

THINK OF “R.I.C.E.”...THINK OF BAPTISM

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

Year B

Is 55:1-11; (Ps)Is 12:2-6; 1 Jn 5:1-9; Mk 1:7-11

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In Nigeria the baptism of a child is usually followed by a happy reception where children are sure to eat one thing, rice. As a result, the baptism dress is sometimes referred to as your rice dress. Thinking of baptism easily makes people think of rice. And sometimes when you are talking about the rites of baptism, all they hear is the rice of baptism. Though the connection between baptism and rice is altogether accidental, one can utilize it as a memory aid for the meaning of baptism.

What does baptism mean? The meaning of baptism can be found in the four letters of the word RICE. R stands for Rebirth. In baptism we are born again by water and the Holy Spirit. We are cleansed from original sin and become sons and daughters of God in a special way. “I” stands for Initiation. At baptism we are initiated or admitted into full membership in the church, the community of the children of God in the world. C is for Consecration. In baptism we consecrate and dedicate ourselves to seek and to spread the kingdom of God. We commit ourselves to be servants of God, to do God’s will and serve God with our whole lives. And finally, E is for Empowerment. At baptism the Holy

Spirit comes into our lives and empowers us, equips us, gives us the moral strength to say no to evil and to live as God's children that we have become.

These four effects of baptism can be divided into two categories: the passive effects (what we receive from God and the people of God)... namely, rebirth, initiation, and empowerment; and the active effect (what we give to God and the people of God)...namely, our commitment and dedication to a cause, to spread the kingdom of God. One problem people have with today's gospel is to understand why Jesus needed to be baptized. An understanding of the "rice" of baptism, as we have tried to explain, can help.

Looking at the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan, we find that Jesus did not need a rebirth since he was from all eternity the only begotten child of God. He had no original sin from which to be cleansed. Did Jesus need initiation? Yes. Being human, Jesus needed to associate and to identify with the community of men and women who were dedicated to promoting the cause of the kingdom of God. When it comes to serving God, no one is an island. We need to interact with other

children of God. We need the community of faith just as Jesus did. We need the church. Empowerment: The Holy Spirit is the power of The Most High. The Spirit that descended on Jesus at his baptism strengthened and empowered him. It was at his baptism that “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; [and] he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil” (Acts 10:37-38). Consecration: Baptism for Jesus was a moment of self-consecration, a moment of self-dedication. For him it was a commitment to do whatever was necessary to promote the cause of the kingdom of God on earth.

We read that soon after Jesus’ baptism, John was arrested and the Kingdom of God movement needed new leadership. When Jesus heard it, he went up and took on the task, in this way implementing the commitment he made at his baptism to promote the kingdom of God. We can see that for Jesus, baptism was not just a question of what he could receive, but very much a question of what he could contribute to the cause of the kingdom of God on earth. John F. Kennedy’s saying, *“Ask not what your country can do for you, rather ask what you can do for*

your country”, can also be applied to our relationship with God and the Church.

What are we doing, each one of us, to promote the kingdom of God? Are we ready to consecrate and dedicate ourselves wholly to the service of the kingdom of God just as Jesus did? What are we doing to support those who have consecrated themselves to doing this work in the name of us all? Let us today with Jesus renew our baptismal commitment to bear witness to the Good News of the kingdom of God in word and in deed.

God bless you all....