

Baptism of the Lord - C  
Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11;  
Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7;  
Luke 3:15-16, 21-22  
Little Flower - 1/13/13

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. As I mentioned last week, in earlier times, the Solemnity of the Epiphany celebrated three mysteries: the visit of the magi, Jesus' baptism by John, and the wedding feast of Cana. A separate feast of the Baptism of the Lord was only established in 1955.

Today's reading from Isaiah prophesies the role of John the Baptist: "*A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the LORD*" God then tells Israel "*to cry out and say to the cities of Judah: Here is your God! Here comes with power the Lord God.*"

Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled at the baptism of Jesus. First, John proclaimed that one mightier than he was coming who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Second, after Jesus was baptized, "*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.'*"

This passage is extremely significant. First, the heart of Old Testament revelation is that God is one and personal. The heart of New Testament revelation is that the one God is a trinity of persons. The baptism of Jesus revealed the Trinity: the Father affirmed Jesus as his Son, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him. Second, the Jews of Jesus' time believed that when the Messiah came, he would be recognized and accepted by the Jewish religious leaders. Obviously, Jesus was not. However, ultimately it would not matter because Jesus was validated by God himself both at his baptism and transfiguration.

The second part of today's reading from Titus reminds us that we are saved through "*the bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,*" in other words, by our baptism. Baptism is one of the pastoral challenges facing the Church today. When parents present their children for baptism, they and the godparents commit themselves to live and practice the Catholic faith and to make sure their children live and practice their faith.

This sometimes creates a dilemma for priests. Before baptizing an infant, the Church requires that there "be the founded hope that the infant will be brought up in the Catholic religion" [CIC, Canon 868, §1, 2°]. When parents are not practicing their faith, priests can reasonably ask if the children will really be raised as practicing, not just nominal, Catholics. In my experience, most priests will baptize infants and small children of registered parishioners. They believe that delaying or refusing baptism will only alienate parents and often their extended families whereas a good experience of baptism can be a moment of grace that will lead the parents to become more active. From experience, they also know that parents often become more active when their children are ready to enter school or to prepare for First Communion.

My brothers and sisters, Catholic parents sometimes face dilemmas raising their children Catholic as well. Some parents who attend Mass every Sunday struggle with whether to insist that their older, and sometimes even younger, children attend Mass. At what age should children living at home be allowed to choose, or should they be allowed to choose? Some parents conclude it is easier not to fight over it. Others conclude that if children are forced, it will only alienate them from faith. However, in *The American Paradox*, David G. Myers wrote, "Belief follows behavior"<sup>1</sup> He would argue that practicing religion, in fact, deepens faith.

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<sup>1</sup>David G. Myers, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 285.