



The Holy See

FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

MASS AND ADMINISTRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Sistine Chapel

Sunday, 9 January 2011

(Video)

Photo Gallery

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am glad to offer a cordial welcome, especially to you, the parents and godparents of the 21 infants to whom, in a little while, I shall have the joy of administering the sacrament of Baptism. Now a tradition, this year too the Rite is taking place during the Holy Eucharistic Celebration with which we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord. It is the Feast which, on the first Sunday after the Epiphany, concludes the Christmas Season with the Lord's manifestation at the River Jordan.

According to the account of the Evangelist Matthew (3:13-17), Jesus came from Galilee to the River Jordan to be baptized by John; indeed people were flocking from all over Palestine to hear the preaching of this great Prophet and the proclamation of the coming of the Kingdom of God and to receive Baptism, that is, to submit to that sign of penance which calls for conversion from sin.

Although it was called "Baptism" it did not have the sacramental value of the rite we are celebrating today; as you well know, it was actually with his death and Resurrection that Jesus instituted the sacraments and caused the Church to be born. What John administered was a penitential act, a gesture of humility to God that invited a new beginning: by immersing themselves in the water, penitents recognized that they had sinned, begged God for purification from their sins and were asked to change wrong behaviour, dying in the water, as it were, and rising from it to

new life.

For this reason, when John the Baptist saw Jesus who had come to be baptized queuing with sinners he was amazed; recognizing him as the Messiah, the Holy One of God, the One who is without sin, John expressed his consternation: he, the Baptist, would himself have liked to be baptized by Jesus. But Jesus urged him not to put up any resistance, to agree to do this act, to do what is fitting “to fulfil all righteousness”.

With these words Jesus showed that he had come into the world to do the will of the One who had sent him, to carry out all that the Father would ask of him. It was in order to obey the Father that he accepted to be made man. This act reveals, first of all, who Jesus is: he is the Son of God, true God as the Father; he is the One who “humbled himself” to make himself one of us, the One who was made man and who accepted to humble himself unto death on a cross (*cf.* Phil 2:7).

The Baptism of Jesus, which we are commemorating today, fits into this logic of humility and solidarity: it is the action of the One who wanted to make himself one of us in everything and who truly joined the line of sinners; he, who knew no sin, let himself be treated as a sinner (*cf.* 2 Cor 5:21), to take upon his shoulders the burden of the sin of all humanity, including our own sin. He is the “servant” of Yahweh of whom the Prophet Isaiah spoke in the First Reading (*cf.* 42:1). His humility is dictated by the desire to establish full communion with humanity, by the desire to bring about true solidarity with man and with his human condition.

Jesus’ action anticipates the Cross, his acceptance of death for man’s sins. This act of abasement, by which Jesus wanted to comply totally with the loving plan of the Father and to conform himself with us, expresses the full harmony of will and intentions that exists between the Persons of the Most Holy Trinity. For this act of love, the Spirit of God revealed himself and descended to alight upon Jesus as a dove, and at that moment the love which unites Jesus to the Father was witnessed to all who were present at the Baptism by a voice from Heaven that everyone heard.

The Father reveals openly to human beings, to us, the profound communion that binds him to the Son: the voice that resounds from on high testifies that Jesus is obedient to the Father in all things and that this obedience is an expression of the love that unites them to each other.

Therefore the Father delights in Jesus, for he recognizes in the Son’s behaviour the wish to obey his will in all things: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3:17). And these words of the Father also allude, in advance, to the victory of the Resurrection and tell us how we must live in order to please the Father, by behaving like Jesus.

Dear parents, the Baptism, that you are asking for your children today, inserts them into this exchange of reciprocal love that is in God between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit;

through this act that I am about to carry out, God's love is poured out upon them, showering them with his gifts. Your children, cleansed by the water, are inserted into the very life of Jesus who died on the Cross to free us from sin and in rising, conquered death.

Therefore, spiritually immersed in his death and Resurrection they are set free from original sin and the life of grace is born within them, which is the very life of the Risen Jesus. He "gave himself for us", St Paul says, "to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds" (Tit 2:14).

Dear friends, in giving us faith, the Lord has given us what is most precious in life, that is, the truest and most beautiful reason for living: it is through grace that we have believed in God, that we have known his love with which he wants to save us and to deliver us from evil. Faith is the great gift with which he also gives us eternal life, true life. Now, dear parents and godparents, you are asking the Church to receive these children within her, to give them Baptism; and you are making this request by virtue of the gift of faith that you yourselves, in turn, have received.

Together with the Prophet Isaiah every Christian can say: "The Lord... formed me from the womb to be his servant" (*cf.* 49:5); thus, dear parents, your children are a precious gift of the Lord, who has kept their hearts for himself in order to fill them with his love. Today, through the sacrament of Baptism, he consecrates them and calls them to follow Jesus, through the realization of their personal vocation in accordance with that particular plan of love that the Father has in mind for each one of them; the destination of this earthly pilgrimage will be full communion with him in eternal happiness.

In receiving Baptism these children obtain as a gift an indelible spiritual seal, the "character" that inwardly marks their belonging to the Lord for ever and makes them living members of his Mystical Body, which is the Church. While they become part of the People of God, today a journey begins for these children which must be a journey of holiness and of conformation to Jesus, a reality that is placed within them like the seed of a splendid tree whose growth must be nurtured.

Therefore, understanding the greatness of this gift, from the earliest centuries care has been taken to give Baptism to newborn infants. Of course, later there will be the need for a free and conscious adherence to this life of faith and love. For this reason, after Baptism they must be educated in the faith, instructed in accordance with the wisdom of Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Church so that this seed of faith that they are receiving today may grow within them and that they may attain full Christian maturity. The Church, which welcomes them among her children must take charge of them, together with their parents and godparents, to accompany them on this journey of growth.

Collaboration between the Christian community and the family is especially necessary in the contemporary social context in which the family institution is threatened on many sides and finds

itself having to face numerous difficulties in its role of raising children in the faith. The lack of stable cultural references and the rapid transformation to which society is constantly subjected, truly make the commitment to bring them up arduous. Parishes must therefore do their utmost increasingly to sustain families, small domestic churches, in their task of passing on the faith.

Dear parents, together with you I thank the Lord for the gift of the Baptism of your little sons and daughters; in raising our prayers for them, let us invoke in abundance the gift of the Holy Spirit, who today consecrates them in the image of Christ the Priest, King and Prophet. As I entrust them to the motherly intercession of Mary Most Holy, let us ask for life and health for them, so that they may grow and mature in the faith and with their lives bear fruits of holiness and of love. Amen!

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