

Homily for the Baptism of the Lord, Year C

January 9, 2022
St. Bavo Parish
Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 (Here is my chosen one, with whom I am pleased.)

Responsory: Psalm 29 (The Lord will bless his people with peace.)

Second Reading: Acts 10:34-38 (Whoever fears God and acts uprightly is acceptable to him.)

Gospel: Luke 3:15-16, 21-22 (The baptism of Jesus.)

Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River is one of the few events recorded in all four gospels. That fact alone suggests that baptism was a key moment in Jesus' life. However, one might legitimately wonder why Jesus needed to be baptized. After all, John said that the purpose of his baptism was to *cleanse people of their sins*, thus preparing them for the Lord's coming. What meaning could this ritual possibly have for *Jesus*, who was entirely unstained by sin?

Actually, the meaning of Jesus' baptism, both for him personally and for those who witnessed the event, is very much in dispute, even among the gospel writers. If you compare their four accounts, you will find disagreement on some key points. For example, it's not clear whether *everybody* saw the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus and heard the voice from heaven proclaiming him to be the Son of God, or whether those were signs directed only at Jesus himself. However, all four evangelists agree that the Holy Spirit *did*, in fact, descend upon Jesus, and God the Father *did* affirm his special, paternal relationship with Jesus. They also agree that Jesus' baptism marked the end of his private life in Nazareth and the beginning of his public ministry as a teacher, healer, miracle worker, and proclaimer of the Good News of the Kingdom. All of these factors distinguish Jesus' baptism from the thousands of other baptisms that John performed in the Jordan River. Those details which are unique to Jesus' baptism also provide insight into the effects of *our Christian baptism* today.

John foreshadowed Christian baptism when he testified that the Messiah would offer a baptism far more powerful than his own. He said, "I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming... He will baptize you with the *Holy Spirit* and fire." John was admitting the limited scope of his own ministry. His baptism was a purification ritual, which expressed the repentant sinner's commitment to a new way of life, in accord with God's will. Although Christian baptism retains the physical symbolism of washing with water, we believe that our cleansing goes much deeper, touching the very core of our sinful human condition and removing even the stain of "original sin." We also believe that the effects of Christian baptism go well beyond just the forgiveness of sins and the purification of the soul.

Remember the two epiphanies that took place *after* Jesus came up out of the water. First, the Holy Spirit descended upon him, and then the voice of the Father affirmed that Jesus is his beloved Son, with whom he is well pleased. This sounds a lot like Isaiah's prophecy, in the first reading, in which the Lord says to his faithful servant that he is well pleased with him and has put his spirit upon him. However, in this case, the Father was affirming and *revealing* what was already true of Jesus *before* his baptism. The Divine Son had always possessed the Holy Spirit and was always pleasing to the Father, from the beginning of time. But now that he had

become incarnate in the person of Jesus, the Father publicly affirmed what others did not know about him. At the same time, he revealed what Christian baptism would do for all of us.

What was *revealed* about Jesus after he emerged from the baptismal waters is what *happens* to all of us through the sacrament. We are forever changed by our baptism. When the Holy Spirit descends upon *us*, it takes possession of us and remains with us for the rest of our lives. The Holy Spirit is God's gift of self, his abiding presence within us. That gift can never be lost. Hence, the Church is right to teach that baptism leaves an "indelible mark on the soul." For the same reason, the Catholic Church never *re-baptizes* anyone. Unlike other sacraments, when it comes to baptism, we don't worry about whether the ritual was performed correctly by an authorized minister. All that matters is whether water was somehow poured over the person three times as someone said, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." That simple action and those simple words are enough for the Holy Spirit to enter in and transform a person into a new creation.

The other sign that appeared after Jesus emerged from the water is the voice from heaven, which proclaimed, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." Again, in the case of Jesus, the voice of the Father revealed the special relationship that *already existed* between these two Persons of the Holy Trinity, a fact that had remained hidden from the public until that moment. But, in the case of *our* baptism, a *new* relationship is formed between the newly baptized and our Heavenly Father. Through this ritual, God claims us as his adopted sons and daughters and declares that he is well pleased with us, too. Although we don't hear that affirmation audibly, we know by faith that God imparts a special dignity to the newly baptized, symbolized by the person being clothed with a white garment. In the explanatory rites that follow, the newly baptized is exhorted to bring that garment unstained into eternal life. In other words, we're told to recognize the extraordinary dignity that has been granted to us by the grace of the sacrament, and cherish it for the rest of our lives.

Baptism also marks a new beginning for us, as it did for Jesus. Baptism is our entry into the sacramental life of the Church and the fount from which all other blessings flow. It is through *baptism* that we are called to follow Christ as his disciples and participate in his saving mission. As Jesus was anointed by the Father, we are anointed with chrism and invited to share in Christ's threefold mission as Priest, Prophet and King. In addition to this baptismal call that is common to all Christians, each of us will eventually hear a summons to follow Christ in a more explicit way, a *vocational* call which leads us to some form of service to the Lord. Just as Jesus found that his life after baptism was no longer his own, so we also discover that we are men and women on a mission. God, who has claimed us as his own and raised us up to a new dignity, wishes for us to serve him. It's up to us to discern *how* to do that. As we embrace our call, we discover *on a daily basis* how the power of the Holy Spirit makes the grace of our baptism flourish within us and bear fruit in the world.