

Homily - The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

Beloved, today we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord Jesus. Jesus accepted the baptism of John, though John tried to decline, saying: "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?" Jesus replied, "Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." What did he mean by this? We shall get to it below. It suffices now to state that Jesus was then baptized. What happened here? John's baptism was only a ritual purification; a sign of "repentance". But Christ had no sins to repent. His baptism anticipated His death and resurrection to save us. By being submerged, we can say, "He died and descended into the dead"; and coming out from the water, "He rose and reopened the door" for a new relationship with God (cf. Rom 6:3-5).

What we imply in the above is that Christ opened a new chapter. It was not simply the baptism of John that He received. His "baptism package" was unique. Though submerged in the waters like anyone else baptized by John, His baptism was more than that. While John played the part of submerging Him, God played the extraordinary part of anointing and manifesting Him as His Only Begotten Son. The submersion and the theophany should always be kept all together: St. Peter indicates this, proclaiming in our Second Reading (Acts 10:34-38): "You know ... what has happened all over Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power." This is a clear distinction: the baptism John administered lacked the "Holy Spirit" manifestation and the Father's testimony.

Certainly, we know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God from all eternity. Nevertheless, in time, as is evident in our Gospel passage (Mt 3:13-17), the occasion of His baptism was the first public attestation of Jesus as the Son of God: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Here, God presents His Only Son to the world. This is the definitive fulfillment of Isaiah's prophesy in the First Reading (Is 42:1-4, 6-7): "Thus says the LORD: Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit; He shall bring forth justice to the nations." Another point worth remarking is that Jesus is baptized before the beginning of His ministry, not at the middle or at the end. This shows that baptism is the "door" to other blessings and endowments in the New Dispensation of grace.

At this juncture, we now consider what Jesus meant by "to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus clearly was not simply referring to John's baptism; something higher was about to happen which will fulfill what John was doing. Yes! The 'unique' baptism Jesus received fulfilled what the baptism administered by John the Baptist envisaged: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16). In simple terms, Christ used the occasion of His baptism to inaugurate the Christian baptism. Thus, Christ's baptism is for our sake (cf. John 12:30). This

"Christian" baptism is where you and I come into this mystery. Before this time, technically, we could not become God's sons and daughters. It is through our baptism in Christ that we have been constituted as adopted son and daughters of God. This means that we have received new birth or rebirth; "born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). God is the Supreme Spirit; through baptism, He grants us His Spirit. Indeed, "that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). We begin to exist in the supernatural way having received the sanctifying grace of God.

Beloved, what does this new life mean to you? What premium do you place on it? Happiness and excitement characterize the expectation of a new born in the flesh. It is such an important landmark that it is celebrated yearly in the company of relations, friends and other close associates: 1 year old birthday ... ten years old... ... 40 years old ... 70 years old ... 100 years old, etc. We sing "Happy Birthday" and we present gifts to the celebrant. What a wonderful celebration of the culture of life, natural life. It is simply praiseworthy. Life, nevertheless, is not limited to the physical order; there is the more important side of life, namely, its supernatural dimension. Our baptism is beginning of the fulfillment of our personal salvation history. In this regard, we may ask, "How many people mark the date of baptism yearly? Or is it irrelevant? Consider the Church's practice: we celebrate not just the birth of Christ but also His baptism yearly.

Furthermore, here, I will like to give an impromptu examination: How many of you remember the date of your baptism? I personally know the year of my baptism but I only made reference to my baptismal card to ascertain the date while I was writing this homily. Most of the time while preparing prospective couples for marriage, it becomes clear that most, if not all, are not acquainted with the date of their baptism. Can we conclude that it is not really relevant to remember it? I know an Archbishop who delayed the ordination of his candidates for the Priesthood. He had asked them the date of their baptism and none of them remembered it. Accordingly, their ordination was shifted from July to the last day (December 31st) of that year. The challenge, therefore, is that we reflect deeply on the meaning and significance of our baptism and why it is worth celebrating; a date never to be forgotten or overlooked again.

Finally, we pray that the Good Lord will give us the grace to understand our privileged status: a people cleansed from Original sin, endowed with sanctifying grace, made children of God, members of the Church and heirs with Christ to the Kingdom of God. May God help us always to cherish these privileged entitlements through Christ our Lord.