

Homily for the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

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

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The Catholic Church and most other Christian traditions recognize the authenticity of the location at the River Jordan where Jesus was baptized. After John died, many of his followers stayed in the area. Later, churches were built near the site and monks lived in caves. At this holy site you see people being baptized today, immersed in the river like Jesus.

I have been to the Holy Land three times: in 2005, 2006, and 2019. My second trip, which took place twenty years ago this summer in 2006, was a pilgrimage that included my mother. I have photographs of my Mom taking off her shoes and wading in the Jordan River. She wanted to enter the same waters where Jesus was baptized.

Jesus, who had no sins to be forgiven, was baptized for our sake and as an example to us. Obviously, the Son of God did not need to be baptized, but He asked to be baptized by Saint John the Baptist to provide an example for us on the significance of being baptized.

Our Lord's baptism reminds us of our own baptism. Today's celebration of the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord is a good opportunity for us to reflect on the meaning of baptism. We can get a deeper appreciation of our own baptism by looking at the example of Our Lord's baptism.

Today's Gospel from Saint Matthew (Mt 3:13-17) tells us that, "After Jesus was baptized, He came up from the water and behold, the heavens were opened for Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon Him." When we are baptized, the Holy Spirit descends upon us as well.

Prior to celebrating the Sacraments of Confirmation and First Holy Communion, I meet with the candidates, most of whom in our diocese are in third grade. I explain that there are many things that are quite real even though we cannot see them, like wi-fi or the air in this room. By definition, spirits are invisible, and the Holy Spirit knows that we cannot see Him, so He takes on a form that we can see. At the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit took on the form of a dove. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down on the Apostles like tongues of fire. At the baptism of infants, after being washed with the baptismal waters, the child is anointed with the Sacred Chrism, the holy oil consecrated by the Bishop at the Chrism

Mass during Holy Week. Similar to how the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ when they are consecrated at Mass, the oil of chrism receives the Presence of the Holy Spirit when it is consecrated at the Chrism Mass. So when infants are anointed with the Sacred Chrism at Baptism, they receive the Holy Spirit for the first time. The Sacrament of Confirmation later brings another anointing with the Sacred Chrism, signifying full initiation into the Church with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. When an adult is baptized, Confirmation is conferred immediately, so baptism always is accompanied by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. The fruits of the Spirit are perfections that the Holy Spirit forms in us as the first fruits of eternal glory. The tradition of the Church lists twelve of them: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* - paragraph # 1832).

If we are mindful of the gifts and fruits that the Holy Spirit has placed in our hearts, we will live in a very different and much better way than if we allow our hearts to be dominated by the seven capital or deadly sins: pride, envy, anger, avarice, gluttony, lust, and sloth. Bad habits are called vices.

Good habits are called virtues. Hearts full of sinful desires will be manifested in a life of vice. Hearts full of God's grace will be reflected in a life of virtue.

After the Spirit of God descending like a dove upon Jesus, the Gospel tells us that "a voice came from the heavens, saying, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'" When we are baptized, we are adopted as a son or daughter of God. This is called "divine filiation," from the Latin word *filius*, which means son, and *filia*, which means daughter. Divine filiation means 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. In this regard, reflecting on our own baptism should bring a sense of gratitude, as we thank God for the great gift of welcoming us into His divine family.

Finally, we note that baptism bring us new life. The old life marked by original sin is washed away and we are transformed by God's grace to live an entirely different and markedly better way of life.

Saint Peter wrote that, after being anointed by the Spirit, Jesus "went about doing good and curing all who had fallen into the power of the devil." After forty days in the desert, where the devil tempted him to abandon his mission, Jesus began to create the Church (not so much as an institution as a movement), "the way" as they called it; His followers, like Him, were

committed to “[going] about and doing good.” Over the centuries since, religious communities were formed in the Church to go about doing good in extraordinarily selfless ways. All over the world, in the poorest and most desperate places, the followers of Jesus are still to be found, caring, teaching and loving. Nearer home there are, for example, Christians running food pantries, bread lines and soup kitchens for those who are homeless, caring for people who are sick or elderly, and for children with emotional and physical difficulties.

Mother Teresa – now St Teresa of Calcutta – remarked that it is often through caring for others that people discover the real meaning of life, and that faith itself can be discovered or strengthened. It is not necessarily an easy life, but one that involves hard choices sometimes and a commitment to keep going, however hard it gets: a commitment sustained by God’s grace-filled promise, “This is my... Beloved.” This is sensed by all those who, in Isaiah’s words, “serve the cause of right”.

Living only for oneself or for pleasure alone is shallow by comparison. Our baptism asks us not to run away from our Christian calling to do good, however hard its demands, and however wearing it may be. That said, we also recognize the need to be refreshed and renewed by rest and recreation.

During the third century, Cyprian of Carthage wrote to his friend Donatus: "It's a bad world, Donatus, in which we live. But right in the middle of it I have discovered a quiet and holy group of people. They are people who have found a happiness that is a thousand times more joyful than all the pleasures of our sinful lives. These people are despised and persecuted, but it does not matter to them. They are Christians, Donatus, and I am one of them."

As we remember Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, let us remember also Cyprian's words, and that through our Christian baptism we too are part of that "holy group of people."

May God give us this grace. Amen.