehended how inherently powerful they are. It took me many years to understand what the Church has known and taught from the beginning: when received in faith, the sacraments have tremendous power through the Holy Spirit to radically transform our lives. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, “Celebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace that they signify. They are efficacious because in them *Christ himself is at work*: it is he who baptizes, he who acts in his sacraments in order to communicate the grace that each sacrament signifies. . . . As fire transforms into itself everything it touches, so *the Holy Spirit transforms into the divine life whatever is subjected to his power*” (CCC, 1127, emphasis added).

Did you catch all that? Each sacrament is a life-changing encounter with Jesus, communicated through the power of the Holy Spirit. This power dwelling within us is the very same power that raised Jesus from the dead (see Rom 8:11), communicating his supernatural life into us. Isn't that amazing? As we will see in the coming pages, the Holy Spirit working through the sacraments is literally capable of raising people from the dead—physically and spiritually. This is our call as Christians—to live Christ's resurrection life. This is why he gave us the sacraments: "The desire and work of the Spirit in the heart of the Church is that we may live the life of the risen Christ" (CCC, 1099).

Most of us, including myself, are still largely asleep to these realities. Though we have received the most potent force in the universe, we go around on a daily basis as if we are on our own and have to figure life out for ourselves. How can this possibly be? Why do we have this gap between what the Church teaches and our own unspectacular personal experiences with the sacraments?

The scriptures and the *Catechism* provide some much-needed insight into these matters (see CCC, 1098; Heb 3:12–13). They point to the condition of our *hearts* as the key factor in our yielding to the power of the Spirit in our lives. When our hearts become hardened through the deceit of sin, we inhibit the power of the Spirit working in and through us. Furthermore, when we fail to forgive those who hurt us, we create barriers which impede the flow of God's grace in our hearts (see Lk 6:37–38; CCC, 2840; 2843).

Conversely, when we humble ourselves and trustingly bring our brokenness to Jesus, his grace becomes most powerful in the midst of our weaknesses (see 2 Cor 12:9). Under these circumstances the sacraments are capable of healing the deepest roots of our brokenness, delivering us from the wounds of sin and bringing us back into intimate communion with the Trinity. This is what it means to *Be Transformed*.



The sacraments are God's chosen remedy for healing our deadly wounds and infusing our souls with Christ's resurrection life. These wounds, which originated with the sin of Adam and Eve and are perpetuated and deepened by our own personal sins, keep us doubting God's love and inhibit its expression in our lives.

The Holy Spirit is always working, in and through the sacraments, to reproduce Christ's life within us. His supernatural presence expressed in every sacrament has the capacity to heal our brokenness, restore our identity, and empower us to share in Christ's relentless mission. This three-fold process of transformation—**H**ealing, **I**ntity, and **M**ission—is summarized by the acronym HIM.¹

Healing is a life-changing encounter with God's love and truth. Whereas sin fragments us, the Father's love restores us to wholeness in Christ. This occurs most effectively through the sacraments as God's healing love reaches the depths of our being. In the words of St. John Paul II: "The Holy Spirit [working through the sacraments] . . . purifies from everything that disfigures man . . . , he heals even the deepest wounds of human existence."² Over time, God's healing progressively restores us to our true identity.

Identity refers to who we are and how we come to understand ourselves in relation to God. When we live apart from God and separate ourselves from his love and truth, we develop a false identity based on lies and deceptions. We end up being defined by our sins, wounds, and disordered relationships. Conversely, as we enter into a real and vibrant relationship with Jesus through the sacraments, we come to discover the truth about ourselves. St. John Paul II was fond of quoting the Second Vatican Council in this regard: "Christ, the new Adam, in the very mystery of the revelation of the Father and of his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling."³ This most high calling represents our mission.

Mission concerns our unique purpose in life, stretching us beyond our human limitations to become the unrepeatable person God created us to be. Another of St. John Paul II's favorite passages from the Second Vatican Council speaks to this reality: "Man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."⁴ Flowing from

our unique identity in Christ, our mission is tailored to fit our specific vocations and life circumstances. It informs how we invest our time, energy, and resources. Prior to surrendering our lives to God, many of us have engaged in various “pseudo-missions” which failed to call us beyond ourselves. But when inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit, our personal mission becomes a dynamic participation in Jesus’ work of restoring all things to the Father (see *CCC*, 850). When offered to God, nothing in our life is ever wasted. Even our wounds, when healed (like Christ’s), become a powerful means of grace to help restore others to wholeness and holiness. Everything in our life, even our deepest brokenness, can be transformed for his glory.

