One of the many sayings of Bishop Fulton Sheen was that Christ did not come to make us nice people, he came to make us a new creation. And the point is that being a Christian isn't so much about being just a nice person; for anyone can do that. Rather it's about being transformed from the inside to the outside so we are truly born again as we hear in our Gospel today. The question for us is how does this transformation take place? The answer is found in taking a hard look at ourselves, seeing the real us; including the things that are a part of ourselves that we might not always want to acknowledge are there, realizing that when we do, the result is not shame but a liberation that can make us new people.

In 1974, Elizabeth Sherrill, herself a Christian, met up with a man that she says she at first did not want to meet. In the process, what she would realize is this man had been born again, but also despite the fact she had accepted Christ, she was certainly not without sins still in her own heart she had to confront.

The man in question was Mitsuo Fuchida. He was a former Shintoist who had become a Christian. He was also a Japanese pilot, who helped lead the attack on Pearl Harbor. But after the war, he found himself born again

as a Christian; he moved to America, and throughout the 50s, 60s and 70s as a part of the evangelization group he founded, he toured and shared his story, “From Pearl Harbor the Calvary.” Reader’s Digest profiled him in the 50s.

As he entered the lobby of the Miyako Hotel in Kyoto, Japan, that day, she saw a small, erect man of 72, and she felt herself stiffen. She had requested this interview because she wanted to hear for herself how it was that this one-time Shintoist had become a Christian. Walk over to him, Elizabeth told herself. Hold out your hand. But her muscles had gone suddenly rigid.

This is the man, those tensed muscles told her, who led the Japanese planes over Pearl Harbor. Three young sailors from her hometown had died in that attack. It was now 1974, more than 30 years later. But in her emotions it was still December 7, 1941...

The awkwardness of refusing a handshake was averted as Mitsuo Fuchida stopped a few feet away and made a ceremonious little bow.

Elizabeth mouthed the introductory speech she had prepared and turned to the translator she'd hired. The man was staring at Mr. Fuchida with undisguised hostility. The next moment he walked away without a word.

Stunned, she asked the hotel for another interpreter. What could have been the man's objection? Hadn't Fuchida been Japan's great hero?

With a new translator, they found seats in the nearly empty restaurant and Elizabeth drew out her list of questions. Mitsuo Fuchida had agreed to the interview, Elizabeth quoted from his letter, because of "love for America." Surely a strange emotion in the man who had led the attack on the United States, she thought?

"Not strange," he corrected her. "Impossible."

That man, the man he had once been, had felt only hatred for Western nations: Britain, France, the United States, and the other colonial powers that dominated Asia. Hatred for the West was implicit in love for his country and its divine emperor. And above all, for Admiral Togo.

“I was almost four years old in 1905”—the translator kept pace with Mr. Fuchida’s staccato syllables—“when Japan won the war with Russia, the first time in history that an Eastern nation had defeated a European one. Everywhere people were praising a single hero. Togo!”

The admiral became the idol of Fuchida’s boyhood. When he learned to read he pored over accounts of Togo’s battles, especially the daring surprise attack with which he had bottled up the Russian fleet at Port Arthur, China. “Over my bed I kept Togo’s picture. I dreamed of becoming, like him, a naval officer.”

By 1939 Fuchida had done just that; he’d risen to the rank of flight commander in the Japanese Navy’s Yokosuka Air Corps. He had also married and started a family. And all the while the country armed for what every Japanese knew was their god-appointed task: to drive the Western powers out of the East.

In 1941 the Japanese were ready. Their army and navy were overwhelmingly the strongest in East Asia; the colonial nations were involved in a war in Europe. Only one force could stop them: the powerful

U.S. Pacific Fleet, stationed at Pearl Harbor. As it had been for Admiral Togo, the answer was clearly a surprise attack—this time from the air. Thirty-nine-year-old Mitsuo Fuchida was chosen to guide the First Air Fleet planes to the target.

A kimono-clad waitress placed tea in handleless cups on the low table in front of them. Mr. Fuchida drank silently, then resumed. “On December seventh the sky was overcast…”

Six Japanese aircraft carriers were stationed about 200 miles north of the target. In those days Japanese airplanes had no radar, and so they depended on visual contact. All night from the deck of the lead carrier Fuchida scanned the starless sky.

At dawn, despite the weather, he led the first wave of 183 airplanes into the leaden sky. His little three-seater climbed through the cloud bank. As they burst above it the sun stood on the eastern horizon, rays streaming seaward in a pattern resembling that on the Japanese flag.

To Fuchida it was a sign from the gods. He slipped on his goggles and slid back the glass canopy to search below for the break in the clouds that he knew must come.

