

The Baptism of the LORD

Here is your God!

Dear brothers and sisters,

Last Sunday, we celebrated the great feast of Epiphany and we noted the three mysteries that Epiphany celebrates. Which are: The star leading the Magi to the infant Christ; the Lord changing water into wine for the wedding feast and submitting himself to be baptized by John in the river Jordan to bring us salvation. The goal of all three mysteries is to tell us who Christ is.

The feast today centers on one of these mysteries, and that is the baptism of the Lord. The baptism from its Greek root, Βαπτίζω means immersion for the purpose of cleansing from sins. Our Lord being God and therefore, sinless does not need baptism. He nevertheless accepted to be baptized in solidarity with us in his capacity as the representative of humanity. Through that gesture, the effect of sin in our origins otherwise known as original sin is neutralized. It follows then that once, we receive Baptism, the original sin and actual sins are wiped away just as the flood wiped away the sinful world during the time of Noah.

Before our Lord came to take away our sins and reconcile us to the Father, we were like exiles. We were still under the reign of sin. This is why the passage today from Isaiah is so *ad rem*. “Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her service is at an end, her guilt is expiated.” (Isaiah 40:1-2). The original context of this prophecy was the return of the people of God from Babylonian exile in 538 BC. However, that return is only a foreshadow of the return of all of humanity to God after the shipwreck of the original sin. The baptism of the Lord in a sense is an acorn or overture of the entire salvific work our Lord did in order to bring man back to God. Hence, pondering on the immensity of this august gift over the centuries, the Church came to this understanding,

The baptism of Jesus is on his part the acceptance and inauguration of his mission as God's suffering Servant. He allows himself to be numbered among sinners; he is already "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world". Already he is anticipating the "baptism"

of his bloody death. Already he is coming to "fulfill all righteousness", that is, he is submitting himself entirely to his Father's will: out of love he consents to this baptism of death for the remission of our sins. The Father's voice responds to the Son's acceptance, proclaiming his entire delight in his Son. The Spirit whom Jesus possessed in fullness from his conception comes to "rest on him".²³⁶ Jesus will be the source of the Spirit for all mankind. At his baptism "the heavens were opened"- the heavens that Adam's sin had closed - and the waters were sanctified by the descent of Jesus and the Spirit, a prelude to the new creation (CCC 536).

God undertook this work by himself as the Scripture testifies, "It was not a messenger or an angel, but he himself who saved them. Because of his love and pity he redeemed them himself, Lifting them and carrying them all the days of old" (Isaiah 63:9). This ties in with the question in the hearts of the people of John the Baptist's time. The Word of God says, "The people were filled with expectation and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Christ." (Luke 3 :15). In addition to John's answer that he is not the Christ, he says, "I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire." (Luke 3:16).

The Father, on his part, gave the answer about the identity of Christ in a memorable way.

The heavens were opened and the voice of the Father thundered: This is my beloved Son, listen to him (Mark 9:7). This in effect reveals that the one who undertook baptism and the entire work of redemption of man is the beloved Son of God who is himself God. Here we see the fulfillment of the theme of this homily, "Here is your God." In the baptism of the Lord, the Trinity in one God is revealed. The voice from heaven was that of the Father, the one who descended on the Son in the form a dove was the Holy Spirit. The one who being baptized and on whom the Holy Spirit descended was the Son. The Baptism of the Lord inaugurates his public ministry. "The Baptism of the Lord at the Jordan is the anticipation of the his baptism of blood on the cross, and it is the symbol of the entire sacramental activity, by which the Redeemer will bring about the salvation of humanity"(Pope Benedict XVI, Baptism of the Lord). The feast of Baptism of the Lord is the most ancient after Easter.

St Hippolytus summed the mystery of baptism of the Lord in this way.

The Father of immortality sent his immortal Son and Word into the world; he came to us men to cleanse us with water and the Spirit. To give us a new birth that would make our bodies and souls immortal, he breathed into us the spirit of life and armed us with incorruptibility. Now if we become immortal, we shall also be divine; and if we become divine after rebirth in baptism through water and the Holy Spirit, we shall also be coheirs with Christ after the resurrection of the dead. Therefore, in a herald's voice I cry: Let peoples of every nation come and receive the immortality that flows from baptism. This is the water that is linked to the Spirit, the water that irrigates Paradise, makes the earth fertile, gives growth to plants, and brings forth living creatures (Sermon on Epiphany, Water and Spirit, attributed to St Hippolytus, Office of the Readings, January 8, 2019).

St Gregory Nazienzen looking at Baptism from the point of view of a beginning of a new creation, wrote.

John is baptizing when Jesus draws near. Perhaps he comes to sanctify his baptizer; certainly he comes to bury sinful humanity in the waters. He comes to sanctify the Jordan for our sake and in readiness for us; he who is spirit and flesh comes to begin a new creation through the Spirit and water(St Gregory Nazienzen, Sermon on the Baptism of Christ, The Feast of Baptism, Office of the Reading, 2019).

What shall we do? Today let us do honor to Christ's baptism and celebrate this feast in holiness. Be cleansed entirely and continue to be cleansed. Nothing gives such pleasure to God as the conversion and salvation of men, for whom his every word and every revelation exist. He wants you to become a living force for all mankind, lights shining in the world. You are to be radiant lights as you stand beside Christ, the great light, bathed in the glory of him who is the light of heaven.

In descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus, the Father gives the Holy Spirit again to the Son, though the Son possesses the Spirit as his own, in order that we may receive the Spirit in Christ.

The only-begotten Son receives the Spirit, but not for his own advantage, for the Spirit is his, and is given in him and through him.... He receives the Holy Spirit to renew our nature in its entirety and to make it whole again, for in becoming man he took our entire nature to himself (St Cyril of Alexandria). Since the feast today concludes the Christmas season, let us then let us wrap up this homily with a prayer. "Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask you to stay. Close by me forever, and love me, I pray. Bless all the dear children in thy tender care, And fit us for heaven, to live with thee there."(William J. Kirkpatrick, 1838-1921).