

January 13, 2019

11:30 a.m. Mass

St. Augustine Cathedral

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

Today, we bring this holy, joyful and very brief Christmas/Epiphany Season to a close. These three weeks that, I'm sure, have been filled with lots of family gatherings, gift giving (and perhaps lots of "gift exchanges" back to the stores), and probably an excess of good food and delicious meals, always flies by so quickly. And what takes us so long to get ready for, seems to be over in a flash. By this time, probably most of our Christmas decorations at home have been taken down and put away for another year, including our beautiful manger scenes. That's actually what I'll be doing this afternoon at my residence. And even though our beautiful manger scene here in our Cathedral is still up, this too will be put away following today's Mass.

While today's Feast of the Baptism of Jesus marks the end of the Christmas Season, today's Gospel shows us an adult Jesus, poised and ready to begin His public ministry. He chooses to do so by joining with those other people who were presenting themselves to Jesus' cousin, John, to be baptized in the Jordan River.

In the Gospel passage we just heard from St. Luke, Jesus' actual baptism is downplayed to such an extent that if we're not paying close attention, we might actually miss it. St. Luke simply says: "*all the people had been baptized, and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying....*". For St. Luke, the most important moment was not Jesus' baptism, but rather what followed after that: the dramatic response by the fullness of God as Jesus is launched into His public mission, and embraces His vocation as Savior of the World.

There aren't many places in the Gospels where we see the fullness of God present, or as we've come to understand God as the Blessed Trinity, as we do in this dramatic moment. Jesus, the Son, is praying, after having been baptized, and St. Luke tells us: "*Heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a Dove; and then a Voice (from the Father spoke) from Heaven.*" And with that, the Christmas event, and the time known as "the hidden life of Jesus", is completed; and, with His Baptism, the "work", the "mission" which Jesus came into the world to accomplish which will lead us to Easter, begins.

Of course, since Jesus had no sin, His Baptism was different from our Baptism. When He was born He was human in every way except for the fact that He was not conceived in sin; rather, He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the sinless Virgin, Mary! But in every other way, Jesus was born like us---and came for the purpose of being One with us! So, since He had no need to have Original Sin washed away, like every other human being---including all of us---needs to have done, why did Jesus need to be baptized? So that He could experience the very same thing that each and every one of us who are baptized experiences.

When we are baptized, we are cleansed of original sin and we become a child - son or daughter - of God. When Jesus was baptized, He didn't need to be cleansed of sin; but as we heard in today's Gospel, He received the same affirmation as we do, except in a much more dramatic way: the Heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a Dove, and the Voice of the Father said: *You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased.*"

Today, as we conclude the Christmas Season and celebrate Jesus' Baptism, we should reflect a bit on our own spiritual identity, as well as on our own mission in life.

The day that we were baptized is a moment of major importance in our spiritual lives. Assuming that most of us were baptized when we were infants, I doubt that we have much of a

recollection of that occasion. Your parents and godparents probably remember very vividly. But that moment, whether we were six weeks old, or 60 years old, or any other age, Baptism changes us at the very core of our being, and transforms us from a precious human being to a person with an eternal destiny, and with a spiritual identity that enables us proudly to say: I am a Child---a son or daughter---of God. If our parents and godparents had been given the spiritual eyes and ears required on the day they brought us to the Church where we were baptized, they would have seen and heard the Voice of our Loving Father in Heaven saying those same affirming words of us as we heard Him say of Jesus: "you are my beloved Child---you are a precious son or daughter of God; with you I am well pleased." And God would say that about us, not because of anything we had done, but simply because of who we are.

When we receive that first, and most important, of the Sacraments, we become united with Christ and with the entire Body of Christ - the Church. In other words, our Baptism gives us our basic spiritual identity and assures us of the amazing status and dignity that we are given as a Child of God.

Not long ago our Holy Father, while reflecting on his role as Pope, stated that he realized that was a very important role; however, he went on to say, what is more important about him is that he is baptized. When you think about who you are, that should be the first and most important fact that we acknowledge about ourselves as well---I am baptized into Christ; my life has a purpose; I share in the mission of Christ Himself; and my membership in the Church, the Body of Christ, is what will help me to accomplish my mission.

Our Baptism brings us into a personal relationship with Jesus Himself, and calls us to share in Jesus' mission, which He left to the Church to complete of preaching the Gospel to all the world until the end of time. So, how well do we know Jesus? What is your relationship with Him?

As you might know, I spent the first eight days of this new year participating in the retreat for all Bishops of the United States at the encouragement of our Holy Father, at Mundelein Seminary in Chicago. It was really a wonderful experience to have those eight days to spend in prayer and reflection with 250 or so other Bishops. I wrote a [Reflection](#) on those days which is posted on our Diocesan website for those that might be interested in reading it. Our Retreat Director was Father Raniero Cantalamessa, a Capuchin Franciscan priest from Italy, and, among his other responsibilities of teaching and writing, he has been the "Preacher of the Papal Household" since 1980. He has preached retreats and conferences to the each of the Popes since Pope St. John Paul II, and is still doing so 39 years later. Obviously he's doing something right!

Father Cantalamessa is an elderly man, but very sharp, insightful, and compelling in his love for Jesus, the Church, and God's Holy Word! In one of his first Conferences early in the Retreat, Father talked about whether we know Jesus as a Person or as a Personality. A **Person**---someone in our life we can speak with, share our sorrows and our joys with, talk things over with, a person with whom we can be ourselves, someone who knows us, loves us and challenges us to be our best selves. **A Personality**---someone we know of---someone we admire from a distance thru TV or on-line: a sports hero, a Hollywood personality, a Professional singer. And then Father said: "I'm afraid that for most Catholics, Jesus is a "Personality", not a "Person".

Do you think that's true for you? Is Jesus someone you admire? Someone you hold in high regard? Someone you give attention to from a distance? If so, that's not going to allow Him to have any impact on your life.

For us to know **Jesus as a Person**, and to allow Jesus to know us---to really know the person we are---we have to spend time with Him in prayer; we have to open our hearts to Him; we have to take down the defenses that we put up to protect ourselves from others; we have to allow Jesus to know our hopes, our fears, our aspirations, our worries; we have to have the confidence in His unconditional love for us to admit our sins, our failings, our weaknesses to Him (since He already knows them anyway)---and to ask Him for His grace to help us overcome them. I think that is a very powerful insight that Father Cantalamessa had; and one on which we would all do well to spend time reflecting.

On this beautiful Feast of the Baptism of Jesus, and the completion of the Christmas/Epiphany Season, let us truly give thanks to God for the gift of who we are as a human being, as well as the gift of who we have become through our Baptism. May we allow our Loving God and Father to love us as He loves His Son, Jesus. May we pray for the Holy Spirit to descend upon each of us and to dwell within us. And may we come to know God's Son, Jesus, as a Person Who loves us unconditionally, and Who challenges us to share in His mission, and to live in union with Him throughout our journey of Faith in this world, which will lead us to live forever with the Holy Trinity in Heaven.

God bless you now and always!