

Homily for the Baptism of the Lord

January 10, 2021

Today we come to the end of the Christmas season with the celebration of the Baptism of the Lord, the beginning of Christ's public ministry.

Jesus' baptism by John was not yet the Sacramental Baptism which you and I received. This baptism was simply one of repentance. People were being washed in the waters of the Jordan by John in order to demonstrate their contrition for their sins and a sincere desire to turn their lives around.

But why would Jesus, the Sinless One (see 1 Peter 2:22), wish to receive John's baptism of repentance? Jesus did not have any sins of His own to take down into the river Jordan. So, what was He doing there? It was not His, but our sins that Jesus took down into the waters with Him. As it was our sins that He took up on the cross with Him.

In His baptism Jesus begins to lay the foundation for our future baptisms. For the Sacrament of Baptism does not just symbolize repentance for sins – like John's baptism – but by Christ's life, death and resurrection, it actually receives the power to take away sins and give new life.

So, let us briefly look at what is a sacrament and then at what is the Sacrament of Baptism.

There are seven sacraments which were instituted by Christ and given to His Church as physical signs by which He imparts His supernatural grace to us: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, Reconciliation, Holy Matrimony, Holy Orders, and Anointing of the Sick.

So, the first thing to note is that the sacraments were not invented by the Church but go back to the very life and ministry of Jesus Christ. At the Last Supper we hear Jesus instituting the Eucharist, *“This is My Body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me”* (Lk 22:19-20). When He rose from the dead and first appeared to His apostles, we hear Jesus instituting the Sacrament of Reconciliation: *“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained”* (Jn 20:22-23). And at His ascension we hear Jesus instructing His apostles to *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”* (Mt 28:19).

But why sacraments? Why does Christ use something physical to impart something spiritual? Why not simply impart all His graces directly into our souls from Heaven and cut out the middleman of the Church and her sacraments?

The answer is quite simple when you think about it. Because we are not pure spirits but physical beings as well. In fact, the physical aspect of ourselves is much more evident than the spiritual. So much so that we can safely say that everything we know in some way comes to us through our body to the soul; through our senses – what we see, hear, touch – to our intellect and will.

So, when God wanted to reveal Himself to humanity how did He do it? He sent prophets and others to speak in His name: people whom others could see and hear. When He wanted to reveal Himself more completely how did He do it? He sent His Son who became flesh and dwelt among us. Saint Paul reminds us that faith itself needs a physical means in order to reach us: *“How are they to believe in One of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim Him?”* (Rm 10:14). Even reading the Bible is a physical act one does in order to discover spiritual truths. Through the body to the soul.

The same is true of certain graces that God bestows. For example, if you lived 2000 years ago in the Holy Land and wanted to be forgiven your sins you could simply go to Jesus. When you heard Him pronounce His forgiveness, you could be certain it was true. For He had that power!

But that is a long time ago and far away. How does Jesus continue to impart His forgiveness to us today? Through the Church He founded for that very purpose and the sacraments He gave to her. As He told His apostles, *“Whoever hears you hears Me”* (Lk 10:16) and *“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.”* Saint Paul recognized himself as a minister of Christ’s reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:17-20).

Maybe an analogy will help make it clearer. How does electrical power come to this building? From some distant power source, maybe a hydro dam or nuclear power plant. It then travels down powerlines until it reaches this building and then is transferred into all the various

things that need it to work; from the lights to the sound system to the video camera. How does the transforming power of Christ's physical life, death and resurrection travel across time and space to get to you and me? Through the spiritual "powerlines" of the sacraments that have their source in Him but then reach us through His Church and transform our lives into what Christ means them to be.

And the first of these sacraments is Baptism. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us: "Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: 'Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word'" (CCC, 1213).

Why is Baptism "the basis of the whole Christian life"? Well for the same reason that birth is the basis of your whole earthly life. You have to be born before you can live out your life in this world. And you have to be "*born from above*" (Jn 3:3) before you can live out your life in Christ. This comes to us, as Jesus said, by "*water and Spirit*" (Jn 3:5), that is to say by Baptism. God uses something physical (water, and the trinitarian formula) to impart something spiritual (His sanctifying grace).

There are many parallels between physical birth and spiritual rebirth. Why not, we are composed of body and soul, and both were created by God! In natural birth we have natural parents; a father and a mother.

In supernatural rebirth we have a supernatural parent; God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When we are born our human parents want to share with us all that they have, yet they cannot give us what is beyond theirs to give. God's life is not theirs to give; it is God's to give. Original Sin is what we call the absence of God's life in our souls; His sanctifying grace. In baptism God takes away that absence by giving us His presence, making us sharers in His divine life. We become "*partakers of the divine nature*" (2 Peter 1:4). This comes to us through Christ's Spirit. But as God is all holy, anything that is not of God must be removed before He can enter in. So, Baptism also washes away any personal sins so as to make us "*temples of the Holy Spirit*" (1 Cor 6:19).

We are born into a family which can include not only our parents but siblings and an extended family who are related to us by blood or marriage. In Baptism we are adopted into the family of God – Christ's Body, the Church – and have brothers and sisters in Christ, not by blood but by grace. They are found all over the world and extend beyond it, all the way to Purgatory and Heaven. That is why we invoke the saints in Heaven; for they are members of our extended family.

When born our home is normally where our parents live. When baptized our true home becomes where our heavenly Father lives with His adopted family. So, we can consider this life on earth as a journey home to God.

And as birth is the gateway to all that this world has to offer, so Baptism is “the gateway to life in the Spirit” and all that God has to offer.

Baptism is also “the door which gives access to the other sacraments.” When a newborn baby is brought home from the hospital the parents’ work does not end there; it has only begun! The child must be nurtured: fed, clothed, taught proper behaviour and forgiven when he or she fails, cared for when sick.

Baptism is not the end of God’s work in us, it is only the beginning. Now that we have entered the household of God we can be spiritually fed with the Eucharist, clothed or equipped for discipleship with the Holy Spirit in Confirmation, reconciled with God when we sin through Confession, given special vocational graces in marriage or priesthood, anointed when we are sick or dying. From birth to death God is continually filling us with His power and presence through the Sacraments.

That is God’s work in us. Our job is to *use* what God has given us. We are not meant to be passive recipients of the sacraments or, worse yet, indifferent ones. Christ gives us sacramental graces to grow in His life, to become true disciples, to live and proclaim the gospel, to “*love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself*” (Luke 10:27). And that is the work of a lifetime; that is our calling as Christians. God bless.