

[Readings: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Isaiah 12:2-6; Acts 10:34-38; Mark 1:7-11]

Whenever I visit the religious education students, and we talk about today's Feast Day of the Baptism of the Lord, the same one question is always asked: Why did Jesus get baptized? He was not born with the stain of Original Sin that needed to be washed away. As a child, a teen and as a grown man, He never committed any actual sins that needed to be forgiven. So, why baptism?

The Holy Spirit inspired me with two letters: B and C. B stands for John the Baptist, who was the "bridge" between the Old Testament writings and prophecies and the New Testament fulfillment of those prophecies in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the "C" which stands for "Chain" – His baptism is the first of many links of a chain, connecting Jesus with all of humanity. The first was His birth, the second was His growing up. Now in His public ministry, He links us in our humanity with His divinity. Speaking of the Lord's baptism...

John, who is the last prophet, the one who initiates a baptism of repentance, baptizes Jesus Christ. The Word made Flesh, the Splendor of the Father, is baptized with a baptism of repentance. In this act, Our Lord places Himself in the space of a sinner. He identifies with the people of Israel, who are called to return to the Lord their God. And yet, as the Gospel of Mark remembers at this moment of apparent weakness, Jesus is proclaimed as the beloved Son of the Father. We are told to listen to Him, to the one proclaimed as Lord in the hidden silence of the desert.

What is the meaning of this baptism? Yes, we are cleansed of original sin. But we are also made adopted sons and daughters of God. As the First Letter of John proclaims, "This is the one who came through water and blood, Jesus Christ, not by water alone, but by water and blood" (1 Jn 5:6).

Christ entered the world through water and blood. Water is purity, an icon of divine life. And yet, blood is an image of the body. Jesus Christ does not come presenting divine life abstracted from the rest of human life. He comes in both water and blood, as divine and human.

As He descends into the waters of baptism, He gives His flesh and blood over to a divine project. The time for Israel's conversion is at hand. It is the conversion that will lead Him to the cross, to the death of the beloved Son who spills water and blood from his side. It will culminate in the Resurrection of the beloved Son, who does not leave behind His humanity but presents it as a fragrant offering to the Father.

Baptism, for us, is immersion into the water and blood of the Son. Yes, we are given divine life, we are bestowed grace. But never apart from the flesh and blood existence to which we are called as men and women and children.

This is why we celebrate Christ's baptism in the Christmas season. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us (cf. Jn 1:14). Redemption now takes place not through escaping the body, but through it.

After all, that's the nature of the sacraments. Christ's Incarnation continues here and now. Sacraments have always been communal events. In one sense, our celebration of the sacraments is like an orchestra or a choir. Every orchestra needs a conductor. Every choir needs a director. But every orchestra needs instruments. Every choir needs voices. That is you folks. This is how we can and must enter every sacramental experience: as full, conscious, and active participants, ready to be conduits for the flow of grace that God is continually pouring out. The celebrant leads, the presider presides, but the members of the community are essential, adding their prayers and intentions to the proceedings, and being commissioned to bring our faith outside the church walls and into the marketplace, into the work place, into the places of learning and, yes, even the places of government. Using another image...

Have you ever heard the expression, "The apple of my eye?" As a kid, I thought it meant that someone had eyes that bugged out like apples. Some children are privileged to know right away they are the apple of their parents' eyes. This phrase "apple of the eye" refers to the dark, reflective part of the eye that acts like a mirror to the viewer.

Literally, the Hebrew translation is "the little man of the eye" That means that your own tiny reflection registered in the eye looks back at you. This occurs

in that beautiful cloak of St. Juan Diego which reveals the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Scientists examining her eyes saw a reflection of the astonished bishop and priest witnessing the miracle of her image on the tilma.

What the phrase suggests is that God watches us so carefully and with such devotion that we are always in His divine eyes. These verses also suggest that we are to keep God's laws as the apple of our eyes. When a voice from Heaven proclaims Jesus to be the beloved Son, the pleasure of God, we understand that Jesus enjoys that premiere place in the sight of God.

Where do YOU hear the voice of God? How do you respond to it?

Jesus enjoys that beloved position because He keeps the divine will in view at all times. It's a reciprocal relationship; each beholds the other with absolute devotion. How do you and I, with so many hills and valleys in our spiritual composition, hope to become in any sense pleasing to God? First of all, we don't have to do anything: We already are the pleasure of God.

If a voice from heaven speaks today over this assembly, it surely declares that WE are beloved children NOW. How does the way you live reflect what you believe -- that you are genuinely and truly loved by God? That God shows no partiality and loves us all equally? That is what both Isaiah in our First Reading and St. Peter in our Second Reading are calling you and me to recognize, to be and to become.

That will come as a great surprise to many who feel unloved or undeserving of love. Of course God's love is not a matter of merit, but of fact. The God of love created us for love, and it is love that holds us in life.

So it's not God's delight in us that's at issue but our response. How do we reply to such devotion? By placing the divine will in the apple of our eye, so that we live and move and have our being in response to God, making His traits our own: generosity, goodness, compassion, kindness, and forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the biggest one. We can forgive any wrong, any sin, any crime, even if we never forget it. By reflecting God's traits in ourselves to others, we fill in the valleys of our omissions with new virtues. We wear down the

mountains of our transgressions with penance and charity aimed at converting our hearts.

This is the answer to all of today's sin, evil and corruption. In our parish, in our Archdiocese, in our homes, in our country, and in our country's capital.

God alone is the source of our salvation, yet we "prepare the way" by straightening out the bends in our character to become better channels of grace. In a real sense, these readings at the end of the Christmas season today bring us back and full circle to the first Sunday of Advent of last month. When you love someone and you see in their eyes the person they imagine you to be, your realized ideal self, you want to become that, quite naturally. That little man or woman, that little child or teen seen in the other's eye, that's you, with a little more refining and cultivating needed. As they sing at the end of the musical, *Les Miserables*: "To love another person is to see the face of God." When we are tempted to pray that other people change, St. Teresa of Calcutta reminds us that we pray to God that God changes US first. AMEN!