



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Works in Progress"**
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Isaiah 42: 1-9
Second Reading Acts 10: 34-38
Gospel Matthew 3: 13-17

The other day I found a [9:30: this] little photo album that my family had put together some years back. It would appear that my mother had been going through some old photos and had put together a collection of pictures of me going back a very, *very* long way. It includes photos of my baptism. There's [9:30: Here's] one of the priest who conducted the service with me being held by my mother wearing a really bizarre hat. There's a rare shot of my maternal grandparents holding me in front of the chapel of St John the Divine on the campus of the University of Illinois in Champaign. All of this is the stuff of history. I have visited the chapel twice since that event on the 15th of August in 1951. The baptismal font is so small it looks more like a water fountain than a piece of church furniture, but it is nevertheless a solemn and impressive church building there in the center of the university where my father was at graduate school when I was born.

Now the reason I am taking you down my own personal memory lane is the fact that I don't remember the occasion at all. I was all of three months old. Until I saw those photos for the first time several years ago, I had no idea what my parents and grandparents looked like at the time, or what I wore, or even how big (or little) I was. Nevertheless, I know that it happened, I have studied the text of the Baptismal service from the 1928 Prayer Book that must have been used. I can read what my

sponsors undertook in my name, and I know that on that day I became a member of the Christian Church and an adopted child of God. I don't *remember* it, but I don't *doubt* that the baptism was real and valid; even as I don't remember being *born* at Burnham City Hospital, but am pretty sure it happened three months before that baptism. It doesn't occur to me to want to be rebaptised any more than I would want to be reborn. Yes, I probably would enjoy the process of study that adult baptisms require, and I would be able to experience consciously what the early Christians did when they as adults left one life and entered another. But the fact of the matter is that it's history now- something that happened in the past. I can't be rebaptised (without breaking Church tradition and the teaching of the Bible itself), so if I want to "recharge" my commitment to the Christian faith, it will be building on the fact of my spiritual rebirth that took place 56 years ago- that's 56 years of a life that has been at least nominally Christian, if not actively so. In that way I am very much like most of you, and like virtually everyone who has even been baptized into the Christian Church. Being born, or being born again, is part of the *process* both of life and also of the life in Christ that being a Christian is all about.

When I was working in what used to be called the Soviet Union, I learned that the society there was never described as *communist*. Rather, it was officially *socialist*. In fact, no country has ever called itself communist *per se*, but has instead insisted on some variation on the term "socialist republic." Socialism was the phase of development according to the Marxist-Leninist creed that came after feudalism and bourgeois capitalism. Communism was the next step and the final *goal*- the perfection of the socialist dream. In the event, Russia never reached it, and it is unlikely at this rate that China, Vietnam or Cuba are going to reach it, either.

In a similar vein, I have heard at least one priest here in the Philippines react critically to the often-heard statement that this is "the only Christian country in Asia". Not only is that technically no longer true with the arrival on the scene of Catholic East Timor, but Korea may tip over into the Christian majority category in a few decades' time. However, the priest's response wasn't to that technicality. He said that the Philippines wasn't really Christian *yet*. Despite its churches and its politically visible hierarchy, the country doesn't act Christian most of the time and so has quite a way to go.

I might make a similar suggestion on this day when we renew our baptismal vows. Arguably, none of us is really Christian *yet*. We all remain “works in progress” as we build upon the foundation that was made when we were baptized, however long ago or recent that might have been. We build upon that foundation whenever we reaffirm our resolve to be more like Jesus Christ in what we do and say and in the goals we set for ourselves or which we join in supporting in the society around us. To presume to say that we have reached the perfection of the Christian life just because we have been born again into the life of Christ’s Body, the Church, is to say that a tiny infant has already reached its full potential just by the fact that it has left its mother’s womb. It is to say that we have reached our destination when in fact we have only begun the journey.

From time to time, the Church asks us to renew our baptismal vows. This isn’t any sort of a “rebaptism”, but rather a reminder of how our journey began, how far we’ve come, and how far we have to go. I am thankful that my family thought to collect the photos of my baptism, but I can compensate for my lack of personal memory of that particular ceremony by renewing regularly throughout my life what happened on that day. And for a “work in progress” that kind of *progress report* is very important, indeed.