

## **The Community of the Baptized**

The Baptism of the Lord (Year B)

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One of the concerns among religious people is that our church isn't as relevant for the people of today as it once was. This is a real concern. Many Catholics have worked hard at keeping their Churches open and have made many sacrifices to raise their children in the practice of the faith. There are many proposed solutions to this problem, with everything from zealous evangelization to forced legislation to keep us a Christian nation. While some solutions are better than others, on today's feast of the Baptism of the Lord, I want to share the insight from Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, the former Master General of the Dominican Order, on this issue.

In his book *Take the Plunge: Living Baptism and Confirmation*, Fr. Radcliffe writes, "Christianity will flourish in the twenty-first century if we grasp that the Church is above all the community of the baptized." (1) While this seems almost too basic, he goes on to explain himself. He notes that nearly 1/3 of the world is already baptized. For him, the numbers are already there, so he suggests that we should help those who have already been baptized come to a deeper appreciation of the gift they have already been given in this sacrament.

Baptism is a powerful sacrament. As John the Baptist said in today's Gospel, those who are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ are not merely baptized with water, but with the Holy Spirit. At baptism, the power of God through the Holy Spirit comes to live within us. If all the baptized would claim this as their own, 1/3 of the world,

Christianity would flourish in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and we could make a greater impact on the world.

Part of Fr. Radcliffe's insight is that for too long we have tried to make an impact on the world without mobilizing all the baptized. In other words, we have only been empowering a small portion of the people of God, not the whole body. In the first place, in the Catholic Church we have associated being an active Christian with becoming a priest or nun. We think of the good old days when the clergy did everything in the parish. This was not sustainable and is certainly not a smart approach as we continue to move through the priest shortage. All the baptized, which still includes the priests and nuns, need to be mobilized. Secondly, we have unnecessarily limited our understanding of the church, and therefore the baptized, to Roman Catholics. As Roman Catholics, we actually do recognize the validity of the baptized of many mainline and non-denominational churches. While we might have disagreements about certain church teachings or practices, if they are validly baptized, they have the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling within them and they could definitely be a force for good. All the baptized, including the non-Catholic Christians, need to be mobilized.

*Understanding the Church as the community of the baptized broadens our base so that we can make a greater impact on the world.*

How often do I remind myself that I have been baptized? For those of us who have been baptized, the gift has already been given to us; it is up to us to mobilize it. Looking ahead to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Fr. Radcliffe summarizes, "Christianity will be strong if all the baptized people of God are strengthened, their vocation recognized and their creativity released." (2)