

Homily 011016

ONLY RARELY DO CATHOLICS REMEMBER THEIR BAPTISM

I was baptized on May 4, 1947 at Saint David Parish in Willow Grove. I was 19 days old. I have no memory of the event. My father was there and my Godparents but not my mother because in those days the mothers rarely attended the baptism of their babies. Typically maternity involved about a week in the hospital not today's 36 hours max. Newborns were baptized very quickly in those days. The thinking was that you did not even take your baby out until after baptism in case, God forbid, anything should happen to the little one. Mothers would have a special blessing ceremony done by the priest after Sunday Mass on the day when she finally returned to Sunday Mass participation. This blessing was called Churching.

While I have no memory of the event in later years my father told me that after the baptism was concluded he picked me up in his arms and carried me to the main altar and he placed me right where the bread and wine were consecrated. My dad told me that in that moment he gave thanks to God for me another child and he entrusted me in that moment into the hands of Almighty God. My father's understanding of things was that children were never outright given to their parents but rather loaned, entrusted and only for a time. His thinking was that we always belonged to God, came from God and would one day return to God. Baptism was our becoming part of the Body of Christ and the Life of Christ. If we live with him we die with him. If we die with him we rise with him. It was pretty down to earth and pretty logical. Remember this was 1947 right after World War II ended. I was given by God and I was given back.

Baptism didn't start with Jesus but it peaked with Jesus. Baptism was used in various ways in ancient times. The Jews were very conscious of water and how vital it was to their existence. No water, no life. Without water, you die. For the Jews, at that time, you became a Jew by being born of Jews especially a Jewish father. That was then. Today you become a Jew by being born of a Jewish mother or Jewish parents. If you want to convert to Judaism as an adult then you undergo a period of study and then you are actually baptized in a Mikvah that cleanses the old and renders you a Jew. What John the Baptist was doing was different from all that. John was using water in a different way, not to designate somebody as a Jew but rather designating one who was already a Jew for a second chance. John's baptism washed away one's past sins and called each person to a personal change of heart. The baptism by immersion was a sign to the world that you wanted to change your life and turn your life around and begin living in a more Godly way. John's baptism was definitely about sinners changing their ways.

So in the early Church the question arose pretty quickly why did Jesus undergo John's baptism, especially if Jesus really was the Son of God and therefore sinless. Why did he need to be baptized by John? In Matthew's Gospel John the Baptist himself asks this question of Jesus and Jesus replies by asking John to let it be for now to fulfill all righteousness. What does that mean?

Jesus seeks out John the Baptist. He finds him down by the Dead Sea but a little farther upstream of the Jordan River. Jesus allows John to baptize him so that he, Jesus, can enter into a genuine solidarity with all of us who are sinners. Jesus becomes one with us. In that moment he establishes the humility of God in the person of Jesus. But in the very moment Jesus undergoes baptism Jesus himself transforms baptism. John baptizes with water only; Jesus will baptize with water (cleansing), with the Holy Spirit (with power) and with fire (that is, love). Jesus brings all that to the table. He changes everything. Jesus supercharges baptism with his own Spirit. Later on after the resurrection and the Ascension will come Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descends on the disciples and Mary all gathered in the Upper Room where the first Eucharist was celebrated.

A tongue of fire over each person's head. Was it more visible or was it something they felt? I have had people pray over me with their hands on my head many times. At various times I have felt a very distinct heat emanating into my head from them sometimes there is the experience of something akin to goose bumps. But they are not goose bumps. What is really happening is that the person is experiencing an anointing, an anointing of the Holy Spirit. It happens and to some people it happens all the time. I was visiting some longtime friends on Friday night and we were sharing our experiences of when Pope Francis came to Philly and at three different points in the discussion the woman said, "Oh I just got goose bumps when you told that story." Not goose bumps. An anointing. She heard the truth and experienced the presence as a slight shiver almost. When you are in a moment of truth and your experience a body flush--that is a grace from the Holy Spirit who has already been poured out upon you. It is a little telltale sign of God's presence, a slight reminder that God is near and we are not alone and his truth is everywhere in this world and the war has been won and death has been vanquished.

All here today have been baptized into Christ. It makes all the difference in the world. We belong to Christ from that moment. His Spirit lives in us in a new way from that moment. And the Spirit of God is real and at work in us whether we realize it or not. But it is better to realize it, believe it, look for signs of it, listen for moments of it, and be attentive to the manifestations of it. All these are little ways that the empowering Spirit is at work in us to make available to us all that we need. It is no pretend thing. And if you want proof for yourself—dare to ask God to give you such a manifestation. Then stand back. He has been waiting for you to ask.