

Feast of the Lord's Baptism

Introduction

I want to thank Fr. Jim Keisel and all of you for welcoming me so graciously. Soon after I began serving as Archbishop of Baltimore, I resolved that I would offer a Sunday Mass in the 150 parishes of the Archdiocese. In the words of the poet, Robert Frost, I have “miles to go before I sleep”; I still have 50 parishes to visit and it is a wonderful journey of love. It is in that spirit that I come among you this evening. I am aware, of course, that this remains a challenging time for this community of faith. It is never really easy when two communities of faith are joined as one, even with all the good will in the world. I know this will continue to take time, much prayer, much patience and love. I thank Fr. Keisel and I thank all of you for your good-heartedness, your generosity, and, indeed, for all the hard work that continues apace.

It turns out that my visit falls on the feast of the Lord's Baptism. This should be an important day of joy for every Christian because it is a feast that reminds us how we became followers of Christ and members of Christ's Body, the Church. It is also a feast that speaks to us of the unity that should be ours in Christ, and of a love that is stronger than sin and more powerful than death.

Day of Re-Birth

If we think about it for just a moment, we'll realize that, unlike ourselves, the Lord did not need to be baptized for the remission of original sin or personal sins. Jesus was and is “the Father's well-beloved Son” – utterly righteous and free of sin. Yet becoming one of us at his birth, so to speak, he got in line with sinful humanity and submitted to John's Baptism of Repentance. Here we see the Christ of the Beatitudes revealed: He came to the Jordan poor in spirit; meek and lowly, thirsting for holiness.

And while Jesus did not need forgiveness, he knew we would need it. Sharing our human nature fully, he knows what was in the human heart. He knows our weakness, our proneness to sin, our capacity to stray. So too the Lord knows that, deep down, all of us desire God's mercy; we're seeking happiness, friendship with God and with others, peace in our hearts. He understands that without love, our

lives make no sense. And so the Lord goes down into the waters of the Jordan for us and for salvation and in that moment is revealed as the Father's beloved Son. It is from this event that we trace the beginnings of the Sacrament of Baptism which is the foundation of the Church's mission to preach the Gospel, and, at the same time, the foundation of life in Christ and our membership in the Church. Truly, this is a day for giving thanks to God for the gift of our Baptism.

Remembering Our Baptism

Every Sunday, in the Creed, the Church invites us to remember our Baptism; we say: "I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins." We speak those words every Sunday, but on this feast of the Lord's Baptism, let us stop and think about what they mean for our lives, beginning with the expression, "I confess."

Here the word "confess" does not mean the same thing as confessing our sins but instead means that we are solemnly declaring something to be true, and not just true but tremendously important in our lives, yours and mine. Pope Francis calls Baptism the identity card of the Christian, a re-birth certificate, signifying and bringing about our re-birth into everlasting life. More than once he has asked his audiences if they knew the day of their Baptism. He wasn't just asking a rhetorical question; he asked for a show of hands. When only a few hands in his vast audiences are raised, he gives them homework, namely, to find out the day when they were baptized. Pope Francis is reminding us that the day of our baptism is even more important than our birthday... for it was on that day that we were reborn by water and the Holy Spirit so as to share the eternal life which Jesus won for us by his death and resurrection. When a child is baptized, the parents and godparents are asked, "What do you desire for your child?" – And, they answer, "Baptism." As a young priest I used to think that was a sort of "pro-forma" question but now I realize that it is meant to mean something deeper. It's really Jesus asking us, as he did in the Gospel, "What are you looking for? What is the deepest desire of your heart?" In expressing our belief in the Sacrament of Baptism we are saying, in effect, to Jesus: "To whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life!" We are professing our faith in Baptism as the door to faith and eternal life and that our faith and hope of eternal life deeply renews and purifies our humanity, expands our capacity to love, and gives us the foundation we need to live as the Lord's disciples, as loving members of his Church, and as his witnesses in the world.

And what we confess is “One Baptism.” This refers to St. Paul’s expressio, “One Lord, one faith, one Baptism” (Eph. 4:5). If Baptism is the beginning of a life-long journey towards God, we might ask ourselves, “Do we really want to make this journey by ourselves? Do we want to be lonely wayfarers stumbling somehow toward the infinite? Or do we not want companions and friends along the way, men and women who have opened their hearts to the same Lord, to the same faith, and to the same hope, as we have? And is it not the case that the Church’s mission to spread the Gospel is more credible when people can look at us and our church communities and see a oneness and a joy that transcends ideology, style, personal likes and dislikes – but focuses instead on the love of God that has the power to overwhelm our sins and in turn to illuminate us so that along with Christ we are light to the world? Not for nothing did Jesus pray that we would be one “so that the world may believe” – and the foundation of our oneness is not merely our good will but the gift of Baptism. It is Baptism that makes each of us a member of the Body of Christ, unique and unrepeatable, but a contributor to the Church’s unity and vitality. So it is that we confess “One Baptism.”

And then there is a third phrase, “For the forgiveness of sins.” In the Sacrament of Baptism, all sins are taken away, including original sin and all of our personal sins. In being immersed into the Lord’s death and resurrection, we encounter a love “stronger than sin and more powerful than death” – and more than that, this greatest of all loves begins to dwell in our hearts, and marks us out as followers of Christ and members of his Church. We might think it would nice if after Baptism we no longer dealt with sin but, of course, that is not the case, because our human nature remains weak. So when we sin, we must continually renew our Baptism by asking forgiveness of our sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which in a sense, is like a “second baptism” not with water but with tears. Our Baptism, the principal of new life, does not wear out because the Lord never tires of forgiving us of our sins, be they great or small. I always feel a deep joy when I go to Confession and receive forgiveness; it is an experience of returning to the very root of the Christian life, to Baptism. And it is a powerful testimony to the enduring love of Jesus which I always experience as a merciful love.

Conclusion

So on this day, when we behold Christ’s being baptized in the Jordan, may we be one

in confessing the Name of God the Father's well beloved Son, and together 'confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins.' "Let us go forward in this way, joyfully, because life should be lived with the joy of Jesus Christ." (Pope Francis) May the Lord bless us and keep us always in his love.