At last, using binoculars to peer through the tiniest rift in the clouds, he caught a glimpse of coastline. He bent over his charts. Oahu! “Then suddenly there it was below them, Pearl Harbor, under an open sky!” Beyond and behind, the cloud cover stretched unbroken, but directly over the base the gods had drawn the clouds aside. The fleet was there.

He turned to the radio operator behind him and sent out the signal to attack. For two hours, as the first wave of fighters and bombers, then the second, shrieked in beneath him, Fuchida directed the assault on the harbor and adjacent airfields. He returned to Japan on December 23 to find himself hailed as “the Admiral Togo of our day.”

For the next six months he led missions in the Solomon Islands, Java, the Indian Ocean: Each month the Rising Sun rode higher in the sky. Then one day in June 1942 he was on the deck of the aircraft carrier Akagi off a small island called Midway when American planes swooped from the sky. Several bombs hit the ship; there were fires and explosions.

One explosion left Fuchida with two shattered legs. From the Japanese light cruiser that rescued him he watched as his ship was scuttled and three other carriers sank. Akagi was the flagship of the Japanese Fleet. The Battle of Midway was Japan's first defeat of the war.

Fuchida was hospitalized for months; then, on crutches, he was assigned to the war college. Classes were hurried: With less and less preparation, Japan's young men were being rushed to the front. Still on crutches, Fuchida too returned to active duty.

During the summer of 1944 Japan was losing eight soldiers to every one lost by the Americans. "But though we knew the war was lost, no one spoke of surrender" he said. Until the atom bomb fell. Nine days later Japan surrendered, and a feeling of despair settled over Fuchida and millions of his countrymen.

Because of his family, Fuchida did not commit suicide as many officers did. Instead, he moved his wife and children to a farm owned by relatives and

supported them by what he grew from the soil. It was a humbling comedown for a national hero.

Meanwhile, in Tokyo, war crimes trials had begun. Some of those on trial had been accused of mistreating prisoners of war. The knowledge that fellow officers had brought such shame upon the nation was another crushing blow for Fuchida.

Although he'd had no contact with the prison camps, he was often summoned from his farm as a character witness. He was walking dejectedly through the Tokyo train station on his way to the court one morning when someone shoved a little leaflet into his hand: "I Was a Prisoner of War" was what the pamphlet said.

Something to do with the trials, he supposed; he put it into his pocket to read on the train going home. Sure enough, it was the account of an American soldier named Jacob DeShazer, who had spent nearly three and a half years in a Japanese concentration camp.

There it all was, the by-now hideously familiar story of kickings, beatings, starvation. And there was DeShazer's very natural reaction: bitterness, hatred, helpless rage. Very much, Fuchida reflected to the click of the train wheels, like his own emotions since Hiroshima.

Now would come the part where DeShazer named his torturers and demanded revenge. But—what was this he was reading? DeShazer loved the Japanese? Rejoiced in the midst of suffering? The transformation had come about, DeShazer explained, through Jesus Christ. Fuchida recognized the name as one of the gods of the enemy. You could learn about Jesus, the leaflet went on, in a book called the Bible.

This, coupled with another event, talking with a Japanese POW who he assumed would tell him how the Americans had mistreated him, also caused him to want to learn more about Christ. Namely, the POW was in the Philippines and was cared for by a woman who was a Christian who's parents, Christian missionaries, had been killed by Japanese bombing. How could one not, out of honor, want revenge, Fuchida wondered.

The next time he was called to testify, Fuchida went to a Tokyo bookstore and bought a Bible. And all alone in the little farmhouse he began to read. There was much he did not understand. But what he did understand, as the weeks went by, was that there were not many gods, siding with this nation or that, but one God who loved all nations. This God had come to earth not as an emperor, or a military hero, but as a humble workingman.

The more he read, the more Fuchida felt the horror of his past devotion—devotion to armaments, to war, to hatred of one race or another.

“Then,” Fuchida continued, “I came to the death of this carpenter, and read that He had prayed from the Cross, ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.’

“Why then ... Jesus had prayed for me,” he thought to himself.

That night in the farmhouse, Mitsuo Fuchida, who did not know a single Christian, asked God to forgive him and became a Christian himself. And without knowing it, following the pattern of believers, he began to tell others. Told them he’d found the answer to despair and defeat. Told them

God had not come to lead armies, but to lead men and women out of hatred into love.

Word of the conversion of the nation's hero reached the media, and the torrent burst. Hate mail, abusive phone calls, threats to his wife and children. He had betrayed his country, turned to the foreigners 'God. Even old friends turned away from him on the street.

"That man here today—the first translator!" I broke in. "That was an example?"

"That was nothing," Fuchida said. "He only walked away.

Others had done worse. A young ex-lieutenant, a flyer named Yamashita, had come to his home. The moment they were alone, the young flyer reached into his shirt and drew out an ornate knife, the sacred dagger given to every kamikaze pilot.

