

Baptized into his death

When I was young, we sang an Easter Song called, “New Life.” It captures the experience of the first Easter and how we should feel at Easter. The first verse is: “New Life, New Life is what we have been given by the Lord.” St. Paul said, ***“Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life”*** (Rom. 6:3-4).

Are you living this newness of life? Another way to ask the question is this: Do you live your Baptism? The Sacrament of Baptism is an experience of Christ’s death and resurrection. Baptism fills us with his Risen Life.

Mary Magdalene helps us know what that new life is like. She was a disciple whom Jesus healed. Luke says that she had been healed of evil spirits and of infirmities; Jesus had freed her from seven evil spirits (Lk. 8:2). He healed her from an overwhelming experience of evil, symbolized by being freed of seven demons. We do not know the details, but we can imagine her battle with darkness. We know what it is like to be trapped in sin or stuck in destructive behavior. You feel helpless, unworthy, and isolated in the dark. At times, the battle is not within us but with others who are in darkness, like a person in an abusive or violent relationship.

Long before the resurrection, Mary Magdalene experienced new life. Jesus healed her and freed her from evil. Maybe that is why she was so disturbed by his death. How could someone so life-giving be crucified like a criminal? How could God let that happen? What was God doing? Mary Magdalene had to learn that new life ultimately comes from being baptized into Jesus’ death.

She followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. As he hung on the cross, she stood watching from a distance (Mk. 15:40). She was with him at the crucifixion and his burial (Mk. 15:47). Then she was the first one at the empty tomb where the angel proclaimed, ***“Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here”*** (Mk. 16:6).

Was Mary Magdalene the first disciple to be baptized by Jesus? St. Paul says that we are “baptized into his death.” To be baptized means to be immersed into his death. According to Paul, we share intimately the entire experience of the cross with Christ. In the Letter to the Romans, he wrote: ***“our old self was crucified with him ... we have died with Christ [and] we were buried with him”*** (Rom. 6:4-8). Mary Magdalene shared intimately in Jesus’ crucifixion, death, and burial. She was immersed (baptized) into his death. I picture her as the first baptized disciple, sharing intimately in Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection.

To better appreciate Mary Magdalene’s baptism and how it transformed her, I want to tell the story of another saint whose death overwhelmed the man he saved. It is the story of St. Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish priest who died in Auschwitz. When the Nazi soldiers chose ten men for the starvation bunker, one of the selected men, Franciszek Gajowniczek, cried out, “My wife. My children.” So, Fr. Kolbe volunteered to take his place, even though he did not know him.

In 1971 Gajowniczek was a guest of Pope Paul VI at the Vatican when he beatified Maximilian Kolbe. One year later, Gajowniczek spoke at Auschwitz to pilgrims celebrating the first anniversary of his beatification. He said, “I want to express my thanks for the gift of life.” Later a television reporter asked him what it felt like to have another man die that he might be spared. He said, “Ever since that day, I feel that I have been walking in another man’s shoes. I feel impelled to live with his attitude, by the values for which he lived and died.”

Gajowniczek was bowled over by Maximilian Kolbe's death. The sacrifice of love changed his life. He had a baptismal experience. By the grace of Christ at work in St. Maximilian, he experienced Christ's sacrifice. It was totally gratuitous. Kolbe never knew him. It filled him with new life, the Risen Life of Christ.

By the grace of Baptism, Kolbe himself was liberated from the power of death in the concentration camp. In 2004, I visited Auschwitz where Kolbe died. They have an Easter Candle burning in the cell. St. Maximilian became the Light of Christ in Auschwitz. He sang songs with the other men in the starvation bunker. He had an indomitable spirit. The Holy Spirit gave him the power of Jesus' victorious suffering.

St. Paul says that being baptized into Jesus' death frees us from the dominion of sin and immerses us into the kingdom of Christ. We go from feeling dominated by sin to being protected and empowered by God. We are embraced by Christ as a beloved daughter or son of God.

Julian of Norwich expresses this "closeness" of God by calling Christ her clothing. She says, Christ "wraps us up, holds us close, entirely enclosing us for tender love" (p. 112, *Words Around the Font*). That is why we clothe the newly baptized in a white garment. They are clothed in Christ, swaddled in divine love. The white symbolizes their dignity as children of God.

Easter Sunday is the anniversary of our baptism. Be aware of the gift of new life because we were baptized into Jesus' death. We are not worthy of such a gift, just as Gajowniczek was not worthy to have Fr. Maximilian Kolbe die for him. Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the other disciples were not worthy to have Jesus die for them.

But living with a sense of unworthiness is not the goal. It is appropriate to be humble before God but not to recoil in unworthiness. We are adopted sons and daughters of God. We walk in Christ. We are gifted with his Spirit. So, we are called to act like beloved children of God. When we live that gift, then we can be like St. Maximilian Kolbe.

This is the path to renew the Church. Are you living the newness of life that Mary Magdalene lived, or that Franciszek Gajowniczek lived? Do people see the power of Christ's death and resurrection alive in you?

If we live the Easter mystery, then we will be life-giving – like Maximilian Kolbe. We will radiate peace and hope to everyone around us. If we live the Easter mystery, then the Church will flourish. As the Body of Christ, we will radiate Love and Joy. We will not have enough room to get everyone inside the Church building.

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