

**BAPTISM OF THE LORD – C (January 10, 2010)**  
**Fr. Jerry Kopacek**

The Christmas season comes to its conclusion today as we celebrate the feast of our Lord's baptism in the River Jordan; we will begin Ordinary Time this coming week until we come to Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent in mid-February. This feast often raises the question: why was Jesus baptized? Did he need that sacrament? We need to remember that this was not the sacrament of baptism that we celebrate now—the sacrament did not come into play until after Jesus' death and resurrection. In any event, Jesus certainly never sinned and so there would not have been any need for him to be baptized for that cleansing purpose. Instead, Jesus' baptism served as a formal beginning of his public life and ministry.

Nevertheless, this feast does give us a good opportunity for a brief refresher course on the importance and the power of the sacrament of baptism that Jesus gave us. And maybe that is a good place to start: to recall that Jesus explicitly established this sacrament. At the end of Matthew's gospel and before Jesus ascended into heaven, he told his apostles: "Go, make disciples of all the nations... baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." And in the gospel of John, Jesus told Nicodemus that no one can enter into the kingdom of God without being begotten, or born again, of water and the Holy Spirit. It is always a joy to celebrate the sacrament of baptism—whether the adults at the Easter Vigil, or the babies and other youngsters throughout the year. You know, of course, that we often celebrate baptisms during the weekend Masses; it's a great family celebration, being in awe once again at the miracle of new life, and being delighted to see yet another "cutest little baby ever". And if you would ever dare to doubt that, those proud parents and grandparents will be sure to set you straight! It's also fun to try to get that little guest of honor to smile for me—it's a guaranteed way to get me wrapped around their little finger...

Back to those gospel references—they highlight two especially important things about baptism. First, it necessarily involves the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That is how Jesus told the apostles to baptize; that is why the Church has been doing so ever since. It is also enlightening to remember how the Trinity was involved in Jesus' own baptism: it was God the Father's voice that came from heaven declaring Jesus, God the Son, as his beloved Son, as God the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove.

The other important thing about baptism for our purposes now is the importance and necessity of water. John baptized Jesus in the river; each of us was baptized in water. And we are reminded of that physical reality every time we walk into this or any other Catholic church—we dip our fingers into the holy water font and bless ourselves with the Sign of the Cross. This familiar and profoundly meaningful gesture reminds us of the fundamentals of the faith in which we were baptized: belief in God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and our salvation that comes to us from Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross. Blessing ourselves in this way is a holy and sacred action; the more we keep in mind what it represents, the less likely we will be to let it become a quick reflex action like we're trying to shoo the flies away...

The celebration of baptism uses other signs and symbols; there are other 'things' involved that emphasize different aspects of the power of this sacrament. The baptismal candle, lit from the Easter candle, symbolizes the fact that the person has received the light of Christ. The baptismal garment is a visible expression of the fact that, in baptism, the person is 'clothed' in Christ, wrapped in his saving truth and love. The sacred chrism is used to anoint the newly-baptized, the oil being an ancient symbol of strength and so it shows the person being strengthened by the power of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection.

The effects of baptism are fundamental. For one thing, we receive the precious gift of sanctifying grace; we are 'born again' as adopted sons and daughters of God and brought into new life in Christ. As Jesus said, this rebirth is necessary for salvation; the Church continues to affirm that necessity while also

recognizing that baptism and its effects can come into effect in different ways (for example, baptism by desire for those who have never had the chance to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ but who seek the truth and do God's will the best they can know how).

Another important effect of baptism is that it incorporates us into the Church, the Body of Christ. Thus, baptism can be considered the great sacrament of welcome into the universal Church and the local parish church as well. That's why it makes sense for us to baptize during Mass—you represent the worldwide Church in a visible way for that baby, that individual who is baptized, and that sacrament is the way they first become truly one of us. Because baptism brings about this incorporation into the Church, it establishes a bond of unity with all others who have been baptized—and so it is received only once. Thus, the Catholic Church recognizes the validity of baptisms done in the Protestant churches with water and in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. People coming into full communion with the Catholic Church from those other Christian communities are not baptized again; instead, they make their profession of the Catholic faith and receive the sacraments of confirmation and Eucharist.

The last effect of baptism I want to mention today is that it cleanses the person from sin, just as we use water in a bath or shower to cleanse our bodies. For those who have reached the age of reason, baptism removes the stain of original sin as well as all personal and actual sins committed; for infants, it removes original sin (since they are not yet capable of freely choosing to sin). We need to remember the reality of original sin—that unhappy legacy we have all received from that first sin, that first freely chosen act of disobedience of God that occurred at the beginning of human history. It has been said that original sin is the Catholic doctrine for which there is the most evidence for its existence...and so it is. Who could look at the world and see all the war, injustice, pride, immorality, cruelty and everything else...and not believe in original sin? Thanks be to God that he did not want to leave us in that state of sin that has infected the world ever since Adam and Eve! In giving us his Son who in turn gave us the sacraments—baptism being the first and foundational sacrament—God has made possible for us what we could not do for ourselves: come to eternal life and perfect joy in his kingdom.

But we have to cooperate with the grace that comes from baptism; it is not just a one-time thing. The fact that we are given the grace and privilege of baptism also involves the challenge and responsibility of living our baptism and pursuing the life of holiness and conversion to which Jesus calls us. Parents who have their children baptized must know that action doesn't end their obligations regarding their child's faith—rather, it is only the beginning. The baptismal rite makes that crystal clear in telling the parents and godparents: “On your part, you must make it your constant care to bring [this child] up in the practice of the faith. See that the divine life which God gives...is kept safe from the poison of sin, to grow always stronger in [their] heart.” An awesome and sobering challenge, to be sure. This assumes, of course, that the parents are living and practicing that faith as well; if not, how can they possibly live up to that critical responsibility? The godparents' role in helping the child grow in faith is also of great importance; that is why it is important (and in fact required) that at least one sponsor practices their Catholic faith and has received the sacrament of confirmation.

Pope St. Leo the Great had this to say: “Thanks to the sacrament of baptism, you have been turned into a temple of the Holy Spirit. Don't ever let it happen that you drive away so noble a guest by your evil deeds...for the price you were bought with is the blood of Christ.” A high price indeed. May we always be grateful for our baptism, determine to live the life to which it calls us, and never take this most precious gift for granted.