

# Baptism Is a Call to a Prophetic Career

## Gospel Reflection for Feast of the Lord's Baptism Year C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, JAN. 6, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- The theme of Christ's epiphany -- of Jesus inaugurating his divine mission on earth -- reaches its fulfillment in the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. The feast seemingly brings an end to the Christmas season, but Christmas really ends with the feast of the Presentation of the Lord on Feb. 2.

In today's Gospel story (Luke 3:15-16, 21-22), Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee after the baptism preached by John. In describing the expectation of the people (3:15), Luke is characterizing the time of John's preaching in the same way as he had earlier described the situation of other devout Israelites in the infancy narrative (2:25-26, 37-38). John the Baptist tells of one far greater than he, one with a more powerful baptism.

In contrast to John's baptism with water, Jesus is said to baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Luke 3:16). From the point of view of the early Christian community, the Spirit and fire must have been understood in the light of the fire symbolism of the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). As part of John's preaching, the Spirit and fire should be related to their purifying and refining characteristics (Ezekiel 36:25-27; Malachi 3:2-3).

When Jesus is baptized, the voice from heaven booms out and names him: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This affirmation is the defining moment for the prophet from Nazareth. It is God's declaration of love to God's new Israel; it is God's naming to supreme accountability; it is God's surprise for the world of the proud and powerful.

Through his baptism by John in the muddy waters of the Jordan, Jesus opens the possibility to us of accepting our human condition and of connecting with God the way we were intended to. Jesus accepts the human condition, and this includes suffering and death. He stretched his arms out in the Jordan River and on the cross. In the Jordan, Jesus received his commission. On the cross he completed it. Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan identifies him deeply with the people he has come to redeem.

We, too, are called to a prophetic career.

When we were baptized into Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death. Our baptism is a public, prophetic and royal anointing. We receive the life of the Church and are called to sustain that faith life. Faith is about concern for others. Faith is a public -- not private -- responsibility.

Baptism is a call to a prophetic career. How we live that out may vary from person to person. The ways may not be as dramatic as the adventures of an Isaiah or a John the Baptist, yet they are in that same great prophetic tradition. To be prophetic is to become involved and to get our hands and feet dirty.

## ZENIT

Through our own baptism, we can become a light to others, just as Jesus is a light to us, and to the world. Our own baptism fills us with a certain boldness, confidence and enthusiasm, reminding us that the Gospel must be proclaimed with gratitude for its proven beauty.

When we slowly discover the demands of that faith, and where the way of repentance leads, when we can tell good from evil; when we search for what God wants to do in our lives and ask him to help us accomplish it; when we learn as much as we can about God and his world; when we come near to God, then -- at that moment -- the person for whom the heavens opened is revealed also to us.

### Baptism in today's Church

In many parts of the world today, baptizing children has already become the exception. The number of unbaptized infants, children, young people, and adults is on the rise. The decline in the practice of baptism is the result of an erosion of family ties and a departure from the Church. During numerous priests' retreats, gatherings of priests and pastors, I have often heard it discussed that when the priest does not see visible signs of the practice of faith, then the Church would have the right to refuse the sacraments to people, especially baptism. It is a very complex question.

Could we not, however also listen anew to the Gospel missionary injunction to "baptize, preach and teach" not by waiting for the people to come to us but by going out to meet the people where they are in today's messy world? What is demanded of us is a new missionary fervor and zeal that do not require extraordinary events. It is in ordinary, daily life that mission work is done. Baptism is absolutely fundamental to this fervor and zeal.

The sacraments are for the life of men and women as they are, not as we would like them to be! I can hear Venerable Pope John Paul II crying out to us: "Duc in altum!" It is not in the shallow, familiar waters that you will find those who most need you!

The dilemma of withholding baptism and other sacraments from those believed to be unfit because they are not practicing has always been present in the Church. It is a dilemma that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger experienced personally as a young man, and finally resolved later in life. Listen to what Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI, said in replying to a related question from a priest of Bressanone in northern Italy, in a public question-and-answer session with the clergy of the diocese on Aug. 6, 2008. The priest, Father Paolo Rizzi, a pastor and professor of theology, asked Benedict XVI a question about baptism, confirmation, and first communion:

"Holy Father, 35 years ago I thought that we were beginning to be a little flock, a minority community, more or less everywhere in Europe; that we should therefore administer the sacraments only to those who are truly committed to Christian life. Then, partly because of the style of John Paul II's Pontificate, I thought things through again. If it is possible to make predictions for the future, what do you think? What pastoral approaches can you suggest to us?"

Benedict XVI responded with these words, so fitting for us on the feast of the Baptism of the Lord this year:

"I must say that I took a similar route to yours. When I was younger I was rather severe. I said: the sacraments are sacraments of faith, and where faith does not exist, where the practice of faith does not exist, the Sacrament cannot be conferred either. And then I always used to talk to my parish priests when I was Archbishop of Munich: here too there were two factions, one severe and one broad-minded. Then I too, with time, came to realize that we must follow, rather, the example of the Lord, who was very open even with people on the margins of Israel of that time. He was a Lord of mercy, too open -- according to many official authorities -- with sinners, welcoming them or letting them invite him to their dinners, drawing them to him in his communion. [...]

## ZENIT

"I would say, therefore, that in the context of the catechesis of children, that work with parents is very important. And this is precisely one of the opportunities to meet with parents, making the life of faith also present to the adults, because, it seems to me, they themselves can relearn the faith from the children and understand that this great solemnity is only meaningful, true and authentic if it is celebrated in the context of a journey with Jesus, in the context of a life of faith. Thus, one should endeavor to convince parents, through their children, of the need for a preparatory journey that is expressed in participation in the mysteries and that begins to make these mysteries loved. [...]

"I would say that this is definitely an inadequate answer, but the pedagogy of faith is always a journey and we must accept today's situations. Yet, we must also open them more to each person, so that the result is not only an external memory of things that endures but that their hearts that have truly been touched. The moment when we are convinced the heart is touched -- it has felt a little of Jesus' love, it has felt a little the desire to move along these lines and in this direction, that is the moment when, it seems to me, we can say that we have made a true catechesis. The proper meaning of catechesis, in fact, must be this: to bring the flame of Jesus' love, even if it is a small one, to the hearts of children, and through the children to their parents, thus reopening the places of faith of our time."

May today's feast of the Lord's Baptism be an invitation to each of you to remember with gratitude and renew your own baptismal promises. Relive the moment of the water that rushed over you. Pray that the grace of your own baptism will help you to be light to others and to the world, and give you the strength and courage to make a difference in the world and in the Church.

[The readings for the feast of the Baptism of the Lord are Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7, or Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; Acts 10:34-38, or Timothy 2:11-14; 3:4-7; and Luke 3:15-16, 21-22]

\* \* \*

Basilian Father Thomas Rosica, chief executive officer of the Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation and Television Network in Canada, is a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. He can be reached at: [rosica@saltandlighttv.org](mailto:rosica@saltandlighttv.org).

--- --- ---

On the Net:

Salt and Light: [www.saltandlighttv.org](http://www.saltandlighttv.org)

All video versions of Salt and Light Christmas Reflections: <http://saltandlighttv.org/advent.html>

© Innovative Media, Inc.

Reprinting ZENIT's articles requires written permission from the [editor](#).