

Recently I reconnected with an old friend from high school. We got to know each other because we both were servers and members of the parish's youth group. But he was two years ahead of me in school, and it was not cool for juniors like him to hang around with freshmen like me. You could be friends, but only up to a point. A year after I graduated from high school, I enrolled at St. Gregory's Seminary College in Cincinnati. When my parents drove me up there, I expected a similar situation. I'd be a freshman once more. I might make a few friends with upperclassmen, but I didn't expect those friendships to be very close. I expected that they would treat me like a freshman. When we pulled up the car that first day, two of the older students were already in the parking lot to greet us. They welcomed me to the seminary, and to my utter surprise they picked up my bags, walked to the dormitory, and hiked up the stairs to show me to my room. I was completely surprised at their hospitality. I was a lowly freshman. To them, it didn't matter. They were adopting me as a member of the seminary college family.

Any time you join a new group, you may have some anxiety. "Will I be accepted? Will people like me? Will I fit in?"

When Saint Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, the early Christians faced the same issues. As with any group, there were problems inside. Some people did not lead well. Some did not follow well. Some did not live up to the expectations of others. People had questions. Saint Paul had answers. Through his letters he tried to get these communities to cooperate. In Rome some of the Christians felt they didn't fit in. They had been baptized, but they still committed sin. They were like high school freshmen, wanting to fit in, but feeling as though they never could.

Paul gives these Romans words of hospitality. He tells them about their new Christian family: "[You are children of God.] For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a Spirit of adoption, through whom we cry, 'Abba, Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ."

My brothers and sisters, in the spiritual life, we sometimes feel discouraged by the mistakes we make. We fall back into the same sins: We fight with people we love.

We lie to keep our privacy. We don't listen even with parents and friends give us good advice. We avoid doing chores around the house that other people need us to do. When this happens, we look up to God, and we expect God to punish us, to treat us like a freshman, or a slave. But through our baptism and our confirmation we did not receive a spirit of slavery. We received the Holy Spirit of adoption. We are part of God's family. We are children of God. Whenever we become mindful of our sins, we need to become more mindful of God's grace. Like the upperclassmen who picked up my bags and carried them up to my room on my first day of college, the Holy Spirit is ready to pick us up and carry us along. No matter what sins we commit or how often we fall into them, we live in the Spirit. We can call upon the gifts that the Holy Spirit gave to us - the same gifts the Spirit gave the apostles on the first Pentecost. We are not servants; we are children. We are not slaves; we are free. If we want to overcome sin, we already have inside us everything we need: the gift of the Holy Spirit.