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Baptism Makes Us Members of the Family of Jesus

Biblical Reflection for Baptism of the Lord, Year A

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, JAN. 6, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Salt and Light Television (my other life!) recently produced a magnificent documentary titled "[Within Your Gates](#)," which details Benedict XVI's historic pilgrimage to Jordan and Israel in 2009. Among the moving scenes in the film are those of the Holy Father's visit, along with Jordan's King Abdullah II and his wife, Queen Rania, to what is strongly believed to be the baptismal site of Jesus at the Jordan River in Jordan. As I reviewed all the footage and listened closely to the Pope's moving homily at the Jordan River, I could not think of more fitting way to prepare for the feast of the Baptism of the Lord that we celebrate today.

Benedict XVI reflected on the Jesus' baptism, which he described as being "brought vividly before us in this place." The Pope said: "Jesus stood in line with sinners and accepted John's baptism of penance as a prophetic sign of his own passion, death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins. Down through the centuries, many pilgrims have come to the Jordan to seek purification, renew their faith and draw closer to the Lord. Such was the pilgrim Egeria, who left a written account of her visit during the late fourth century.

"The sacrament of baptism, drawing its power from Christ's death and resurrection, will be cherished especially by the Christian communities that gather in the new church buildings. May the Jordan always remind you that you have been washed in the waters of baptism and have become members of the family of Jesus. Your lives, in obedience to his word, are being transformed into his image and likeness. As you strive to be faithful to your baptismal commitment of conversion, witness and mission, know that you are being strengthened by the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Scriptural insights

Three rich Scripture readings are spread before us for the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. Each reading gives us some profound insights into the baptism of Jesus and our own baptism.

Today's first reading from Isaiah's second "Suffering Servant Song" (42:1-4, 6-7) introduces us to the Suffering Servant of the Lord who lives in union, communion and sympathy with the entire human family. The Lord has chosen a special servant to be and to show the divine glory in the world. The striking fact about Isaiah 42:1-9 is that the Servant is never clearly identified. What is emphasized is the activity and character of the Servant. This servant was chosen by God; he was given God's Spirit, so he would bring justice to everyone, Jew and foreigner alike. For the society of the time, the servant would be counter-cultural; he would not be interested in fame or power. But his rule would be gentle but would be sure. His rule would precede his teaching to the coastlands, areas west (the Mediterranean world) and south (along the Red Sea).

Isaiah 42:1-4 reminds the people of God to be humble since they are not God's sole agents of justice and righteousness. In some cases God may be accomplishing his plans for his people through the nations (e.g.,

ZENIT

44:28). In verses 6-7, God, himself, commissioned the Servant. God called the servant to justice and to act as his own representative. The Servant would give the blind sight and prisoners freedom. These images of sight and liberation could be taken literally or figuratively. At the time of Second Isaiah, the ruling elite of Judea were captives held by the blind ambition of foreign dictators. In a figurative sense, the blindness and imprisonment could be the people's lack of faith. In either case, the Servant would be God's instrument of healing, wholeness and liberation.

Deep goodness

The extraordinary story of Cornelius' conversion in today's second reading (Acts 10:34-38) certainly sheds light on the meaning and implications of baptism. It is the longest individual narrative in the Acts of the Apostles. The theme of this narrative is divine compulsion: Peter is the least prepared to accept Cornelius into the Christian community and he even refuses to admit him two times. Peter had to be converted before he could convert Cornelius. Peter came to the realization that God's gifts were given to all those who listened to the Word of God. His question "Can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (10:47) echoes the Ethiopian's question and Philip's response in the earlier story: "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" (8:36)?

Peter's actions with Cornelius had far-reaching implications. Struck at once with the exceptional sincerity, hospitality and deep goodness of Cornelius and his household, Peter spontaneously exclaimed: "God has made it clear to me that no one should call anyone unclean or impure... God shows no partiality." That statement broke centuries of customs and even of theology, that Israel, alone was God's chosen people, separated from all other nations as God's very own (cf. Deuteronomy 7:6-8; Exodus 19:5-6). Peter had no choice but to baptize the household of Cornelius and he was criticized for his 'ecumenical' approach but responded to his critics: "Who am I that I could withstand God" (11:17)? When his critics heard these words, they were silenced and began to glorify God (11:18).

