



## January 9, 2011 The Baptism of the Lord

*Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him.  
—Matthew 3:13*

Dear Friends;

Why did Jesus need to be baptized? John even argues with him in today's passage from Matthew. Jesus' baptism is connected to his Incarnation—that is his taking on our humanity in all its fleshiness. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, that is, an outward bodily sign of an interior conversion. Jesus is baptized for the same reason he became one of us. He is standing in solidarity with us in all our humanity.

So what is our attitude toward our own bodily existence? Do we despise our bodies or see the material world as the source of evil? Or do we recognize the splendor of our bodies? Do we realize that it is in our bodies that we experience heaven and in our bodies God experiences us and our world? The meaning of Christmas, the Incarnation and the Lord's baptism is the human becomes the nexus between heaven and earth.

In the early Church there was a heresy called Manichaeism. Their thought seems to have colored our Tradition through St. Augustine (even today). The Manicheans did not value the dignity of the human body. They believed that there was an eternal struggle between good and evil, they regarded the body as evil, and even frowned on marriage and procreation. Our obsession with celibate clergy seems at times tainted by Manichaeism. Also the tendency not to have a body at a funeral reflects a similar devaluing of the body.

In his Christmas homily Pope St Leo the Great (died 461 AD) fought these negative attitudes by the prayers that he composed. His Christmas prayer proclaims the *humanae substantiae dignitas* (the dignity of human beings) that God had created wonderfully and still wonderfully restored in Christ. If the Word of God took on a human body then how can the body be evil? It might be misused or abused but never loses the original dignity that God created.

In baptism the human body is washed, immersed in the waters of rebirth. To receive the sacrament of adoption it is necessary for a person's body to come into contact with the sacramental water whereby the Holy Spirit claims that person as a child of God. God saves us as whole persons not disembodied spirits. And in all the sacraments our human senses are engaged.

So it is with our Sunday celebration. The liturgy should engage us fully, a body animated by a spiritual soul. It is our whole person that is intended to become in the body of Christ a temple of the Holy Spirit. (see 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 & 15: 44-45).

Since the liturgy is meant to engage the whole person in praise of God then emotional outbursts should be a characteristic of our liturgy. As the famous liturgist Angscar J Chupungco OSB says: "Smiles, laughter, weeping and moaning are human expressions that should naturally accompany liturgical celebrations. Why should the assembly not smile at a presider's jokes or antics? Why should the bereaved not shed tears during the funeral rite?" St John Chrysostom archbishop of Constantinople told his clergy that if the people did not applaud at the end of their homily they had not done their job (talk about pressure!)

There is a trend among some pastors and bishops to return us to a liturgical style that would drain us of our humanity. Whether they are misanthropes, Manicheans or control freaks they are trying to force us into a liturgy that the Benedictine monk, Adrian Nocent described as "The Liturgy of the Death of God." You can see this type of liturgy on an unnamed religious channel. There the presiders always remind me of patients on psychotropic drugs—not fully there.

The great gift of the Second Vatican Council was that we were called to reclaim our baptism and our full humanity in worship and in the mission of Jesus. We must claim our full humanity and proclaim it as God's delight and joy. One of the early fathers of the Church (I believe it to be St Iranaeus) said "The Glory of God is the human person fully alive." Words to live by!

Peace,

*Fr. Ron*