

## Christmas.Baptism of the Lord

1.12.25

I remember an old family photo of my mom, my youngest brother, and me. The three of us are huddled together as that brother was about to be baptized. Throughout the ceremony, my little brother was uncharacteristically quiet for a newborn. Just as the water was to be poured on his head, my grandmother rushed up to my mom and told her to pinch my little brother to make him cry. Even as a 10-year-old, I thought that request was just weird.

My mom ignored her mother-in-law and the baptism continued. Throughout it all, my brother never even stirred. Following the ceremony, I asked my mom about Nana's odd request. My mom said that my grandmother was from Ireland. And it was her understanding that a baby needed to cry at their baptism in order to get the evil out. I knew baptism freed us from Original Sin, but this "getting the evil out" was not something I was aware of.

My mom simply said that baptism was so much more than what Nana understood. I didn't know it then, but I think that experience and the conversation I had with my mom led to a lifelong interest in the sacraments and the deeper meaning experienced as we celebrate those sacraments.

Today, we celebrate the baptism of the Lord. Being sinless, Jesus didn't need to be baptized. He was probably adhering to the tradition of the time where the followers of a particular teacher or prophet necessarily underwent a baptism of sorts. For John the Baptist, the tradition that Jesus was following, baptism meant turning away from sin. It was a way to commit oneself to follow God more closely.

The word "baptism" literally means being immersed in something. For Christians, baptism means being immersed into Christ. It means being united with Christ in an intimate and life-long way. The words of St. Paul in his *Letter to the Romans* capture that sentiment. In chapter 6 of that *Letter*, St. Paul says, "...are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life. For if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection" (Romans 6:3-5).

Baptism joins us to Christ. It immerses us into the Body of Christ. As such, it is the first sacrament of initiation into the Catholic Church. In baptism we experience forgiveness of sin. This sacrament "gets all the evil out" as Nana would say. But it is so much more, as my mom said.

That is why in the Catholic Church, we baptize babies. It is an age-old practice that has its roots in the *Acts of the Apostles*. Just as we have babies participate in family traditions like our Christmas observances and don't exclude babies from those traditions because they don't understand, so too we baptize – immersing little ones into the person of Jesus and his Church from their earliest days. The parents provide and nurture the faith in that child just as they provide and nurture in that child the qualities of love, support, good manners, and morals from their earliest days, even when they don't quite understand those qualities.

Learning about the faith and practicing that faith are not just for little ones. Our initiation into the Church doesn't end with our Confirmation. Growth in our faith is a life-long endeavor. As such we are all called to continually grow in our faith which began on the day of our baptism. So often we think that when we receive the sacraments, they are static experiences which end when we walk out of church. But the sacraments continue to affect us day after day.

In the sacrament of baptism the primary symbol used, of course, is water. In that sacrament water is usually poured over the forehead of the person being baptized or they are immersed in a pool of water. As that happens, the Church commends us to think about all the things which water does or represents. Water cleanses, it purifies, it heals, it nourishes, it builds up (like a river delta which deposits life-giving soil and silt to farmlands), and it tears down (as we see with floods, reminding us of dying to old ways). The waters of baptism do all these things in us and to us. And those baptismal waters continue to affect

us to this day. In you and me, the grace of those baptismal waters cleanses us, purifies us, heals us, nourishes our faith, builds us up, and helps us to turn away from what is evil. When we water plants or a garden, those waters seep down into the soil and nurture that plant, long after we've turned off the garden hose or put away the watering can. It takes hours, days, and sometimes weeks until that water is absorbed into the plant by its roots helping it to grow and bear fruit. That's what happens to us in baptism. Our bodies and souls are continually absorbing the grace and blessings of that sacrament long after that sacrament took place. And that grace and those blessings enable us to grow and bear fruit as God's children.

Following the account of Jesus' baptism in each of the synoptic gospels – that is, Matthew, Mark, and Luke – we hear about Jesus heading into the desert and being tempted by the devil. We are reminded in that part of the gospel that with every blessing we receive from God there will be an accompanying challenge. In baptism we are blessed, refreshed, and strengthened. We become like Christ and share in his Kingdom through that sacrament. Like Christ, we will also be challenged and tempted. But as Christ resisted those temptations and overcame those challenges, we too are given the grace to do the same.

As you leave church today and bless yourself with the holy water that reminds you of your baptism, give thanks to God for the many good things he has given you in that sacrament – forgiveness, unity with him and his Church, the strength to resist temptation, and the power to serve as his disciple. May what God has generously given to you in baptism, be what you generously offer to others.

Amen? Amen!