

011308 BAPTISM OF THE LORD

Peace be with you. I have had the joys and challenges associated with baptizing children into the Catholic Church. And early baptism involved a sort of an unusual experience – and it resulted in baptizing two young people from the same family. As a new deacon, I was still wet behind the ears (that's not a Baptism joke) when this story started. The pastor at our Colorado parish gave me the assignment of doing all baptismal preparation – and so one day I was given a message by the office to call a woman in Florida about a possible baptism for a niece and nephew. When I reached the woman – she told me of a planned family reunion – a big reunion that was going to take place in Estes Park. Her brother lived in Vermont – and the brother's two children had never been baptized. She wanted to know if I'd be willing to talk to her brother and see about a possible baptism when the entire family gathered in Colorado later that summer.

As has happened many times – the more I dug into this – the tougher it became because the brother was in a mixed faith marriage and neither father nor mother was practicing the Catholic faith. Well – this story could go on for quite a while, because it involved hours and hours and many phone conversations with the brother in Vermont. Countless hours discussing why he stopped practicing the faith... about what baptism might mean to him... and to his Protestant wife. The Sacrament must mean something or it's a sham. Gently, I reiterated the words of Jesus:

"If you want to enter the kingdom of heaven, you must be born again by water and the Holy Spirit." (Jn 3:5). Finally, we began to make some progress. Let me leave this story for a minute.

You know, in the Catholic faith, when we baptize a child, we begin with the "rite of reception" or welcoming. After making sure the parents and godparents recognize their responsibilities, the priest (or deacon) traces the sign of the cross on the child's forehead and says "Michael, Heather...the Christian community welcomes you with great joy. In its name I now claim you for Christ our Savior by the sign of the cross." In other words "you belong to us--and we belong to you." That is the rite of spiritual family welcome. The same happens for adult catechumens in a more elaborate ceremony. They receive the sign of the cross not only on their foreheads, but their eyes, ears, lips, shoulders and heart. They are accepted or welcomed as students of the new faith they will later be joining.

Well – long story shortened about the sister in Florida who helped get me started with her brother's family in Vermont – the entire family and many friends descended on Estes Park, Colorado. As many as 40 people were there for a Friday evening dinner that my wife and I were invited to. The grandparents didn't know a thing about the plan for baptism – so they were shocked and quizzical when I showed up wearing clerics. And as I showed up, the Florida daughter gave her dad a present – and when he opened it up – it contained baptismal garments for the two grandchildren.

This was their way of springing the surprise on the grandparents that the two youngsters were going to finally be baptized by Deacon Tom the next morning. The grandfather started crying – and soon many in the gathering were emotional – it was like a beginning – a new start to the faith of the family was about to begin.

As we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, we mark the end of the private life of Jesus and the beginning of his public ministry. I would like to first focus on that key element of welcoming the children and adults -- Welcoming is also called hospitality. What the clergy struggles with is how to be welcoming and inviting – but also to tell the parents that this isn't some social rite of passage that takes place before everyone goes out to eat a meal at a nice restaurant.

And when you are here for a baptism, whether as personal family members of faith family witnesses, it is important that you share in a real sense of prayerful and joyful welcome for the one entering our Catholic Faith. More than just a Hail Mary... more than just some polite applause... but reaching out and in our own ways, letting the new members know that they have joined THE FAMILY OF GOD... a welcoming, practicing family of believers.

A few other discussion points: Since John preached a baptism of repentance, Christians have always struggled with why Jesus allowed himself to be immersed in those waters. We Catholics need to know of the early Church and of the early Church leaders – we call them the Church Fathers.

In the earliest hours, Church leaders knew – they insisted Jesus had no sins to wash away, and so they speculated that he allowed John to baptize him for two reasons. First Christ wanted to give us an example to underscore the necessity of the sacrament. The great Church Father, St. Gregory Nazianzen stated it this way: “Christ is baptized; let us also go down with him (into the waters) and rise with him.” In the same homily St. Gregory presents the second reason: “He comes to bury sinful humanity in the waters. He comes to sanctify the (waters) for our sake.” So Jesus wasn’t baptized for his need or sake – he was baptized for our sake.

Some of my joys in baptismal work have been meeting with holy, practicing Catholics – people who understand this as the first Sacrament for their child. I’ve also met parents who simply want a quick ceremony because this is what their parents did... or that’s what the grandparents said to do. If those types of parents come to me – we have real work to do. As a deacon, I also have very real expectations for those who come to talk to me about being a baptismal sponsor.

By baptism, we become a fully graced son or daughter of God. There was a man who used to call a certain young girl "princess." Someone said to him, "Don't do that. You will make her conceited." But he said, "Do you know what a princess is?' They said, "Sure, a princess is the daughter of a king." In fact, that is the dignity God gives us by our baptism. It washes away the condemnation that hangs over us because of original sin.

On today's Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, I would like to make a suggestion for parents or grandparents or sponsors of baptisms from their past. Make the anniversary of baptism a meaningful date to celebrate and to talk about.

One of the most meaningful things we can do is tell children about the day of their baptism.... how they were dressed, who were the godparents, how the child reacted when the water was poured over him, what the candle looked like, who was the priest or deacon, what the church was like - and the things you did before and after the ceremony. You can send anniversary cards on the yearly date of the baptism. Make it a re-celebration of the first sacrament. Any detail you can remember will have significance for a child now more mature, even if he is a teenager or an adult.

And above all, let him know that on the day of his baptism was spoken those most beautiful words, "This is my beloved Son (or daughter), with whom I am well pleased."