

January 12, 2020 Game On Homily: “After Jesus was baptized, he came up from the water and behold, the heavens were opened for him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon him.” (Mt. 3:16)

From his balcony window overlooking St. Peter’s square Pope Francis spoke to a large gathering of pilgrims on January 14, 2014. Standing beside him were two children. On cue they were told to release two doves from his window. They complied. Unexpectedly, and without warning, once the doves took flight a large black crow and a seagull swooped down from the blue sky and attacked the two vulnerable birds. The pilgrims were horrified. In a flash, the doves simply disappeared from sight. All the pope could see was feathers flying in the wind. The celebratory mood of the pilgrims quickly vanished. The image of two predatory birds attacking innocent doves may have seemed like a heaven sent message. The innocent of this world will always be the prey of the wicked.

And that was certainly true of Jesus, the innocent one and model servant of the Lord.

Consider the early chapters of St. Matthew’s gospel. In the second chapter we learn that King Herod has evil designs on the child to be born in Bethlehem. “Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him.” (Mt. 2:15) Immediately after his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus will be driven into the desert, where he will be subjected to various temptations and offer stiff resistance to the Antichrist. In reality, the Baptism of Jesus begins a long drawn out fight with the powers of darkness. It ends only after he breathes his last breath on the cross.

In today’s gospel reading, an account of Our Lord’s baptism in the river Jordan, the heavens opened for Jesus and only he saw the Spirit descending like a dove and coming upon him. The Spirit coming upon Jesus represents the anointing of Israel’s Messiah and a public declaration by the Eternal Father that Jesus is truly the beloved Son. The stage is set for the inauguration of his public mission. On his journey, Jesus has the consolation of the presence of the Holy Spirit to sustain and embolden him in all his earthly battles.

He carries out his mission as God’s beloved and obedient servant. The words of the prophet Isaiah come to mind, “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I am well pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit.....”. (Is. 42:1)

Surely it is not without significance that the feast of the Baptism of the Lord is the first Sunday of the Church’s liturgical year.

Our baptism begins a fight, but it is a good fight. Why? It is simply because it is Christ Himself who leads us into battle. He is our Commander in Chief. We are his warriors.

Game on!

Amen!