

Homily for the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord
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By Deacon Nick Thompson

Baptism, Its Amazing! How is it that babies bring adults back to church? It never ceases to amaze me! The number of young and old alike whose souls are damaged for whatever reason, who have stopped attending Mass, stopped participating in their faith and yet are drawn to have their children or grandchildren Baptized. Most times their intent is not even to begin attending church again. It's more a need to make life perfect and complete, to satisfy the inner yearning for wholeness that our Father in heaven plants within our broken lives. The Father in heaven calls out continuously to otherwise deaf ears. He whispers in those ears His desire to adopt this new soul and to heal a broken relationship. Ears long deadened to His call, but now lovingly attuned to the needs of a newborn, to the cries of innocence hear and heed His call. Conversion, healing, repentance and forgiveness are given yet another chance to seep into broken souls. Isn't it amazing how God works!

But why did Jesus get baptized? He isn't broken by original sin. He doesn't have a broken relationship with the Father in heaven. He is full of the Holy Spirit for all eternity. What purpose did his baptism by John serve? Jesus chose the Jordan river, the font of life in the dessert,

to become the womb of mother church through which each of us is born again as a child of God. Jesus gets Baptized to provide salvation for us. The way, the truth and the life eternally re-purposes the water for new birth.

The Church emphasizes three basic truths in its teaching concerning baptism: first, that just as Christ was made incarnate, conceived in the womb of Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, our immortality lost due to sin is restored, we are conceived as children of God by the Holy Spirit through the womb of the Baptismal font; second, that Jesus calls us to discipleship to be students of His Word and finally that he commissions us to complete his work to teach, to spread the good news. Baptism is at one time initiation, call and commission.

People often ask if they can schedule a private Baptism. Initiation rites are necessarily public ceremonies. Christ's baptism was at a busy crossing in a public river that supplied life-giving water to all the nations through which it flowed. Perhaps you have gone to or seen pictures of the Lateran Basilica in Rome, or the great Cathedrals of Florence, Siena or Pisa. Next to these basilicas you find a very large circular building. These are baptistries, large enough for the entire congregation to gather around a central baptism font. This is how the early Church envisioned baptism. And this is what happened for centuries. This is why we regularly try to have baptisms during Mass, this is why we have

a single source of holy water rather than having mini-baptism fonts at each door. Regardless of how a parish organizes its celebration of baptism, it is clear that no private baptism was ever envisioned. Baptism is a public revelation an adoption into the body of Christ not a private celebration.

It is a public revelation of our common call to discipleship. In the early days of the Church this call was so serious that people who were not born into Christian families spent years preparing to enter the Church. The catechumenate, the period of preparation, usually lasted three years. In some places it lasted seven years. All during this time the candidates for baptism had to prove their sincerity to live as Jesus lived by prayer and good works. They even had to produce witnesses who would publicly testify to this. Back in those days to be baptized was to be counter cultural. Perhaps we are approaching that point again. To accept the Lord's call to discipleship means to live differently from the rest of the world. It means we make a commitment to holiness.

Today, we provide baptismal classes for new parents to alert them that their child's baptism is not just an erasing of original sin but a new birth, a call to discipleship. The life of the disciple must be lived by the child's parents, passed on by example for generations. By having their child baptized, parents are taught that they are taking upon

themselves the responsibility to raise disciples for Christ. That is the reason why the greatest action any person can take with his or her life is to raise a Christian, or two, or three or four.... This year in our catechumenate, our RCIA process, we have nineteen Elect to be fully initiated at Easter Vigil. Some are still in need of witnesses of sponsors willing to walk with them in these last weeks before their baptism, their initiation into our faith community. Perhaps one of you feels called.

Finally, baptism is not just a christening, Baptism is a commissioning. Jesus' Baptism is a model for our own -- by the coming of the Spirit, he was filled with knowledge of himself as God's beloved and empowered for mission. Through our Baptisms Jesus' role as priest, prophet and servant/king and his mission, become our own as we each become a Temple of the Holy Spirit. All of us, not just priests, all of us are commissioned through our baptism to be representatives of Jesus. All of us are chosen by God to fulfill his mission. Remember, Jesus told us, "It is not you who chose me, it is I who chose you."

Baptism means for us exactly what it meant for Jesus that day he stepped into the River Jordan and was washed by John. He was beginning his public life, his mission. His baptism was his initiation, his entrance into that mission. He emerged from the water commissioned by the Father to do his work. In the waters of Baptism, we have been

initiated, called and commissioned. We have been initiated into a worldwide people, called to discipleship and commissioned to ministry.

“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” The importance of this theophany lies in the words of the Father. Jesus and Jesus alone, is our teacher. Our way to God the Father is through the person of Jesus Christ. We take these steps by responding to his call for us to take up our crosses and follow him. Any theory or practice that diminishes the need for Jesus in our lives or relegates his presence to a secondary role can not be our way to the Father. When you leave Church today and dip your fingers into the water of the baptismal font, into the womb of the church, think of your holiness, your adoption as a child of God, your call to discipleship and God’s statement of your commission: “You are my Beloved in whom I am well pleased. Go and be my disciples.” *His love is beyond our understanding. His voice is the one we need to hear.* Isn’t it amazing how God works!