In this entire process of transformation in HIM, the sacraments play the most foundational role. They are the source of our healing and restoration, they define our identity in Christ, and they empower and direct our mission. When received and lived authentically, these sacred covenants, sealed by the Lord himself, enable us to become whole and holy people (healing), knowing who we are in Christ (identity), and loving with the Father’s love (mission). In this way, they bring healing not only to ourselves but also to our families and communities.

Can you imagine the impact in all of our lives if we allowed the Holy Spirit to transform us in this way through the sacraments? In the following pages you will read several heartwarming and inspiring stories of people from various vocations and states of life, whose lives and relationships have been transformed in this way. These stories of priests, married couples, single people, and consecrated religious illustrate how each of the seven sacraments has the power to heal our wounds, restore our identity, and invite us to share in Christ’s mission.



The stories, along with the practical applications throughout the book, are designed to lead you in your own process of transformation. What you are about to read has the potential to impact every aspect of your life. The first two chapters of the book provide an important context for the journey. They are intended to prepare your heart and mind for

life-changing encounters with Jesus and a greater understanding of the healing power of the sacraments. Each of the remaining seven chapters (chapters 3 to 9) focuses on one of the seven sacraments, highlighting the core wounds that are healed, the identities that are bestowed, and the mission that is called forth in each sacrament. The final chapter is a conclusion, summarizing and applying the subsequent chapters in light of the movie *The Lion King*. A comprehensive prayer experience at the end of the book brings all the elements together.

Because every sacrament is for the benefit of every person, I encourage you to read the chapters in order. The graces and applications will build upon one another. For that reason, every chapter is meant for every reader. You won't need to skip the chapter focusing on Holy Orders, for example, because you aren't ordained or the one on Matrimony because you are not married. All the chapters are written for your personal benefit.

You will notice as you read through the book that God's Word and prayer are intimately tied to the sacraments and add to their efficacy in our lives. With that in mind, I have woven reflection questions, scriptural meditation, and prayer activities into every chapter to help you prayerfully contemplate the insights you receive while reading.

As you work your way through the book, I encourage you to read a chapter at a time, stopping to engage the reflection questions, immerse yourself in the selected scripture passage, and enter into greater intimacy with the Lord through prayer. Furthermore, I recommend that you form a small, trusted community to walk through this material together.

May the Holy Spirit grant you revelation and healing as you make your way through the book. May you discover more deeply your true identity in Christ. And may our eternal Father be glorified in you as his mission is more fully realized in your life.

UNVEILED FACES

How We Reflect God's Glory

All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory. . . .

2 Corinthians 3:18

Pope Francis refers to Jesus as the “face of the Father’s mercy.”¹ I love this description because it captures the essence of Jesus’ character as well as the heart of his mission. The gospels are filled with eyewitness accounts of his encounters with all kinds of broken people, including many who are sick, oppressed, or bound by the shackles of sin and shame. These accounts cover a wide range of experiences, such as the woman caught in adultery (see Jn 8:1–11); Zacchaeus, the self-serving tax collector (see Lk 19:1–10); and the little boy with the mute spirit (see Mk 9:14–29). In these stories we see Jesus’ compassionate heart overflowing with the Father’s merciful love.

You may have noticed that Jesus’ mercy is expressed very differently in these stories depending on the way people approach him and the condition of their hearts. Not everyone in the gospel narratives seems to draw out Jesus’ compassion. Even in the same gospel accounts, he interacts differently with different people. Notice, for example, his reaction to the scribes and Pharisees, who were all too eager to throw stones at the woman caught in adultery. In their pride and pompous piety, they acted as if they had no need for a savior. They elicited a much less compassionate response from the Lord—what some might call a severe mercy.

Seeing straight through the pretenses of these revered leaders, Jesus exposed the depths of their proud hearts, unmasking their hypocrisy and bringing to light the deadness behind the veneer of their whitewashed facades (see Mt 23). Have you ever wondered, as I have, whether Jesus was acting out of character in confrontations like these? Was he still the “face of the Father’s mercy”? Didn’t he tell us not to judge or condemn anyone and that he himself didn’t come to condemn any person but to save all of us (see Lk 6:36, Jn 12:47)?



