

Experience Rebirth



by Fr. Cedric Pisegna, C.P.

Years ago Toyota came out with an ad, “Toyota is born again.” They introduced several models with new designs. The cars were still the same Toyota models but different in shape and style. Golfer Fred Couples is a fan favorite. Some time ago he turned 50 years old and joined the senior “Champions Tour.” After quickly winning three tournaments, an article came out about him that said, “Fred’s putting stroke is born again.” His resurgence in the game was due to improved putting. In the 1970s the Renaissance Center in Detroit changed the skyline. In 1996 General Motors purchased the Renaissance Center that includes a 73-story Marriott hotel. These buildings have revitalized and changed downtown Detroit.

Words like rebirth, renaissance, revitalization, resurgence, and rejuvenation intrigue us. Is it really possible to undergo rebirth? Can I really change? We are all in need of a burst of new life and energy. We all need change, growth, and renewal. Jesus taught that new life is possible for each of us.

Jesus once spoke to the very religious man Nicodemus who was a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. As a Pharisee, he would have been meticulous about prayer and keeping the law of the Jews. He knew the rituals, rules, and structures of his religion well. Yet, he approached Jesus looking for more. He came to Jesus “at night” perhaps because he was embarrassed to be searching for advice from a carpenter from Galilee. Yet he recognized that Jesus taught truth. He called Jesus “rabbi” or teacher.

Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about the necessity of “rebirth” or “being born again.” Jesus could have affirmed what he already knew, but wanted to challenge Nicodemus to something deeper. This statement confused Nicodemus and he asked questions. Jesus clarified speaking about being “born of water and the Spirit.” (John 3) In order to enter God’s kingdom, we must experience this rebirth.

Like Nicodemus, many are religious and go to church. They are familiar with rituals, rubrics, and rules. While these are good, they only go so far. Religion points to a deeper reality – a relationship with God. Many have the externals and miss the most important thing: A tangible, real, personal relationship with God is needed.

Others don’t attend church and aren’t religious at all. Some don’t like “organized religion.” Whether you go to church or not, you are a spiritual person. All of us have a spiritual side as well as our physical side. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said, “We are not human beings on a spiritual journey; we are spiritual beings on a human journey.”

I am a Catholic priest. I help people by trying to inspire, counsel, and reconcile them. I minister through writing, preaching, and producing television programs. I want to reach out and help all people. While I am familiar with ritual and attend church frequently, my aim is to help people experience what our church points to: new life in God. My greatest desire for people is that they experience rebirth. I define being born again as having a new

“consciousness” of God. You become aware of God in a real, tangible way. It is still you, but you are spiritually different. You are a spiritual person. You can experience rebirth. Jesus came to bring you new life. You can have a new awakening.

I met an eighth grade girl named Rebecca at a mission I preached in Louisiana. I thought it was unusual that a girl so young was attending my mission and even buying my books. When I talked to her about her strong faith, she told me she wasn’t always that way. She shared this story:

A month ago we had our eighth grade retreat. During the retreat we were all praying before the Blessed Sacrament. As I prayed, I suddenly got the sense that Jesus had died for me personally. I knew inwardly that my sins were forgiven. Afterward, I learned that four of my friends were touched also. I go to a Catholic school and used to dread it when they made us pray. I got nothing out of it. Now I want to pray. I know my classmates dread the religious part of our school. Now I have a deep desire to tell them about Jesus. My friend and I are going to give a witness before the whole school about what a difference Jesus makes.

I love hearing stories like Rebecca’s. She was born again. *One touch* from God and everything can be different. God’s touch can be dramatic or quite ordinary. Grace can come suddenly or gradually.

We were all made for God. As St. Augustine said, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in God.” Many feel empty, lack peace, are dissatisfied, and have an inner ache. These feelings aren’t necessarily bad. These interior cravings reveal that we were made for God. Billy Graham called this reality a “cosmic loneliness.” All of us have a longing for God within. Many who have no religion are searching for God without knowing who or what they are looking for. One of the reasons I wanted to develop television programs in the first place was to reach out beyond the walls of the church to all people. I wanted to help people identify their inner hunger and find God. God has been called the “hound of heaven.” He is searching for you. There is a big difference between religion and Christianity. Religion is our search for God. Christianity is God’s search for us.

WHAT IS BEING BORN AGAIN?

