

BAPTISM OF OUR LORD  
BAPTISED TO MAKE US ONE WITH HIM

*“No sooner had He come out of the water than He saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit, like a dove, descending on Him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are My Son, the Beloved; My favour rests on You”  
(Mk. 1: 10-11)*

***A friend once asked me: “Was Jesus baptised as an infant?”*** I did not understand why he asked the question until he explained himself. “We just celebrated the Christmas, the Birth of Jesus”, he began. “Last Sunday we celebrated the Epiphany, which marked the visit of the kings or wise men to Baby Jesus, that marked His revelation to the nations of the world outside the Jewish province”, he continued. “Then the following Sunday, we celebrate the Baptism, how come?” He asked. Only then did I understand what he meant. I could appreciate his confusion. And I still do, because there may be some people in a similar situation: pondering on the sequence of events between the early and adult life of Jesus. It is true that within the space of a few days, we have leapt from age zero to age thirty – from Birth to Baptism. As I told my friend then, the Church arranges the life-cycle events of Jesus not to so much as to follow specific or accurate chronological sequence but to enable us to commemorate them in remembrance of Him, whose existence is historical as the gospels affirm. St Matthew tells us: He was born “In the town of Bethlehem in Judea” (2: 5). St. Luke situates the Birth of Christ within a historical context: “At that time, Emperor Caesar Augustus issued a decree for a census of the whole world to be taken” (2: 1). In the Gospel of today, in giving the account of the Baptism of Jesus, St. Mark writes: “It was at this time that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised in the Jordan by John” (1: 9). Here St. Mark specifies and identifies the occasion, the venue and the person who baptised Jesus.

***Why Did Jesus Go to John Baptism?*** The question that people often ask is “Did Jesus need the baptism of John?” The one-off answer is “No, He did not need it.” John’s baptism was “for the forgiveness of sin” (Mk. 1: 4). “The goal (of baptism) is truly to leave behind the sinful life one has led until now and to start on the path to a new, changed life” (Benedict XVI: 2007: 15). Jesus was not only sinless; He was God (2 Cor. 5: 21). Therefore, there was no personal need for Him to be baptised; but there was a need for Jesus to identify with His people, and with sinful humanity that He came to save. This identification and solidarity will inexorably lead to the Cross in Calvary culminating in the Resurrection. John’s baptism represented a

movement. The people of Israel had lived a life of “stiff-necked” obstinacy and without a prophet for centuries. The emergence of John, his preaching and baptism offered an opening for revival and return. The people responded with remorse and determination to return to the God of their ancestors. Here, we see Jesus as the new Moses, the ideal intercessor (Ex. 32: 31-32), not standing apart from the sinners but in solidarity with them in God’s judgement (M. Healy: 2008: 35). By humbly presenting Himself before John to be baptised, Jesus therefore, identified with this popular Godward movement of His people and their calling. This act also confirmed John’s mission and ministry and divine. Thirdly, His baptism by John was in obedience to the Will of the Father, “to fulfil all righteousness (Matt. 3: 15). Obedience to the Father’s Will was the mantra of Jesus’ mission: “I have come down from heaven, not to do My Will but to do the Will of Him Who sent Me” (Jn. 6: 38). Lastly, by “stepping into the water of Jordan” to be baptised, Jesus sanctified the waters of our baptism thus opening the way, as Moses did at the Red Sea, for us to cross from a life of slavery to sin on to a new life of freedom of the children of God.

***Jesus’ Baptism was in anticipation of His Passion and Resurrection.*** By immersion into the water, the Baptism of Jesus symbolised His Death. And “coming out of the water” symbolised His resurrection. St. John Chrysostom writes: “Going down into the water and emerging again are the image of the descent into hell and the Resurrection.” Benedict XVI elucidates further: “His Baptism is a descent into the house of the evil one, combat with ‘the strong man’ (cf. Lk. 11: 22) who holds men captive (and the truth is that we are all very much captive to powers that anonymously manipulate us).” Our participation in Baptism as a sacrament enables us to share in this victory over “the strong man” before whom we are otherwise powerless and helpless. By our Baptism, we are buried with Christ with the hope that just as He died and rose again, we too shall rise with Him on the last day. “Therefore, we are buried with him by Baptism into death: that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so, we also should walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6: 4). By the Spirit we receive at our baptism we become intrinsically united with Christ, sharing in the one fatherhood which enables us to call God “Abba, Father!” (Rom. 8: 15).

***“No sooner had He come out of the water than He saw the heavens are torn apart, and the Spirit, like a dove, descending on Him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are My Son, the Beloved; My favour rests on You.”*** This is Mark’s description

of what took place immediately after the Baptism. This is a very powerful scene: sublime in effect and full of symbolism. The heaven does not just open but “torn apart.” This implies a forceful power splitting open the “abode of God” and breaking down every barrier between God and man. Israel’s prayer had thus been answered: “Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down” (Is. 64: 1). This was a sign of the communion between the Father and the Son, Who, in obedience, has fulfilled “all righteousness.” The descent of the Spirit like a dove recalls the “Spirit of God that hovered over the waters” at creation (Gen. 1: 2). It also reminds us of the dove that returned with a branch of olive in its beak after the flood of Noah (Gen. 8: 11). This is a sign of “new beginning/creation.” Jesus is the “New Beginning” of a New Covenant in which we are partakers. Thus so, our Baptism marks not only a break away from the old ways but the beginning of new ways of living in union with Christ. The image of a dove as representing humility, meekness, and peace relate to the Person of Christ, the Prince of Peace, Who was meek and humble (Is. 9: 6; Matt. 11: 29; Phil. 2: 8). The Holy Spirit “anoints” Jesus to inaugurate His mission and ministry as the Messiah. The Voice of the Father from heaven confirms the identity of Jesus as “God’s Beloved” and “Only Son”; it echoes the words of the Psalmist (2: 7) and prophet Isaiah (42: 1). These point to the new relationship we have with Christ and God the Father at baptism: we become God’s children and members of the Church, the Body of Christ. In this scene, we encounter God the Father, speaking; God the Son baptised; God the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. At Baptism, we are bonded in the love of the Trinity.

***My dear friends,*** we celebrate this day to also remind us of our baptism. The joy this brought to our families and friends. That happiness could be kept alive if we carry the torch of the commission of Christ: “You shall be My witnesses to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1: 8), and live it out to the full with pride and courage. This is an opportunity for us to reflect on our Christian journey; on the vows, we made at our Baptism – when we rejected Satan and all his works; and affirmed our faith in God. Are we God’s beloved children still? Does God’s favour still rest in us? Are we still maintaining that relationship with the Trinity? How far have we travelled? How many souls have we won for Christ?

May the grace of God be sufficient for us. Amen.