

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
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As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of Pope Francis to this country, I greet you in his name, assuring all gathered here in this basilica, along with those joining through radio, television, and live-streaming, of the spiritual closeness and paternal affection of the Holy Father at the dawn of this new year and at the conclusion of the Christmas season.

Today's Gospel passage from Saint Luke mentions Jesus' baptism in passing. Luke emphasizes the investiture of Jesus with the descent of the Holy Spirit and the declaration of Jesus as the Son of God. The first part of the Gospel presents John the Baptist, who is preparing the people for the coming of the Messiah. Jesus Himself prepares for the mission entrusted to Him by the Father by submitting to baptism. It seems strange to us that Jesus should submit to baptism since He never sinned.

Why then was Jesus baptized by John? Jesus, though he never sinned, *wants* to be baptized. Many people were coming to be baptized by John as a sign of repentance and as an expression of wanting to live in a new way. Jesus, though sinless, blends into the gray mass of sinners waiting on the banks of the Jordan. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells John: "Let it be so for now; for this it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." This fulfillment of all righteousness will happen with Jesus' death on the cross; His descent among the dead; and His resurrection.

As we conclude the Christmas season, we are already moving toward Easter. The average Jew who came to John descended into the waters of baptism, confessed his guilt, and pleaded for forgiveness in order to make a new beginning. Although John's baptism did not wash away sins in the sense of Christian baptism, it was a sign of a deeper commitment to a new way of living. In that sense, it is not unlike what catechumens desire: to be freed from sin and to live a new life.

Luke also notes that Jesus was at prayer – in conversation with His Father – when preparing to be baptized. At the beginning of His public life, He chose how to live His belonging to the Father: to be a man in the midst of ordinary men and who, even though not being a sinner, to stand in line with sinners to receive the baptism of John. He chose to remain faithful to the Incarnation, to stay within this style: of being wholly God and wholly man, assuming the weakness of human nature, and of being God-with-us. The baptism of Jesus reveals His desire, even His need, to be in relationship with the Father. His baptism sets an example for us that we need a relationship with God to have true life.

Jesus' baptism is another example of His solidarity with humanity. Looking at Jesus' baptism in light of the Cross and Resurrection, early Christians realized what had happened: Jesus loaded the burden of mankind's guilt upon his shoulders; He bore it down into the depths of the River Jordan. He manifested the beginning of His public ministry by stepping into the place of sinners.

His inaugural gesture is an anticipation of the Cross. He is the "true Jonah" who says: "take me and throw me into the sea". The whole significance of Jesus' baptism comes to light on the Cross. Jesus' Baptism is

an acceptance of death for the sins of humanity, and the Father's voice calls out: "This is my Beloved Son", anticipating the Resurrection of the Beloved Son.

The descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus is a reminder for us that this divine life is open to us if we are willing to live as a son or daughter of God – to die to ourselves; to humble ourselves; to be in solidarity with our brothers and sisters; and to be open to receive a gift from on high which we cannot give ourselves. This feast is an invitation to live as a son or daughter in the Beloved Son.

To accept the invitation to be baptized is to go to the place of Jesus' baptism; to go where He identifies himself with us and to receive our identification with Him. To go to those waters means to descend into them and to "drown", even in a violent fashion, that which in us needs to die: our sinfulness. Then, we can truly ascend from our baseness and rise with Him.

Last Sunday, we celebrated the Epiphany, recalling the journey of the Magi who searched for God. This feast was also celebrated as part of Epiphany, which means manifestation. As much as we think about our journey and search for God, whether leading up to our baptism or after, we must also recognize God's search for us. He desires to share His life with us. Through baptism, we participate in the divine Trinitarian life, and we celebrate God's finding of us.

This is the starting point for understanding the unique role of Jesus in our salvation. God wants to share His life with persons who are not God. This sharing cannot come from anyone but God Himself. By sharing His life with us, God not only forgives our sins but makes it possible for us to live in a new way. Thus, the Preface for the Epiphany reads: "For today you have revealed the mystery of our salvation in Christ as a light for the nations, and, when he appeared in our mortal nature, you made us new by the glory of His immortal nature."

Salvation is not something that comes from us, nor does it emanate from the created order; rather, it is a gift from God, and this is the best Christmas gift! God wants to share His life with us – with the entire human race. This happens in and through Christ, who heals us from our sins and who raises us to the status of the adopted sons and daughters of God, sharers in the life of the Trinity.

Throughout history, humanity has been powerless to defeat the devil or to achieve forgiveness of sins, but now through the sending of the Beloved Son into the world, through the sending of the One who is not only true man but also true God, the barrier is overcome. God reveals Himself – manifests Himself – as Savior.

As I said in my Christmas Homily, Jesus saves us by assuming the weakness of our human condition, not only at His Birth and Baptism, but even at the Cross. I repeat the words of St. Leo the Great as we conclude the Christmas season:

"God's Son took on human nature to reconcile it to its Maker. In that way, the devil who invented death might be overcome through that very thing which he had overcome. In the conflict undertaken on our behalf, battle was joined ... The Omnipotent Lord engages this extremely savage enemy, not in his own majesty but in our lowliness, bringing against him the same form and the very same nature, partaker indeed in our mortality but wholly without sin." (Leo the Great, Sermon 21 on the Nativity)

He shares in our humanity so that we may share in His Divinity. This feast reveals to us, not only what Jesus does, but who He is. He is the Beloved Son of the Father. He is true God and true man. He is the Redeemer. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

In His Baptism, Jesus demonstrates His willingness to associate Himself with us. The question for us to ponder is: Are we willing to associate ourselves with Him?