

Baptism of the Lord Year "A"

January 11-12, 2014

Readings: Isaiah 42: 1-4, 6-7; Acts 10: 34-38; Matthew 3: 13-17

Before the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council, time was marked for a large part of the year in terms of the number of weeks after Epiphany. Today's Feast of the Baptism of the Lord is the same as the former Octave of Epiphany. The Baptism of the Lord was the second of the three mysteries of the Epiphany, after the manifestation to the Magi about whom I spoke last Sunday.

But this day also serves as a fitting time in which to speak of the vocational call that flows from Baptism. A calling from God to a state in life is one of the great mysteries of our faith and it manifests itself in various ways. When working with couples preparing for Matrimony, not a few speak about how they knew they had found their future spouse early on. A few have even spoken of their own movement towards marriage as a 'calling' of sorts from God.

Our first reading today spoke of the Lord's message to the servant: "I, the Lord, have called you...I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people, a light for the nations..." As faithful members of the laity, do you sense that God has also formed you, entrusting to you the special work for which He has called you? Your fruitful reception of Baptism and Confirmation has enabled you to see your daily life as a response to that Baptismal calling.

A religious vocation is also a mystery. No two Vocation stories are the same, but what is constant is the willingness of the Lord to call those whom He chooses to the priesthood or religious life. I know firsthand that He does not call perfect men to the priesthood; we are flawed human beings, in need of God's sustaining grace. He does call young men who have a heart to serve, those who derive joy from bringing the saving truths of Jesus Christ to bear in the world,

a world hungry and thirsty for meaning, for substance, for answers to life's questions.

Some priests have been shy in calling forth others to consider the priesthood and religious life for fear of receiving a less than enthusiastic response, especially perhaps of late. Yet, I have every reason to believe that young men in this parish are being called to the priesthood, and I would say the same thing about religious life for some young women I have come to know as well.

The sacrament of Baptism, literally from the Greek “to *plunge or immerse*” is the fundamental sacrament of regeneration. Not only are we freed from sin and reborn as sons of God, but incorporated into the Church, we are made sharers in her mission. The pre-figurations of the Old Testament find their fulfillment in Christ Jesus. Notice that the public life of Jesus begins after his own Baptism. Surely he did not need Baptism in the way we need it. It did not remit sin, for there was no sin to remit.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us that Jesus' gesture is a **manifestation (an epiphany) of his self-emptying**, so beautifully described in the Philippians Canticle. The Spirit who had hovered over the waters of the first creation descended then on the Christ as a prelude of the new creation. An early 4th c. homily highlights this:

“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.¹

¹ (St. Gregory of Nazianzen, *Oratio 39 in Sancta Lumina*, 14-16, 20)

Indeed, our Baptism ought to have a visible effect in our lives. Baptism may be the sacrament of faith, but faith needs a community of believers in which those acts of faith are fostered and developed. This begins with the family and including the Church. We are not “lone rangers” in the Church; Jesus founded the Church as a community of believers, and not as a collection of individual relationships. You parents will have something to say about how well the gifts of Baptism are called forth in the lives of the your children entrusted to your care.

As the Christmas season officially draws to a close for one more year, perhaps with a touch of melancholy for such a joyous season ending, we are better prepared now, having experienced the joy of Christ’s birth, to go about the challenging, yet rewarding work of bringing the Gospel into the world. Our own Baptism remains the key, the indelible spiritual sign that consecrates us and all people for Christian worship. Come, let us adore.