

Homily on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

Baptism calls us all to sainthood.

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, which Matthew, Mark, and Luke all designate as the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Why did Jesus subject himself to baptism in the first place? What did he hope to gain? He seems to have had at least three reasons in mind: first, to demonstrate unity and solidarity with the human race; second, to sanctify baptism, washing away our sins and giving us the grace to follow him; and third, to fulfill righteousness, infusing baptism with divine power and meaning.

Regarding the first point of unity, in being baptized, Jesus shows solidarity with the whole human race, setting aside personal exemption and becoming one with us. The redeemer of humanity entered into the fullness of not only humanity itself, but all our human experience. Other than birth, this experience is most rooted in baptism. It is simply the most important rite of passage that we have. Baptism is our front door to heaven, opening up the floodgates of grace and equipping us to fully participate in the sacramental life of the church. God models what we are invited to do by first doing it himself, showing us how to gain eternal life as saints.

I best relate the second point of sanctification through my own experience. Before I was even Catholic, I felt called to a vocation. I knew that baptism, which I would receive in the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, was something I had to undergo. Like a man lost in the desert I was thirsting for it. I understood the point of unity, and knew that what Christ had modeled for all people, I would have to likewise enact. Yet sanctification and having the grace to follow him was foremost in my mind,

for I understood that grace would eventually materialize into a clear path of service. We all have this vocational calling, this longing for holiness, for wholeness. We all want to feel complete, and when we follow after God through baptism, he reveals our vocations to us – how we are to be and act in the world.

The third point, fulfilling righteousness and being infused with divine power and meaning, means being spiritually effective in producing holiness. Modeled by Christ himself, baptism allows us to be in sacramental union with him, possessing the grace to follow him and make a profound difference in the world. We will not necessarily know what that difference will look like in advance, but when we follow God in ministry, we participate in building a mighty legacy, becoming part of church history in our own little corners of the world.

Baptism empowers us to accomplish extraordinary tasks. These will sometimes involve working in ministries such as food banks, clothing drives, immigrants' rights, women's and children's shelters, or against human trafficking. They may at times be more interpersonal, where we find ourselves simply being present with someone, listening and giving comfort. Whatever our ministries may be, we are all equally called to holiness; all called to ministry, all called to be saints.

That is what baptism is all about – becoming a saint. Whether priests, religious, or laity, whether single or married, the love of God is for all of us to embody and share. Know that while we can trust God to sanctify us, also know that we cannot predict how our lives will unfold as we walk the path of sainthood. The types of ministries we are doing now may be different than what we are called to in the future. Part of being a saint means staying open to God by remaining willing to learn new ways of being.

As we begin a new calendar year, let us ask God what new beginnings he is calling us to. Are we engaged in activities that have taken us as far as they can? Even if not called into different types of activities, what new perspectives can we adopt? Can we be more openminded with the people in our lives? Is there anything we can learn to help us be more present to God, ourselves, and others? Baptism calls us into a sanctifying union with God that infuses us with divine power and meaning. Let us ask God what this means to us, and seek his will accordingly throughout the new year.