The *Catholic Catechism* tells us that we are reborn through water baptism. (#1213) This is a reality that happens sacramentally when we are baptized as an infant or as an adult at the Easter Vigil. While we are graced and enlightened through this sacrament, we still need to be born again *experientially*. Even those who have not been baptized can experience the new birth. (Acts 10:47)

Rebirth is primarily a spiritual phenomenon. Because of God’s grace, you come to experience God in a real way. You develop a new consciousness of God. Like young Rebecca, you may

hear God telling you he loves you. Whatever experience God gives, there is a new awakening to God in your heart of hearts. No matter your past or how far you feel from God, you are susceptible to grace. Various experiences can take the form of deep feelings, manifestations of God's presence, healing, or dreams. Perhaps a new peace overwhelms you. Possibly you begin to identify, hear, and understand God's voice. However God manifests himself, you develop a new perception of God. God was always there. You simply have a new spiritual awakening toward him.

THE SOURCE OF REBIRTH

During his three-year ministry on earth, Jesus taught about the Holy Spirit. Jesus offered us this job description: "I have come that you may have life and life *abundant*." (Jn. 10:10) He lived, taught, and healed through the anointing of the Spirit of God. When God raised Jesus from the dead, Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit upon his disciples. This gift revolutionized the followers of Jesus and empowered them to "turn the world upside down." (Acts 17:6) Not only did they impact their generation, but they experienced a radical, personal change. The apostles themselves received a deep relationship with God, inner conversion, and began to realize their potential. The disciples were born again.

This gift of the Risen Jesus is for all people. God does not ration his Spirit (Jn. 3:34) but lavishes this gift on all flesh. *You* can experience this anointing from God. Even if you weren't brought up as a Christian or don't attend church each week, you can receive God's touch of grace. Perhaps, you do go to church religiously yet you may feel like you are missing something. The grace of rebirth is for you also.

HOLINESS

The main quality of the new birth has to do with God. Those who are touched develop an intensification of God's presence. However, rebirth includes other important elements. The presence of God within you is the *Holy Spirit*. *God comes to make us holy as he is holy*. (1 Pet. 1:16) The definition of holiness at its root means "to be separated from evil." The positive side of holiness is to become virtuous. This major work the Spirit does in us is called "sanctification." This is the life long process of being purified from selfishness and evil. Another way to put it is that we become like Jesus. (Ro. 8:29) This work of regeneration cleanses and heals our fallen, flawed heart. The Holy Spirit makes us a new creature in Christ. (2 Cor. 5:17)

CHANGE

Our desires, thoughts, motivations, and emotions begin to change in the rebirth. In other words, we go through an *inner process of conversion*. Conversion can have sudden and dramatic beginnings, but is also ongoing and gradual. Through the grace of God you begin to

make moral choices that are in accord with God's will. You turn away from sin. You become a disciplined person. You develop virtues such as patience, compassion, and selflessness. You begin to love people selflessly and give of yourself generously. You become a positive, encouraging person. You identify the fears and anxieties in your life and confront them rather than allow them to control you. You manage your emotions. These inner changes are all aspects of the new birth. This is the "hearing the sound of the wind" that is a sign of rebirth. (Jn. 3:8)

POWER

Besides a deeper relationship with God and developing virtue, rebirth includes having *fresh energy*. There is *power* in the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is more than a force; he is the person of God. However, he comes with a vivifying power that is life changing. This explosive fire is more than an arbitrary force. I like to put it this way: "The efficacy lies in the intimacy." As you begin to know and experience the gentle person of God intimately, a new passion and enthusiasm for life ensues. The source of the power lies in an ineffable intimacy with the divine. Because you know God, you begin to pursue your dreams and potential with relentless vigor. You know God is with you and that all things are possible. You desire to achieve, accomplish, and realize your God-given potential. Nothing is too hard because all things are possible with God. You reach for the stars because now they seem within reach. God's Spirit is fierce and indomitable. His presence leads to you being determined and tenacious. There is a new resilience and endurance within you.

In addition, you have a resurgence in your prayer life. You *want* to pray, read the Bible, and explore spiritual realities. St. Therese of Lisieux described prayer as a "surge of the heart." The Spirit pulsates within you. You are driven and led by God himself to grow spiritually.

NEW APPROACH

Lastly, the new birth brings a *new approach* to life. Instead of being anxious and frustrated, you begin to enjoy your everyday life. You don't have to be in control of everything and stressed out. God is a God of peace and tranquility is his gift. Through grace you can relax and enjoy your lot in life. You have a new joy not based on circumstances and even in spite of tough conditions. The Spirit helps you see and appreciate life as if you are viewing it through new lenses. Additionally, you develop a new sense of amazement and excitement. You become thankful. You listen to and savor music. You take time to taste your food. You find the humor in things and people. You take time out to smell the roses. The Spirit comes to help us live our life with awe. One of our priests who died a few years ago used to preach about awe. He called it Awareness, Wonder, and Enthusiasm. Someone once asked a wise man, "What are the seven wonders of the world?" He replied, "To see, to hear, to smell, to taste, to touch, to laugh, and to love."