As we come to know Jesus through the gospels, we grow in trust that his judgments are pure and motivated by a perfect balance of mercy and justice, which are completely integrated in Jesus’ life. Like his Father, Jesus sees beyond our external facades and into the motives and intents of our hearts (see 1 Sm 16:7). Perhaps you’ve noticed that he isn’t easily impressed with outward appearances such as titles and degrees, worldly accomplishments, public accolades, or prominent positions when these merely serve to mask our brokenness. Hiding anything from him who sees all things is an illusion of the deadliest kind. Just ask Adam and Eve, who thought they could hide their sin from their omniscient Creator by covering themselves with fig leaves (see Gn 3).

Ever since that first sin we all have fashioned for ourselves personally tailored fig leaves. Like the Pharisees, we’re all prone to veil ourselves behind masks of pride and self-righteousness, which we use to cover our inadequacies. Fr. Jacques Philippe expresses this common human condition of ours with great insight: “It is worth reflecting on the problem of pride. We are all born with a deep wound, experienced as a lack of being. We seek to compensate by constructing a self, different from our real self. This artificial self requires large amounts of energy to maintain it; being fragile, it needs protecting. Woe to anyone who contradicts it, threatens it, questions it, or inhibits its expansion. When the Gospel says we must ‘die to ourselves,’ it means this artificial ego, this constructed self, must die, so that the real self, given us

by God, can emerge.”²² Fr. Philippe’s words touch upon our deepest insecurities, don’t they? Hesitant to acknowledge our deepest wounds, we conceal our true faces. In doing so, we deceive even ourselves. We end up believing that this false self is who we really are. Expending all of our energy in maintaining it, we are threatened when anyone tries to unmask us to expose our sin or weaknesses.

We may point fingers at the Pharisees, but all of us have a natural inclination to veil our faces in one way or another, as they did. But if we are to make progress spiritually, we must be willing to come before Jesus with *unveiled faces* (see 2 Cor 3:18), bringing our wounds and our shame to him, so that he can heal us and fill us with his glory. This unveiling is the first step in facing our brokenness on the road to becoming the whole person God created us to be. As we grow in humility through the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we gradually come to realize that we lack certain capacities on our own, most especially when it comes to receiving and expressing God’s merciful love.

In this light, it becomes a bit easier to see why Jesus so passionately confronted the Pharisees. Like many of us today, they developed personally fitted fig leaves, woven together by their knowledge of the scriptures and their religious practices. They could fool many of the people with their false front, but not Jesus. Woe to Jesus for confronting and threatening their masks. Rather than die to themselves, they eventually killed him instead.

We may be aghast at the Pharisees’ response, but many of us act similarly without realizing it. We *kill* the very life of Jesus within us, hiding our sin and brokenness behind our false piety. We may even approach the sacraments in this state, with a deadness of heart, showing a form of godliness while denying the healing power of the Holy Spirit inherent in the sacraments. When we practice our faith superficially in this way, we, too, *kill* the life of Jesus within our own hearts, our families, and our church communities. Everyone then lives in the same shallowness of dead religion. Have you ever experienced this?



The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that “the vocation of humanity is to show forth the image of God and to be transformed into the image of the Father’s only Son” (1877). That means that, in Christ, we, too, are called to reveal the “face of the Father’s mercy.” I believe this is one of Jesus’ fundamental purposes in giving us the sacraments. When we encounter the depths of the Father’s mercy ourselves (through the sacraments) we are then able to represent his image to the world around us. But what happens when we end up looking and acting more like the Pharisees than Jesus—when we participate in the sacraments like the Pharisees approached their legalistic rituals? Hiding our sin and brokenness behind our facades, we kill the life of the Spirit by our dead works.

Pope Francis has a beautiful and gentle way of helping us to see beyond our fig leaves. He recently challenged all of us to look at ourselves in the mirror of God’s Word, to see where that Pharisaical spirit may have hardened our own hearts. In a daily homily, he observed: “[The Pharisees] were strong, but on the outside. They were in a cast. Their heart was very weak; they didn’t know what they believed.” He went on to caution: “As it was for the Pharisees, there also exists for us the danger of considering our place as better than others for the only fact of observing the rules or customs, even if we do not love our neighbor, [even if] we are hard of heart or prideful.”³

Can’t we all relate to those telltale signs of self-righteousness in some measure? Let’s face it, none of us goes around and publicly proclaims our worst sins and greatest faults for the whole world to see; we naturally want to put our best face forward with the people around us. And few of us see the goodness of our neighbor without some taint of judgment or superiority. I believe we each have at least a bit of that self-righteous Pharisee in us. We find it too easy to get defensive and justify ourselves while condemning others, forgetting that we have a Redeemer who is more than capable of justifying us by his death on the cross.