"He pressed the point against my throat. He was crying. 'I looked up to you all my life, 'he said, 'and now I must kill you.'"

“What did you do?” Elizabeth exclaimed.

“I told him the story I have told you—with the knife pricking my throat the entire time.”

“And at the end?” Elizabeth asked.

“At the end he lowered the knife.”

Yamashita became an elder of the church in Amagasaki.

Elizabeth, at the end of her story, says she saw herself that day too. Like Fuchida, like Yamashita, forgiven by God—but holding back the hand of friendship because it was clinging to the hatreds of the past.

“We have a custom when we make a new friend,” she said, reaching out her hand.

As their hands met, the love that flowed through Fuchida's grasp was, she believes, the love that was born in a stable long ago.

What the story, and the story of so many who find the faith, goes to show us, is that God never abandons us. It is never too late for conversion or reversion. But the love that God gives us also requires us to open up our eyes and be aware of the realities not just of evil in the world, but also of what is going on in our souls too; for all of us need that ongoing conversion.

So much of what we do as Catholics; receiving Communion, coming to Mass; going to confession and celebrating the sacraments, these are helps in helping you and me to be born again. The point is that on our part, as happened for both Elizabeth and Mitsuo, our eyes need to be opened to the reality of evil, and the reality of love.

With respect to the reality of evil, Jesus says just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him might have eternal life. The reference is to the serpent Moses put on a pole that the ancient Israelites looked at for healing when bitten by the serpents sent to punish them for their infidelity to God; the

same symbol many physicians to this day wear on their white coat as a lapel pin. The Israelites complained and God came up with the solution; so why would looking at the source of the trouble be the cure, namely in their case the serpent on the pole but for us the Cross?

Jesus is lifted up on the Cross and looking at that Cross brings you and me healing. It results in you and me being born again but we need to be open to the healing. Saint Peter said the author of life came and you killed him in an early sermon. This is the reality of the Cross; the Cross shows us sin its ugliness. Even after the resurrection when Jesus appears, the wounds are still there that are shown to the apostles in the upper room. Such is the reality of sin. For the Cross shows us so much about sin; cruelty; hate; violence; injustice; denying; betraying. We see it on the cross. And we see it in daily life; from what was in the heart of Elizabeth Sherrill when she went for that interview to what was in the heart of Mitsuo as he lead the Pearl Harbor attack to the what was in the heart of the angry lieutenant who wanted to take his life to the translator who wouldn't even work with him in the hotel lobby - and remember that was 1991. All of us can be lulled into this sense that we are pretty good or I'm okay and you're okay. But the Cross, when we look at it and really think about it, we realize that's not true.

So what we need to do is to do what Elizabeth did, and do what Mitsuo did, namely look inside our hearts and see what is there and name it. What is your struggle? Perhaps it's gossip. Perhaps its hate and anger towards people who are of a different race, religion or political persuasion. Maybe struggles with sins of the flesh. Maybe not living up to your marriage vows. Maybe being slothful. Maybe being consumed with wrath and anger. Maybe not doing your part for your parents or your kids. Sin takes all kinds of forms; and so often it can be hidden, tucked away, or ignored. Remember saying "I believe" is one thing; living that out is another.

But here is the hope. The power of what God does for us; the power to change evil into good. As exhibited by how Mitsuo converted; reading the story of an American POW who did not return hate with hate, but said "I love the Japanese." This during a time when our own country even interred the Japanese and many Americans supported Japanese genocide. This is the power of good over evil; for in the Cross, evil is swallowed up by good. It all goes back to John 3:16, which some have said summarizes the whole Bible in a single verse: God so loved the world that He gave his only Son that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but might have eternal life." So take comfort in that. Maybe you are battling sin and are afraid to

think about it or look at it. Maybe you've been beaten up by life and are hurting inside. Maybe you've been verbally abused or worse by other people and the sins of others. Whatever your situation, put your trust in God and Christ crucified. Know that the Cross reveals sin, but even more so reveals divine mercy. And put your faith in that, knowing how much you are loved by God. For when we do that, we too can transform others like Mitsuo did that lieutenant and how he changed Elizabeth through that conversation. You and I, through our good deeds done out of love, can do so much good for so many people. But it requires a true change in our hearts for that to happen.

All of us are a bit like Nicodemus in the Gospel; a man who comes to Jesus at night because he doesn't want people to know who he is talking to. But he's curious, and he's on the right path, and Jesus helps him to take the next steps. We'll be meeting him again; he'll stand up for Jesus saying the law requires a person to be heard before being judged; and he'll assist in burying Jesus. My sense is these words Jesus says to him sink in; and hopefully they do for us too. What is it that keeps you and me in the dark? Turn it over to our Lord, and let the Son rise on your hearts, with Divine Mercy setting you free and be truly born again.