

Homily - Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

Today, *the beginning of our National Vocation Awareness Week*, we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. We want to reflect on the significance of Christ's baptism. Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. But what was going on here? The baptism John the Baptist administered was only "a call to repentance". It was an occasion for remorse and true sorrow (contrition) for one's sins. It could not take away sins. However, we know Jesus had no sins to repent of; and he was not in need of forgiveness either. So what was going on? Why did Jesus submit to baptism at the hands of John?

Beloved, first, Jesus did it to show great solidarity with us! In our Gospel (Lk 3:15-16, 21-22), Luke provides this "shocking" scenario about Jesus allowing himself to mingle with sinners: "After all the people had been baptized and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying..." He identified with sinners during his baptism; he was not ashamed to mingle with sinners in order to save them. He was not ashamed to be called our brother. Thus, the Author to the Hebrews enjoined us to look "to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who ... endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb 12:2). What a great love! What a lesson for us? How many people come to Church and feel they cannot sit next to "this or that man or woman", that it is below their dignity? *So candidates for the Priesthood and the religious life must strive, like Jesus, to "become all things to all" (1Cor 9:22) to win them for Christ.*

Second, Jesus had no sins to repent of; yet he was baptized to fulfill the righteous demands of the Law. This is consistent with his words, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt 5:17). Or again, "These are my words... that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44). Through his baptism, he gave divine endorsement to all that John the Baptist, the patriarchs and prophets did. Since Jesus was baptized "to fulfill all righteousness"; *one may not have any personal need for the priesthood or religious life, but if God calls, one should yield. For Jesus says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide" (John 15:16).*

Above all, Jesus was baptized to inaugurate the new way of initiation into the covenant family of God. St. Paul describes the new baptism Jesus inaugurated as the new "Circumcision" (cf. Col 2:11). The order of Nature and Law are now replaced by the order of the Supernatural and Grace. In the Old Testament, circumcision was the norm. God decreed, "Any uncircumcised male ... shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant" (Gen 17:14). Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac were circumcised in the flesh, as were all Israelite males. John the Baptist was circumcised (Luke 1:59) and Jesus

also (Luke 2:21). Again, we see his act of solidarity. What a great God we have! Indeed, as St Paul says, “God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law” (Gal 4:4-5). *Accepting the call to the priesthood or religious life is an action of love in solidarity with Jesus for the salvation of all.*

Let us now consider how Jesus inaugurated the Christian baptism: Our Gospel reads, “After ...Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased”. Clearly, what happened here transcended the baptism John the Baptist administered, just as the New Passover transcended the Old. This is the first time the “theophany”, the Trinitarian manifestation, ever happened. It was actually the beginning of a new dispensation of grace. This is the baptism we receive, administered in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. As St John puts it, “From his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:16-17). *This grace of vocation is sustained through prayer.*

Not surprising, therefore, the baptism Jesus inaugurated gives us a new identity, we become God’s children, his sons and daughters. The Catechism teaches, “This sacrament is called *Baptism*.... [T]o baptize (Greek *baptizein*) means to ‘plunge’ or ‘immerse’; the ‘plunge’ into the water symbolizes the catechumen's burial into Christ's death, from which he rises up by resurrection with him, as ‘a new creature’” (CCC 1214). The result is that we are born again in spirit: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). *We share in Christ’s prophetic, priestly and kingly ministry; ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation’ (1Peter 2:9).* This is so amazing that we must never forget our date of baptism. How many of us remember it? Just as we celebrate birthdays, we should not forget our spiritual birthday in Christ.

Finally, *this rebirth demands a new responsibility for vocation awareness.* Peter stresses in our Second Reading (Acts 10:34-38) that after Jesus was baptized, “God anointed ... [him] with the Holy Spirit and power [and] He went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil”. We too have been given this mission of Jesus. God declares in our First Reading (Is 42:1-4, 6-7): “*Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one [Elizabeth, Marylou, Tom, Larry, Carlos, Maria, etc] with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit I, the LORD, have called you ... I have grasped you by the hand; I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness*”. May the Lord of the harvest bless us with vocations, especially to the priesthood and the religious life. Amen.