

## From the PA's Desk

### Jesus' Baptism:

Unfortunately because of the way both Christmas and New Year's fell, we lost two great Sunday celebrations; the feast of the Holy Family, and the Baptism of the Lord. Since much of our identity as Christians comes to us from our baptism, I wanted to write about it briefly as a means of adult faith formation.

Did you know that the Gospels say as much about us as they say about Jesus? Whenever we read that Jesus said or did something, those words or actions of Jesus carry a message about us and about the ways we are invited to live a more fully Christian, fully human life.

All four Gospel's recall the baptism of Jesus, with slight variation; we are reminded of our own identity through baptism. Like Jesus, when we are baptized we receive an anointing that commissions us for Christian ministry. In a very real sense, at any baptism the heavens are torn open, and the Spirit, like a falling dove, descends upon the one being baptized. Did you know that when we pray in our Creed week after week, "I confess **one Baptism** for the forgiveness of sins," the one baptism we are referring to is Jesus' own baptism, whereby Jesus becomes the primordial or first sacrament. Jesus is in himself what baptism is all about, and when we are baptized, we share in his **one Baptism** as sons and daughters of God. When Catholics hear the word "Baptism," they often think of "water," or of "original sin," or of "entrance into the Church." However at our baptism, we receive an immersion into Jesus' own self as the beloved of God.

When each of us was baptized, God spoke within our own heart saying, "You are my beloved; with you I am well pleased." Some years ago, the late Father Karl Rahner, S.J., probably the greatest Catholic theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, was asked to sum up the Christian message in a single short sentence. Rahner said: "God dwells in you."

Paul Tillich, a great Lutheran theologian who died in 1965, was asked a similar question. He responded: "Accept yourself as accepted in spite of being unacceptable."

The tough part, of course, is *believing* that God dwells in us and that we are accepted completely by God. We tend to find it difficult to believe in God's constant love for us. It seems too good to be true. This, of course, is where faith and experience comes in. Authentic faith is humble enough to admit that yes, I am loved with a love that never stops forgiving and has no end. Experience too has its role to play, because unless we experience something first hand, it's hard to believe it.

**Why did Jesus get baptized?** We know that we get baptized because we need God's help in all we do, but why did Jesus (who was God in the flesh) need baptism? Here is an easy answer that makes sense to me. Can you love a pet cat you never had? Can you love salmon if you have never tasted it? The human mind is divided into intellect and will, and when we experience something new, our intellect acts first. It seeks to understand and know the object, experience, or person.

Sometimes we use the word **love** to express a judgment we have made, as when we say, "I love French fries," which means "I choose French fries because I enjoy how they taste. Similarly, if we meet a person whom our intellect judges as good, then our will chooses that person as a potential friend or one worth loving.

Our will seeks what our intellect judges as good. Knowledge comes before love. That's why we can't love a cat we never knew, or the taste of salmon we have never eaten, or a teacher we never had in class. That is why there is no such thing as love at first sight. We can feel attraction at first sight, infatuation at first sight, or desire at first sight, but we cannot love at first sight. Our intellect has to get to know someone well before our will can make that deep, intimate choice to love that person. To really come to love someone, then, requires that we come to know that person.

Back to Jesus and his baptism. Jesus, the enfleshment of God, becomes one of us, and is baptized, so that we get to know intimately who this God is, and once our intellect experiences this God in Jesus first hand, then and only then can we fall in love with God.

Carl Jung once said: "I do not believe in God, I *know* (meaning to experience) God." Charles Schultz had a similar idea when he said: "What Jesus means to me is this... in him we are able to see God and to understand his feelings toward us."

In the case of Jesus, we are dealing with someone who was more profoundly united to God than anyone else we know of, and by his examples, we all can know and love God. The Good News of course, is that God chooses us even before we know who God is.

### **THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD:**

Albert Einstein once said: "The great truth, when we discover it, will be simple and it will be beautiful." That's what we celebrate on the feast of the Epiphany of the Lord. The word "epiphany" means "manifestation" or appearance. The feast of the Epiphany reminds us that God in Jesus can be personally experienced by each one of us. Fr. Richard Rohr has said that an epiphany is not an experience that we can create from within, but one that we can only be open to receive from another [God]. Epiphanies leave us totally out of control and vulnerable because God is the one in control and they always demand that we change and re-focus our understanding of what's really important. God's epiphanies are difficult for most of us because we prefer to be in control. Most of us do not like the notion of being powerless and helpless, but that is part of the epiphany experience. We are not God and God is the one who is in control. The mystery of Epiphany is a reminder that God is perfectly hidden and perfectly revealed in the same physical place! God is shining forth in the most unwanted and unsuspected of places: the material and even vulnerable world. Here God is no longer an unapproachable, unknown, dangerous, threatening deity brandishing punishments, but, believe it or not, a helpless baby entrusted totally to human beings in a totally human world. I cannot think of any other religion which puts God in such a compromised position. Epiphany tries to awaken us; to spiritually arouse us; tells us to expect God in our life. Someone once said: "God comes to you disguised as your life." Thomas Merton had a similar insight when he said: "The spiritual life begins the moment you realize you are not the center of the world." The celebration of Epiphany tries to shake us from our collective sleepwalking, cruise control, daily business as usual mentality. God's epiphanies wake us up so we can in fact experience our experiences, learn from them and be transformed by them. This is the journey of holiness. What we celebrate in the mystery of the Epiphany is not that we have God in our pocket but that God has humanity in God's pocket and that God-in-Jesus is totally and utterly given to us. Because of the incarnation, we now have the ability to find God in all things, even in the dark moments of our lives; the broken, the painful and the tragic. Epiphany is ultimately about love. The mystery that God loved us first before we could return that love. The Epiphany we celebrate is Incarnation itself [the root word which means the "enfleshment" of God]; the ability to see God's image and likeness everywhere, in all people and in all places. As we celebrate this great feast day, let us remember the words of Cardinal Avery Dulles who said: "The incarnation does not provide us with a ladder by which to escape the ambiguities of life and scale the heights of heaven. Rather it enables us to burrow deep into the heart of planet earth and find it shimmering with divinity."

Jerry Green

### **Nominees for Pastoral Council:**

We have two openings for Parish Pastoral Council. Tom Krafft and Jake Moeggenborg talked to me, and, because the time-commitments of young family life (Tom has five children and Jake has two), have asked me to find replacements for them. If you would like to nominate someone for Parish Pastoral Council, please let Jerry Degruise, Craig Shanteau, or myself know, or use the nomination form in this week's bulletin.