The biggest problem with the Pharisees is that they were stubbornly blind and refused to see, while most of us have some desire for the Holy Spirit to provide us at least a modicum of interior vision. But even

with this genuine desire, our blind spots make it hard to see ourselves clearly. The Holy Spirit gives us vision. Sometimes he puts certain people in our lives to enable us to see ourselves through God's eyes.



For me, one of these life-transforming encounters took place about twenty-five years ago when I met a joy-filled and holy man from Kenya named Simeon. The first time I met Simeon he grabbed my hand and led me across a parking lot to a private meeting space. I wanted to pull my hand away, but I didn't want to offend him. So I asked if holding hands with another man was a normal custom in his country. He answered back in his broken English, "I like to get a feel for a person." I quickly responded, "Can you feel I'm uncomfortable?" After we both laughed and broke the tension, he proceeded to read my heart and reveal some of my deepest wounds while showing me where I was not living authentically.

Simeon said to me, "Bob, God is holy; you not nearly so much. But God have mercy on you, and he love you. And God have grace; he make you become more like him." (It took me a while to realize the Holy Spirit was working through Simeon to reveal another layer of my self-righteousness and ungodly self-sufficiency.) Later, Simeon encouraged me to spend time seeing myself through Jesus' eyes. "Reading God's Word," he said, "is like seeing yourself in a mirror. That's why most people don't really study the Bible; they are afraid to see themselves."

A few months later, while serving as a spiritual leader with a community of men on a Christ Renews His Parish weekend, the Holy Spirit helped me see more of my self-righteousness through the mirror of God's Word. In preparing to give a talk on "New Life in Christ," I was drawn to the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector in the Gospel of Luke (18:9-14). Reflecting on the parable, I realized it was much better to identify with the tax collector, who was painfully aware of his unworthiness before God and deeply grieved by his sin. But that is not the one in the story with whom I identified at first.

I became troubled as I discovered that my heart resonated more with the Pharisee. I could relate all too well with his self-satisfaction: “O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity—greedy, dishonest, adulterous—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and pay tithes on my whole income” (Lk 18:11–12). The irony, if you could call it that, is that I resembled that Pharisee in many ways that I had previously considered good and holy. I also fasted twice a week and tithed regularly. What cut to my heart were the sins that the Pharisee disdained among the “rest of humanity.” They hit too close to home, as I had personally judged members of my family for many of those exact sins and had made inner resolutions that I would not be like them. With insight from the Holy Spirit, I finally realized that I was looking down on them for not measuring up to my standard of righteousness.

As the Spirit led me to other similar passages of scripture, he invited me to look squarely at this sin of all sins: my self-righteousness. Through these verses, it was as though Jesus delivered a one-two punch of truth to knock me off my pedestal. The first blow to my ego came through Jesus’ sermon on the plain in St. Luke’s gospel: “Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. . . . For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you” (Lk 6:37–38).

A similar passage from St. Paul delivered the knockout punch: “Therefore you are without excuse, every one of you who passes judgment. For by the standard by which you judge another you condemn yourself, since you, the judge, do the very same things” (Rom 2:1).

I was especially troubled by this last line: “You the judge do the very same things.” How could that be? No one around me had ever accused me of being greedy, and I wasn’t cheating on my taxes or having an adulterous affair. How could I be doing the same things as those I had judged? I didn’t want to face the reality that I am just as much a sinner as the people who hurt me. That would mean that I am not really better than anyone else and that I, too, need a savior just like them. My false self-image couldn’t bear to face that I am greedy, dishonest, and adulterous like the rest of humanity.

I had kept any semblance of those sins hidden from my self-awareness. When I did anything even remotely related to those sins, I would mercilessly condemn myself as I had condemned others. In order to be good enough in my own mind, to be loved by God, I strived to be morally perfect. Since I couldn't be perfect, I had to convince myself that I was righteous enough for God to love me, but I never knew exactly where that line was drawn. What would I do (or fail to do) that would get me on God's bad side and become one of the goats that were sent away to hell (see Mt 25:32–33)? I found myself on a hopeless and joyless treadmill, striving to be good enough but never quite measuring up. I wish I could say this is completely in my past and that I am completely free from this kind of thinking, but the truth is I still can look at God, myself, and those around me with this kind of legalistic and fearful attitude at times. Can you relate to this perfectionistic trap at all in your life? Be careful not to dismiss it too quickly. Just because you don't see it doesn't mean that you are free from it.

