

**January 13, 2019 Baptism of the Lord Homily:** The famed Waldorf–Astoria hotel in New York City is the venue for an annual event that is widely covered by the local and global media: the International Debutante Ball. A debutante is a young woman of upper class family background who has come of age and is now prepared to be introduced to High Society. For the young lady, who is likely from fifteen to seventeen years of age, the event is a “coming out” party. She is sponsored by an elite member of society, usually a relative. One of the special moments of the gala is when the debutantes stand in a receiving line and are introduced individually to the audience. For a daughter of privilege, the ball is a rite of passage for a teenage girl and a turning point in a young life. She is now a prominent figure on the world stage. She must leave behind her childhood and embrace the duties and responsibilities of a mature young woman.

The Baptism of Christ marks the beginning of the public life of Jesus. He emerges from the shadows of his hidden life in Nazareth and stands on the banks of the River Jordan. He has left his home for good. The evangelist Luke presents him as someone hidden in the crowd, an anonymous figure, while he went to John the Baptist to be baptized.

The baptism of Christ is a sort of “coming out” moment, and one which will never be repeated. The atmosphere of the event is not festive but somber and serious. A monumental drama begins to unfold. Right at the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus gives an unmistakable sign. He shows us the new path he has taken. He is going out in the midst of people. He places himself among sinners who are in line to receive the baptism of repentance John offers. Jesus intends to carry our burdens and our sins on his shoulders. Clearly, he does not despise the people among who he is taking his place. He fully understands our weakness. He immerses himself in the human condition. The baptism is an acceptance of death for the sins of humanity. Jesus’ sponsor is from above. The Father introduces Jesus as His Divine Son. “You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased”. (Lk.3:22) A voice from heaven explains what has happened... Jesus is the servant of the Lord, the perfection of his people.

What lessons can we derive from this gospel reading?

First, it was a prayer event. Luke tells us that Jesus was praying (Lk.3:21). While Jesus was in prayer, the heavens opened and under the form of a dove, the Holy Spirit descends on Him. Surely it is worth noting that at key junctures in his life Christ speaks with his Father in heaven. The evangelist Luke, in particular, underscores the importance of prayer in the life of Jesus. How often do we rely on prayer at critical moments in our own life? Do we speak to the Lord? Can we hear his response? Can we, in faith, accept his Holy Will?

The grey mass of sinners waiting on the banks of the Jordan may remind many of our aged priests of the time, years ago, when repentant sinners stood in a long line awaiting to receive the sacrament of Penance. Many confessions were heard by priest in anticipation of the major feast days of the church. The penitent was never alone but stood shoulder to shoulder with his brothers and sisters in need of God’s mercy. Have we ignored one of the great sacraments of the church? Do we still acknowledge our sins?

The early church saw the baptism of the Lord as a celebration of our baptism, too. As a celebration of the new life that is shared through the sacrament.

The Christmas season ends today. Tomorrow begins “ordinary time”. But for us who are Christians, it is as opportune a time to re-commit ourselves to living out our baptismal faith.

Amen!