

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC
January 10, 2021 Streaming Mass
Baptism of the Lord Year B Mk 1:7-11

It was recently announced by the director of “The Godfather” trilogy, Francis Ford Coppola, that he intends to reedit the final installment of the series because by all accounts, it did not measure up to the other two. In that trilogy one of the most memorable scenes is that in the first episode, wherein Michael Corleone, as a young don, consolidates his power by having his gang-world rivals rubbed out at the very hour that his infant nephew is being baptized down at St. Patrick’s Old Cathedral on Mulberry Street in Little Italy—thus fulfilling his familial responsibilities, and providing himself with an alibi in the process. What makes this scene particularly ironic is that while Michael Corleone is responding, in his role as the baby’s godfather, to the words of the ritual, that he does, indeed, “renounce Satan and all his works,” the camera jumps back and forth between the tranquility of the church baptistery and the various spots where Corleone’s henchmen are ruthlessly eliminating the opposition.

That scene would have us reflect on the meaning of baptism, of faith, and of God in our lives. All three Godfather films have a common theme, and it is the theme of corruption, but corruption in a very special and particular sense—not just the corruption of random individuals, but the corruption of what is most noble, most sacred, and most vital to any society—the corruption of the family and the corruption of religion, the corruption of government.

There is an old Latin saying which goes “the corruption of the best is the very worst.” Shakespeare put it another way, but essentially it is the same thing, “Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.” “The Godfather” trilogy shows how the ties that should bind parent to child, brother to brother, priest to the church, public official to government—how those ties can be twisted, how loyalties can be warped, how institutions meant to nourish and protect their members can betray their own noble ends, and become self-serving, protective of their own interests, and callous to the ideals for which they are supposed to exist. So, deception, greed, envy, jealousy, spite and a host of other demons eat away at the fabric of family, religion and government. They destroy or maim the innocent, the gullible, the slow-witted, the pure, as well as the vicious and the cold-blooded. When that which is most sacred betrays itself; therein lies the greatest corruption.

“The Godfather” saga would tell us this is life, this is reality, this is how the world works. The world that Francis Ford Coppola depicts is certainly very dark, bleak; it is a

world without hope; there never appears to be any element of redemption. But I would suggest that the world-view that Coppola presents is incomplete.

If we come here today as people of faith, then that faith would tell us there is something more. Faith would tell us that there is an antidote that can prevent us from succumbing to the corrupting influences of the world in which we live. That antidote is a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Baptism unites us to the risen Christ, so that the love of God made visible in Him can touch our lives to support and strengthen us, as we grow to full stature in our humanity. Of course, there is nothing magical, nothing automatic, about Baptism. But the sacrament is the assurance of God's continuing and supportive presence in our lives

The world in which a newly baptized baby will have to live out his or her faith is certainly one that is well depicted in "The Godfather" trilogy, but again accurate only up to a point. We are born into a world that is so often at odds with itself, a world of selfishness, cruelty, injustice, stupidity. This is what theologians call "original sin;" otherwise known as the "human condition." In the words of St. Paul, "The good I want to do, I can't do, and what I don't want to do, I end up doing." We are born into a world where it is so difficult to grow beyond the confines of our ego, where so often we are subject to the cravings of our instincts, so often paralyzed by our fears. In Baptism, we are rescued from that world: we are born into a relationship with the risen Christ, so that we can begin to move beyond those limitations, to embrace life in all its wonder and possibility.

At Baptism we are welcomed into the Church which is to be seen, not just as a building or institution, but as a community of people who continually struggle against the temper of the times, trying to incorporate into our lives the virtues, the values, the strength and compassion shown to us in the life of Jesus. If our whole life, not just the ritual of baptism, is to be described as a "christening," then we will have to learn to imitate Jesus. Pope Francis has said, "The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints." Within the Church we have available to us the healing presence of Christ. The sacraments of the Church continue the work of Jesus. Confirmation strengthens what began in Baptism; the Eucharist is food for life's journey; Penance restores that union with God, when it has been severed by our turning away from God; Matrimony and Holy Orders equip us to live out our life's calling, our vocation; and the Sacrament of the Sick provides physical healing in a time of serious illness and prepares one for that final journey into God's care.

Baptism then is nothing more, nothing less, than God's welcome and our response to the invitation to live as a child of God, as demonstrated for us in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, God's Beloved Son. Every age presents its own challenges to living

out that invitation. In the terrible events of last Wednesday in Washington D.C., we saw all the signs of white supremacy, of racism, of anti-Semitism, of violence as a solution to political disagreements. All of these things we are called to reject unequivocally as followers of Jesus Christ. The irony is that all this took place on January 6th, the traditional date for the celebration of the feast of the Epiphany---a stark reminder that we are called to follow in the path of the Magi, not MAGA. Let us pray, then, that we may be renewed and strengthened by Christ's Spirit to live out our baptismal commitment, and show ourselves to be truly the "beloved" children of God.