

Baptism of the Lord
January 13, 2019
Homily for the Anglican Usage Mass
of the
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

The traditional way to baptize adults and children, thereby initiating them into Christ's one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, was to immerse them in water. While the common practice today is to sprinkle water upon the person's head, the rubrics in all the sacramentaries still commend immersion first and only mention sprinkling as a secondary option. The reason for this historic preference for immersion is the symbolism of full immersion, a symbolism that is consistent with Christ's own baptism that we commemorate today.

Since Jesus was sinless, he did not have to be baptized for forgiveness, for which we are baptized, or even to represent his repentance, which St. John made clear was the reason for his baptism of sinners. Rather, Jesus was baptized to show who he was, another Epiphany of sorts, as we see in the words spoken after He was baptized: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." And what was demonstrated at Jesus' baptism about who He was and what He would do? Jesus' baptism, by immersion, showed that He would die and then rise to newness of life, would be resurrected from the dead.

The immersion of a child or adult is a prefiguration of the destiny of every Christian. As a child begins his life in the Church, his end is already symbolized, for the dunking of a baby in a font like ours shows that every person born into this world of sin is appointed to die. That's the immersion part. But the priest then lifts the child of God out of the water, showing to all the witnesses that God's will for the newly initiated is that, like Jesus Himself, this person will rise at the resurrection of the dead. Because this symbolism is so powerful, all four of our boys have been baptized in this way. The long, flowing, white dress that our girls have worn, and which precludes their being dunked, emphasizes the purity that by baptism they thereby possess, a different symbolism that nevertheless points to life in Christ by the forgiveness of sins.

The purity comes about, of course, by the gift of the Holy Spirit imprinted at baptism, as we heard St. John promise in today's Gospel. But what St. John also promised was baptism with fire. Naturally, the fire causes us to contemplate the light of Christ, which each neophyte receives at his baptism in the form of a baptismal candle. We don't discount this reality in the least. However, the pairing of the Holy Spirit and fire should lead us to meditate upon purification, the sanctifying power inherent to the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity. Just as the Holy Spirit purifies us as Jesus is pure, so does fire.

Here we are speaking figuratively, as the fires humans pass through to be purified are not literal. Fire, instead, symbolizes the trials that each believer passes through and which, if they do not break us, help to sanctify our souls. So, for example, the fire that St. John the Baptist experienced was his confrontation with King Herod. Imprisoned for speaking the truth, he did not cease standing up for what is right, a consistency that then led to his martyrdom for the sanctity of marriage. He now stands before the Throne of Grace.

This same pattern should characterize our own trials that we pass through in this valley of tears. We are challenged, but the consolations we receive from God in our steadfastness ultimately strengthen our

faith and point to the new life Jesus has in store for us after we die. Each of us should be able to come up with examples of how on the back end of trials, our faith has been strengthened and we have found ourselves further purified by the harrowing experience. I've told many of you how close I came to death thirteen years ago this weekend; yet through it all the power of the Sacrament of the Sick was manifested, and our fledgling community that God had given me to lead was made stronger.

Fires don't necessarily reference death. The infertility that my wife and I experienced early in our marriage did not threaten our lives, but it was a heart-wrenching experience that led us finally to embrace the Catholic Faith. It stripped away a lot of lies and laid bare the choice before us, whether we would be part of an institution that actually taught what we said we believed. God's desire for life can be seen not only in this parish He gave, but also in the ten children with which He has blessed our family. Our faith is strengthened with every member He adds to the parish and every child by which our family grows.

My point is that the gift of the Faith does not mean that the trials will cease, but that the fires we pass through will be accompanied by the Holy Spirit. Just as Jesus was not abandoned to death in His Passion, but triumphed over it, we who are confronted with baptism by fire know that in the end the Lord lifts us up from the ashes and gives us more than we could ask or imagine. Those who have weathered trials and come out stronger are a powerful witness to the power of the Holy Spirit and to God's desire that we will rise eternally from the waters of baptism. If sharing your own stories of purification will point to God's great love, and not to yourself, I encourage you to counsel the doubtful and comfort the sorrowful by personal witness.

In undertaking such a witness there is always the danger that we will be accused of grandstanding or of pulling the gaze of the faithful away from God. This should give us pause, so we ever give God the glory. But the reality is that the Faith is lived, and how it is lived either attracts people to the foot of the cross or causes them to turn away in revulsion. Thus, witnessing to the fires we've passed through by the power of the Holy Spirit is a risk we must take and, if done well, a venture that will win souls for Him who first rose from the waters of baptism.