

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord
January 10-11, 2015
Readings: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Acts 10:34-38; Mark 1:7-11

Perhaps you have seen the people line up in Minneapolis to jump into the lake in what is called the Polar Plunge. From January through March 16 Polar Bear Plunges take place across the state. They are sponsored by Minnesota Law Enforcement and raise awareness as well as \$3 million in donations for the Special Olympics Minnesota. It is all for a good cause and the photos give people from warm weather states more reasons to think that we are crazy to live here. Who in their right mind would plunge into the depths of 32-degree water?

Plunge is actually an apt description of the act, and in fact most closely approximates the root meaning of our word *baptize*. From the Greek, it means literally to “plunge” or “immerse.” “The ‘plunge’ into the water symbolizes the catechumen’s burial into Christ’s death, from which he rises up by resurrection with him, as “a new creature.”¹ Through the Holy Spirit, Baptism is a bath that purifies, justifies, and sanctifies.²

While full immersion baptism was an ancient practice in the Church, most baptisms today tend to be less dramatic than that. The threefold pouring of water over the person’s head is also of ancient origin as some of the earliest Christian mosaics depict in the catacombs and ancient baptistries.

“I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” These are the life changing words, the words that once and for all acknowledge that we belong to the Lord– we are His, and no one else’s, and Christ has called us and chosen us to be members of His Body, the Church.

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, para. # 1214

² Ibid., para. # 1227, Cf. *1 Cor* 6:11; 12:13.

Earlier this week, I sought permission to look into the Baptism Registry at my home parish, where I could see the record of my own baptism in the parish books. As I quickly glanced at the names of the others baptized within the same few weeks listed on the same page, I recognized several names of my classmates.

I found out that I was the 89th child baptized that year and that I was baptized along with some other babies on the same day. The priest who baptized me and I have always shared a unique bond based on this singular event. He was assigned to my home parish just for one year, right after he was ordained.

Forgive me if this all sounds quite trivial to you, but in point of fact, our baptism was the day during which sanctifying grace entered into our souls for the very first time. One early writer in the Church described Baptism as follows:

“Baptism is God’s most beautiful and magnificent gift.... We call it gift, grace, anointing, enlightenment, garment of immortality, bath of rebirth, seal, and most precious gift.”³

Clearly, Jesus did not need to receive baptism for the remission of sins, for there was no sin to remit. He submitted to Baptism out of love for us, as a gesture manifesting his self-emptying love for all of humanity.

Baptism is also the time at which our parents formally name us in the Church– it is the first part of the ceremony. Just as young people face tremendous outside pressure to be trendy—to a degree so too do new parents with respect to naming their children.

But there are some great new saint names– Gianna, Isabella and Bernadette are quite popular girls names. For boys, Francis is showing a comeback, as is Michael and William and Andrew.

³ Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church para. # 1216, citing Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 40, 3-4.

Names have meanings, and those meanings carry with them tremendous power. My own first name of John originates from the Hebrew and it means 'God is gracious'. Matthew means "the Lord's gift"; Margaret means 'pearl'; Teresa means 'one who reaps'; Sophia means 'wisdom' and so on.

The point is this. We tend to name people after important historical personages, after relatives (carrying on the family name), or after people to whom we look for inspiration. Understandably, the saints hold pride of place amongst faithful Catholics.

The Church proposes- she does not impose. The use of a Christian name for the first or middle name is worthy of your prayerful consideration. What is strictly forbidden is a name that would offend the Christian sensibility. Certainly, some names take on a character very peculiar to the times, and speak of certain generations. Others are ageless and withstand the test of time.

What is in a name? In point of fact, words are important; let us pray for the grace to respect the power inherent in our words in all types of settings, including that at the time of birth. Even our names provide witness to our beliefs.

As we close the Christmas season for this year, the occasion of the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord serves as a valuable reminder of the importance of our own Baptism as the primordial sacrament of our salvation. By respecting and protecting its central role in our lives, we can cooperate to help to build a civilization of love and truth.