

Homily for the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

January 12, 2025

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Every Sunday after the homily at Mass, along with Catholics all over the world, we recite the Profession of Faith, known as the Nicene Creed. During this Jubilee Year 2025, we celebrate the seventeenth centenary of the Council of Nicaea, which is the basis of the Creed we still use today. Just imagine, seventeen centuries during which, using these same words, billions of Christians have expressed their belief in God as the One who loves, the One who is beloved, and the One who is the Love between them. During that gathering in Nicaea, in the year 325, well before our lands were evangelized, the Council delegates came to a unified statement of who Jesus Christ is. We are the heirs of those who gathered so long ago, and we too believe in the mystery of God's continuing presence in our world, and in our call to live in that mystery while being Christ's hands and feet in our concrete service and generous love for suffering humanity.

When we say the words of the Creed, we are committing ourselves to beliefs that have practical, real-life implications. For example, when we say: “I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Begotten son of God... through Him all things were made,” we are expressing our belief in Christ’s identity as true God and true man. But we are also expressing our understanding of our own identity as human beings created in God’s image and disciples of Christ. In fact, when we say, “through Him all things were made,” we acknowledge that every part of God’s creation is graced and full of dignity.

Today the Church celebrates the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. We might wonder why Jesus chose to be baptized. Obviously, the Son of God did not need to be baptized, but He asked to be baptized by St. John the Baptist to provide an example for us on the significance of being baptized.

Saint Maximus of Turin, who became the first Bishop of Turin in 398, a year after the death of Saint Ambrose, explains it this way: “Christ is baptized, not to be made holy by the water, but to make the water holy, and by his cleansing to purify the waters which He touched. For the consecration of Christ involves a more significant consecration of the water. For when the Savior is washed all water for our baptism is made clean, purified at its source for the dispensing of baptismal grace to the people of future ages.

Christ is the first to be baptized, then, so that Christians will follow after him with confidence.”¹

The Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord is a good opportunity for us to reflect on the meaning of our own baptism.

For some, being baptized may simply mean becoming a member of the Catholic Church, like joining some kind of a club. Indeed, it is not unusual for bishops to receive letters occasionally from people asking to be deleted from the list of members of the Catholic Church. People are then surprised to learn that the Catholic Church does not keep a list of members. Yes, we have registered parishioners that indicate your membership in a particular parish, but people can move and change their parish affiliation, however, they are still members of the Catholic Church even if they do not register in another parish.

When a person is baptized, a record of the baptism is made in the parish of the church where the person was baptized. That record of baptism is a permanent record of an historical event that took place, but it is more than that, because baptism imprints a permanent character on a person’s soul. Baptism cannot be undone.

A baptized person who obstinately denies or doubts some truth which is to be believed by divine and Catholic faith is called a heretic; a baptized person who repudiates the Christian faith is called an apostate; a baptized person who refuses submission to the supreme pontiff or of communion with the members of the Church is called a schismatic (cf. canon 751). But in each of these cases such a person is still a baptized Christian.

A much richer and more profound description of the meaning of baptism is provided in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which says, “Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission” (n. 1213).

Along these lines, the *Code of Canon Law* says that “Baptism, the gateway to the sacraments and necessary for salvation by actual reception or at least by desire, is validly conferred only by a washing of true water with the proper form of words. Through baptism men and women are freed from sin, are reborn as children of God, and, configured to Christ by an indelible character, are incorporated into the Church” (canon 849).

At the moment of Christ's baptism, as we heard in today's Gospel passage, the voice of God the Father came from the heavens, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3: 21-22).

On the day of our baptism, we too are adopted as sons and daughters of God. As such, we are also beloved by God, who is pleased to welcome us into His family. As Jesus loves His Father, we are called to love God as well.

Seven years ago, on the Solemnity of Christ the King, we concluded our Fourth Diocesan Synod at which representatives from each of our 129 parishes voted overwhelmingly to declare that the "mission of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Springfield in Illinois is to build a fervent community of intentional and dedicated missionary disciples of the Risen Lord and steadfast stewards of God's creation who seek to become saints. Accordingly, the community of Catholic faithful in this Diocese is committed to the discipleship and stewardship way of life as commanded by Christ Our Savior and as revealed by Sacred Scripture and Tradition."²

The fourth Declaration of our Fourth Diocesan Synod declared, "To be a disciple means to accept Jesus Christ as one's Lord and Savior. Disciples are those who 'make a conscious, firm decision, carried out in action, to be followers of Jesus Christ no matter the cost to themselves.'³ Catholic

discipleship refers to a committed approach to living a Christian life within the Catholic Church."⁴

Reflecting on the meaning of our own baptism, let us reaffirm our commitment to the discipleship and stewardship way of life, to be followers of Jesus Christ no matter the cost.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ From a sermon by Saint Maximus of Turin, bishop, (*Sermo* 100, *de sancta Epiphania* 1, 3: CCL 23, 398-400); second reading for the Office of Readings, Friday after the Epiphany of the Lord.

² Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, 2017 Synodal Declarations, Declaration 1, p. 24; online at <https://diospringfield.cld.bz/FourthSynodCompiledActsDeclarationsandStatutes/24/>.

³ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, 1992.

⁴ Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, 2017 Synodal Declarations, Declaration 4, p. 25; online at <https://diospringfield.cld.bz/FourthSynodCompiledActsDeclarationsandStatutes/24/>.