

The Baptism of the Lord (C)

January 10, 2016. *And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'* (Lk. 3:22).

Today's Feast may legitimately confuse us for we rightly understand that baptism entails a cleansing from original sin. Our Saviour obviously had no need for baptism, so why did He submit to this ritual cleansing? Quite simply, in order to bring us salvation. An ancient antiphon from the Liturgy of the Hours for the Feast of the Epiphany places today's Feast of our Lord's Baptism and the Christmas Mystery within the context of God's manifestation of His saving purpose to humanity. *Three mysteries mark this holy day: today the star leads the Magi to the Infant Christ; today water is changed into wine for the wedding feast; today Christ wills to be baptized by John in the river Jordan to bring us salvation* (Magnificat Antiphon, Second Vespers). Though separated chronologically, each of these events in the life of our Lord proclaims the revelation and manifestation of His divinity. Today's Feast celebrates our Lord's manifestation as God's Son, the Beloved. *'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'* (Lk. 3:22). Our Lord's baptism marks the beginning of His public life, just as our own baptism marks the beginning of our Christian life; for no one is born a Christian. His baptism marks the revelation of His Sonship and *it is on His part the acceptance and inauguration of His mission as God's Suffering Servant* (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 536). It is in our Lord's Passion and Death that the full meaning of this particular mission is revealed. So we begin our liturgical and spiritual journey to the celebration of the Paschal Mystery at Easter and for this reason *we preach Christ crucified...Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God* (1Cor. 1:23-24).

Just as Our Lord's Baptism is the beginning of His public life, our own baptism marked the beginning of our life in Christ. If we only took Our Lord's words and example simply at face value, our lives would literally be transformed. Such transformations are often quite evident in those who come to the Faith as adults or in the interior conversion that takes place when we resolve to walk along the path of devout humility with integrity and with purpose. For many, this rite which cleanses us of original sin and initiates us in the life of grace and which enables us to share in the gift of salvation has become nothing more than a rite of passage. Too often, once Baptism has been administered, children are neither brought to church nor formed and educated in the faith; and the consequences of such neglect are all too evident. The words of reproach spoken through the Prophet Isaiah come to mind: *Their reverence for me has become routine observance of the precepts of man* (Is. 29:13). Parents are the primary educators of their children in the faith and the spiritual wellbeing of our children should be of paramount importance for all of us.

Baptism is not a rite of passage nor should it be referred to as a *christening* for this term strictly speaking, describes the anointing that accompanies the rite. Baptism on our part entails being fully immersed in the Mystery of God. In plunging into the waters of the Jordan, our Lord performs a gesture rich in meaning. This gesture manifests and symbolises His self-emptying or *kenosis*. Jesus plunges into the waters and so enters fully into our human condition. He is totally immersed into the realities of human existence: of hunger and thirst, of shelter, of work; and this immersion prefigures His descent into death; and His coming out of the water prefigures His resurrection and glorification as God's Son. How we share in this reality is explained for us by St. Paul in his Epistle to the

Colossians: *And you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead (Col. 2:12).*

If by His baptism our Lord embraces our human condition, then our sharing in His baptism means not only a share in His Sonship, enabling us to call God Father, but also a share in this mystery of self-emptying (*kenosis*) and of service. We are called to live the very life of God in and through our union of shared existence with the Beloved Son. What this means practically for us is that we submit to the work God wants to do in each one of us. We may term this the passive element of our relationship with God. Often these graces are communicated to us in the intimacy of our private prayer and our fidelity to quiet reflective prayer will help us to grow in greater intimacy with God.

Our Lord wants to share His life with us. In the simplest of terms, this is the meaning and purpose of Christian life. Both our Lord's baptism and our own may be understood in light of these words from the Gospel: *'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'* (Lk. 3:22). At the Jordan, Jesus the Word (*Logos*) of God from all eternity is revealed as the Beloved (*Agapitos*). By the grace of adoption and by faith, the same is said of us as we are born again and re-created in the waters of baptism. The mystery of the Church is the fulfillment of this promise. Out of the experience of our divine filiation; that is, our sharing in the Sonship of Christ, we share in the mission of Christ to heal a broken world and serve a suffering humanity. This is the active element of our relationship with God. During this Year of Mercy our Holy Father has asked us to be even more zealous in practising the works of mercy. When our spiritual union with our Lord is intense and meaningful, its fruit manifested in the works of mercy and of charity, is limitless. The truth is that no government, no other church, no organization political or social has fed, clothed and educated as many people, cared for as many sick or even begun to perform the works of mercy performed by the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, making known the truth of the Faith is greatest act of charity that we perform either individually or collectively. This is a spiritual work of mercy which gives rise and meaning to every other work of mercy, whether corporal or spiritual. The way of Christian discipleship which we have undertaken to follow, mysteriously, is also a share in the mission of the Son of God who came to take away the sins of the world. The union of our suffering with the Atoning Sacrifice of our Lord is a source of grace and of reparation. Thus we preach Christ Crucified and we respond to Love Crucified with a *crucified love*.

In celebrating the Feast of our Lord's Baptism, we commemorate the event which marks the beginning of His public ministry and of His mission as God's Suffering Servant. We share in the self-emptying (*kenosis*) of Christ Our Lord through grace, imitation and love. The fullest expression of Our Lord's self-emptying is experienced by us in the Sacrament of the Eucharist which unites us to His saving work. The offerings or oblations soon to be placed on the Altar will *be transformed into the sacrifice of Him who willed in His compassion to wash away the sins of the whole world* (Prayer over the Offerings, Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, *The Roman Missal*). Like His Baptism, the Eucharist is also the Sacrament of Our Lord's humility in which is revealed the majesty and the sublime mercy of Our Lord. He who humbled Himself to be baptized and who humbles Himself in the Eucharist reveals to us again and again that there is nothing more powerful on earth than the humility of God. *What wonderful majesty! What stupendous condescension! O sublime humility! That the Lord of the whole universe, God and the Son of God, should humble Himself like this under the form of a little bread, for our salvation* (St. Francis of Assisi).