Paul, too, found the same spontaneous manifestation of the faith among the gentiles and so made the exciting declaration: "We now turn to the Gentiles!" The controversy over the law was to linger for a long time, so that Paul dedicated to this topic his most comprehensive theological work: the letter to the Romans.

Messianic Vocation

The Gospel reading for this feast, Matthew 3:13-17, contains echoes of Isaiah 42. Jesus' anointing by the Spirit of God (3:16) and recalls the Lord God's declaration in 42:1, "I have put my spirit on him." The affirmation of Jesus as God's "Beloved, with whom (he is) well pleased" (3:17) evokes God's designation of his Servant as "(his) chosen, in whom (his) soul delights" (Isaiah 42:1). The commissioning of Jesus to a vocation of Servanthood at his Baptism indicates this new age has begun.

In Matthew's baptism scene, we catch a glimpse of not only the intimate relationship between Father and Son but also the consequences of that relationship. The private believer is a public servant. According to Matthew, when Jesus rises, dripping, from the waters of the Jordan, John has moved on to the next baptism and the crowds are busy with repentance. Jesus alone sees the Spirit descending on wings of light to rest upon his soggy head. Jesus alone hears the well-pleased voice of God calling him "Beloved Son." The experience drives him out alone into the desert for 40 days to hone his calling. No wonder that when he returns to begin his ministry, one of his first actions is to call disciples. Enough solitude already! It's time for company!

Sacraments of initiation

In receiving the life of Christ in baptism, we Christians are also called upon to sustain the life of the Church. Baptism is truly a leap into the mystery of Jesus, a leap and an immersion that transform us fully into his

ZENIT

likeness. Like the Servant in today's reading from the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 42:1-4,6-7), we are to replace darkness with light. Like the Servant in Matthew, we are to replace pain with healing. Far from being purely a private gift, faith is a public responsibility. We must stand up and take our rightful place in the Church. Our sharing in the Eucharist bonds us together with our brothers and sisters who have been immersed into the life of Christ through the waters of baptism.

As the New Year begins, we need sight to see beyond our limitations and freedom from our self-imposed faults. Our relationship with God helps us to see beyond the little worlds in which we live. How does God help us to see the possibilities? How does faith in Christ help lift us up and radically change us? Let us pray that the grace of our own baptism will help us to be light to others and to the world, and give us the strength and courage to make a difference, to be counted among the family and friends of Jesus.

Responsibility for the proclamation of the Gospel

As we continue our reflection on Pope Benedict's Apostolic Exhortation "Verbum Domini" that followed the Synod of Bishops on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church we read in paragraph #94 that all the baptized are responsible for the proclamation of the Gospel.

"Since the entire People of God is a people which has been "sent", the Synod reaffirmed that "the mission of proclaiming the word of God is the task of all of the disciples of Jesus Christ based on their Baptism". No believer in Christ can feel dispensed from this responsibility which comes from the fact of our sacramentally belonging to the Body of Christ. A consciousness of this must be revived in every family, parish, community, association and ecclesial movement. The Church, as a mystery of communion, is thus entirely missionary, and everyone, according to his or her proper state in life, is called to give an incisive contribution to the proclamation of Christ. Bishops and priests, in accordance with their specific mission, are the first to be called to live a life completely at the service of the word, to proclaim the Gospel, to celebrate the sacraments and to form the faithful in the authentic knowledge of Scripture. Deacons too must feel themselves called to cooperate, in accordance with their specific mission, in this task of evangelization.

Throughout the Church's history the consecrated life has been outstanding for explicitly taking up the task of proclaiming and preaching the word of God in the 'missio ad gentes' and in the most difficult situations, for being ever ready to adapt to new situations and for setting out courageously and boldly along fresh paths in meeting new challenges for the effective proclamation of God's word.

The laity are called to exercise their own prophetic role, which derives directly from their Baptism, and to bear witness to the Gospel in daily life, wherever they find themselves. In this regard the Synod Fathers expressed "the greatest esteem, gratitude and encouragement for the service to evangelization which so many of the lay faithful, and women in particular, provide with generosity and commitment in their communities throughout the world, following the example of Mary Magdalene, the first witness of the joy of Easter". The Synod also recognized with gratitude that the ecclesial movements and the new communities are a great force for evangelization in our times and an incentive to the development of new ways of proclaiming the Gospel."

[The readings for the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord are Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Acts 10:34-38; Matthew 3:13-17]

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