

The Christmas decorations come down, the Mardi Gras ones go up, and we start to see Valentine's Day candy in the stores. This is what January is about in our secular culture. Where are we in our Catholic Church calendar?

Today is a special feast – the Baptism of the Lord. It is the last day of the Christmas season, so please don't be too hard on that neighbor who still has their lights up and wreaths everywhere! We are celebrating the time at which Jesus further unites himself to us by being baptized. There is no need for Jesus to be baptized, but he chooses to be because he wants to further demonstrate his fully human nature, and take on our sins.

The Gospel reading ends with the beautiful image of the heavens opening and our Creator declaring Jesus is His beloved Son, in whom he is well pleased. The Spirit then descends upon Jesus. God shows how He is well pleased in each of us at our baptism through the pouring of the water on our heads, and the placing of the sacred Chrism on our bodies.

We actually hear more about Jesus' baptism, or the context for it, in the first two readings rather than the Gospel. Isaiah's reading, for example, tells us what baptism does for all of us:

*I, the LORD, have called you for the victory of justice,
I have grasped you by the hand;
I formed you, and set you
as a covenant of the people,
a light for the nations,
to open the eyes of the blind,
to bring out prisoners from confinement,
and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness. (Is 42: 6-7)*

Here in the Archdiocese of New Orleans, we are called to begin today a special Year of the Eucharist and St. Joseph. How are the two related? Jesus began his life journey under the care of St. Joseph, and we celebrate the beginning of our journey with Christ within our Catholic community in our baptism. Just as we celebrate our baptism as the beginning of our life in Christ, the Eucharist is a regular sustenance of our lives, as Isaiah writes, "to bring out....those who live in darkness." This special year will be devoted to a better understanding of the mystery of this "source and summit" of our daily witness as Catholics.

The archdiocese has asked that we observe this year in three ways: Explanation of the Mass, the Real Presence of Christ, and the Meaning and Importance of our Obligation to Sunday Mass. We will use the bulletin, adult faith formation opportunities, and our online presence to celebrate the year.