

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord Year “A”

January 11-12, 2020

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

The Baptism of Jesus is another one of the examples of the various modes of manifestation included in the season of Christmas, part of the Epiphany cycle. 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 manifests itself in various ways.

Today’s first reading spoke of the Lord’s message to the servant, a passage that tradition sees as a foreshadowing of Jesus: “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, God has equally formed you, entrusting to you a 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. I am edified by powerful witness in the public square on behalf of the sanctity of Human Life as well as your outreach to the poor at Dorothy Day. These works flow directly from your Baptismal calling.

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 children of God, but we are incorporated into the Church, made sharers in her mission. The pre-figurations of the Old Testament find their fulfillment in Christ Jesus. The public life of Jesus begins after his own Baptism. 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. So too should our Baptism have a tangible effect in our lives.

As the sacrament of faith, Baptism necessitates a stable community of believers in which those acts of faith are fostered. This begins with the family and includes the Church, both parents as well as godparents. Parents are to seek baptism for their children in a timely manner after birth. The grace of God is beautifully manifest in infant baptism, when we gather to witness a baby being incorporated in the Body of Christ, the Church, freed from all stain of original sin.

The Church's legislation offers guidance here: "Parents are obliged to see that their infants are baptized within the first few weeks. As soon as possible after the birth, indeed even before it, they are to approach the parish priest to ask for the sacrament for their child, and to be themselves duly prepared for it."¹

We conduct a Baptismal class for first time parents so that they are versed in the beautiful theology of Baptism and gain appreciation for the seriousness with which the Church approaches the sacrament. Far from a mere "photo op," it is the most important day of their spiritual lives. While I would not refuse a baptism to those who earnestly seek it, I do have a pastoral duty to ensure that the sacrament is properly understood and that the parents both understand and have the intention to follow through on the promises that they make during the ceremony.

Sponsors (or godparents) play a key role in witnessing to a fully lived Catholic life. "Only one sponsor is required, and the maximum number of sponsors is two, in which case they must both be Catholics, and one male and one female."² Godparents must: (a) be Catholic (b) have been fully initiated (including Confirmation) (c) ordinarily be 16 years of age (d) must be living a life consistent with their own baptismal vows. Simple on the face of it, but in fact it is asking of baptismal godparents that they be active in their Catholic faith.

¹ See Code of Canon Law # 867 §1

² Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis Clergy Bulletin for Baptism, paragraph #17, (revised on 10 November 2011).

Parents should be diligent in considering potential sponsors for this important role and are encouraged to think ahead.³ Good theology combined with pastoral practice takes all these particulars into consideration, and please know that the “rules” surrounding Baptism in reality are there to protect and highlight its significance in the life of each one of us. It is always a great joy to celebrate this sacrament.

As the Christmas season officially draws to a close for one more year having experienced the joy of Christ’s birth, we hope we are better prepared 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.

³ Ibid., “A baptized person who belongs to a non-Catholic ecclesial community is not to participate except together with a Catholic sponsor and then only as a witness of the baptism (canon 874, §2). If there is only one Catholic godparent, the Church permits a non-Catholic Christian to serve as a “Christian witness.” The Catholic sponsor’s name appears in the official registry.