For me, the roots trace back to early in my life (and probably eons before that to Adam and Eve and original sin). I remember, as a child, confusing my dad's anger with God's wrath whenever I did something wrong. I wanted to please, so I did what I could to gain both of my parents' approval. When I did something wrong, I didn't want my parents or God to see my sin for fear that I would be punished and my "good boy" image would be tarnished.

I remember, as early as six years old, consciously hiding my sins from my parents. My brother Dave and I secretly smoked cigarettes on our way to school, and he made me promise I would not tell our parents. I easily agreed because I didn't want to get into trouble. At eight, I began to steal candy at a local grocery store and look at *Playboy* magazines with my friends. I lied to cover it up, which only took me deeper into hiding. Though I had the availability of the sacrament of Reconciliation, I continued to keep these sins hidden even from the priest. In sixth grade, when I became an altar boy, these patterns were well established in my life. I was already "greedy" (stealing), "dishonest" (lying), and "adulterous" (lusting after women in those magazines). I was more like the tax collector and the rest of humanity

than I wanted to admit, but I kept all this hidden behind my “good boy Bob” image.

By seventh grade, when our family started unraveling due to my dad’s drinking and adultery, my Pharisee suit was pretty firmly established and those tax-collector traits were kept hidden away in shame. With my heart barricaded by shame and self-righteousness, it was only natural that I would suppress my fear and pain, just as I had kept my sins hidden all those years. By ninth grade, my dad and older brother left the family, and I was primed to take on the role of family savior, hoping to avoid falling into disgrace as they had. My self-justifying attitude, now firmly entrenched, necessitated a continual drive to moral perfectionism.



Let me be perfectly clear. This is not the kind of perfection that Jesus calls each of us to in the Gospel. The quest for genuine holiness is not based on self-righteous striving to be good enough in order to be loved; it is the perfection of mercy, which is the true measure of holiness (see *CCC*, 1709; Lk 6:36). “It comes from an entirely free gift of God” and leads us to enter into “the divine joy” (*CCC*, 1722). Fr. Jacques Philippe notes: “Our Father in heaven does not love us because of the good that we do. He loves us for ourselves, because he has adopted us as his children forever. This is why humility, spiritual poverty is so precious.”⁴ True holiness is an easy yoke that comes from learning meekness and humility from Jesus (see Mt 11:29). It stands in stark contrast to the heavy yoke of legalism with which the Pharisees burdened their followers (see Mt 23:4).

God’s grace is the totally unmerited gift of his love that enables us to participate in his inner life and thus discover our true identity (see *CCC*, 1995–1999). Grace can come to us in many ways. God’s Word, the sacraments, and prayer are three primary ways that the Lord ordinarily communicates his graciousness to us. My friend Simeon taught me something about grace and pointed me to the scriptures as a way of seeing myself in the mirror. I want to pass his gift forward

and invite you to see yourself in the mirror, too, with unveiled faces. As Simeon said, “God is good and holy; you not nearly so much. But God have mercy and God have grace.”

Let’s pause here a moment to reflect on what we have discussed.

Take a Moment

1. What are your thoughts after reading Fr. Philippe’s insights on pride and humility? How do you hide your wounds and sins?
2. What aspects of my story and experience with Simeon relate to your life?



My friend Simeon helped me see myself through God’s eyes and pointed me to scripture as a way of continuing that process. As Simeon invited me, I now invite you to hold my hand (metaphorically speaking) so that we can take a walk and look in the mirror together. Our “mirror” for this spiritual exercise comes from the Gospel of Luke, and it is the one Pope Francis chose to announce the Jubilee Year of Mercy. You are probably familiar with the story where Jesus is invited to Simon’s house for dinner and they are interrupted by an unexpected guest—a sinful woman from town (see Lk 7:36–50). In some ways, this is another version of the Pharisee and the tax collector, only it is a real interaction and not a parable. As we reflect on this gospel together, remember our goal is to shed the masks of our false selves so that we can receive the abundant mercy God pours out to us and live more fully from our true identity in Christ.

As we walk through the narrative, I encourage you to take note of which of the main characters you identify with the most. First we meet the Pharisee, Simon, who is Jesus’ host. An upstanding citizen and well respected in his community, he most likely practiced his faith diligently and was well regarded by his influential friends. Next we have the unnamed “sinful woman.” She apparently has an unsavory