HOW TO BE BORN AGAIN

Rebirth is similar to being born. We can't make it happen by ourselves. The new birth comes by the grace and gift of God. However, we do have a role to play. We must get in touch with and respond to the inner craving and desire for the "more," the "abundance" God offers. This inner hunger and thirst can motivate us to seek God more fully. One primary way this can happen is through prayer. Everyone, no matter how young or old can pray. Prayer is an instinctual cry of the heart, a yearning. Jesus taught, "If you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will God give the Holy Spirit to those who *ask!*" (Lk. 11:13)

The verse from the Bible that touched me when I was 19 and was a major contributor to my rebirth was Mt. 7:7: "Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened." Actually in the Greek, the words mean to "keep on" asking, seeking, and knocking. Seeking God is not a one time effort done because of emptiness, but must become a lifestyle. Part of this way of life has to be the reading of the Word of God. When you come to the Scriptures, you ingest and begin to interiorize the truths that are written. Much like when you strike a match, a new spark/fire occurs. When you open your heart to the truths in the Bible, faith is ignited and grows. Faith comes through hearing. As you spend time listening, your spiritual side will deepen. You can also hear the Word of God through inspiring religious books, music, and television programs. As you give God time, you will grow through osmosis.

It is important to participate in a mission, retreat, or religious conference. I preach parish missions as my full time ministry. I gear my talks to inspire people to change and receive the grace of God. God touches people when they take time from their schedule to seek him. There are countless stories of peoples' lives being renewed by God's mercy. God will touch *you* also when you make an effort to seek him in this way.

In addition, to the best of your ability, you must turn away from any known sin in your life. This turning is a lifelong journey. You must strive for greater consistency more than ever as you are searching for God. You may want to go to confession or speak to someone you can trust about your past and your desire to seek change.

SURRENDER

Finally, a moment of yielding, abandonment, or surrender must occur. One of the earliest Christian hymns is Philippians 2:5-11. This ancient liturgical song highlights an important truth: Jesus "emptied" himself. The word in the Greek is "kenosis." Our journey toward rebirth must be one of "self-emptying" also. We are born being selfish and must progress toward being selfless. One of the major ways this can occur is through a lifestyle of surrender.

St. Ignatius of Loyola was a priest who lived in the 1500's and the founder of the Jesuit religious community. While fighting in a battle, a cannonball almost blew his leg off. While he was in the hospital recovering and reflecting, he experienced a rebirth. It was his suffering and brokenness that brought him to think, pray, and surrender. This prayer of surrender was written by St. Ignatius.

Take Lord, receive, all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, my entire will. All I have and call my own. Whatever I have or hold, you have given me. I return it all to you and surrender it wholly to be governed by your will. Give me only your love and your grace and I am rich enough and ask for nothing more.

I believe we all need a major moment of surrender in our life. This moment can be prefaced by suffering or discontent. Usually change happens because people are uncomfortable with their life and seeking something different. A prayer of surrender can open a person to the grace and touch of God in a powerful way. Many denominations teach that if you pray a prayer of surrender to God, then you are born again. Rebirth is much more than a simple prayer, but a prayer of surrender can be the catalyst for being born again. Surrender begins with prayer and continues as a *lifestyle* of selflessness, giving, and growing.

You have read this booklet because you want change. You want to be born again. I invite you to pray the prayer below now and often. Whether you feel anything or not, trust that God is working in you and bringing you to a new birth. My prayer for you is that you will be born again! By God's grace, your life will never be the same.

PRAYER OF SELF-SURRENDER

Jesus, I need change in my life
I want to taste your presence
I want to be born again
I surrender myself to you
Take my mind, heart, and will
Fill me with your Holy Spirit
I need your peace, happiness, and passion
I believe I am changing right now
I love you Lord Jesus. Amen!

I thank God for your new commitment to Jesus. I invite you to go to church each week. Read the Scriptures and whatever spiritual books attract you. Dedicate yourself to prayer each day. Remember, surrender is a *lifestyle*. I pray you will be filled with the Holy Spirit and fire. May you know a new *Passion* and joy in your life. Email me at francedric@francedric.org and tell me of your new decision. I promise to pray for you!

May Almighty God *bless* you. +The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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