



The Holy See

MASS IN THE SISTINE CHAPEL
AND ADMINISTRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM
HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord
Sunday, 13 January 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today's celebration is always a cause of special joy for me. Indeed, the administration of the Sacrament of Baptism on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord is one of the most expressive moments of our faith, in which we can almost see the mystery of life through the signs of the liturgy. In the first place, there is human life. It is represented here in particular by these 13 children who are the fruit of your love, dear parents, to whom I address my cordial greeting, which I extend to the godparents and the other relatives and friends present. Then comes the mystery of divine life which God gives to these little ones today through rebirth in water and the Holy Spirit. God is life, as some of the pictures that embellish this Sistine Chapel marvellously evoke.

Yet it does not seem out of place if we immediately juxtapose the experience of life with the opposite experience, that is, the reality of death. Sooner or later everything that begins on earth comes to its end, like the meadow grass that springs up in the morning and by evening has wilted. In Baptism, however, the tiny human being receives a new life, the life of grace, which enables him or her to enter into a personal relationship with the Creator for ever, for the whole of eternity. Unfortunately, human beings are capable of extinguishing this new life with their sin, reducing themselves to being in a situation which Sacred Scripture describes as "second death". Whereas for other creatures who are not called to eternity, death means solely the end of existence on earth, in us sin creates an abyss in which we risk being engulfed for ever unless the Father who is in Heaven stretches out his hand to us. This, dear brothers and sisters, is the mystery of Baptism: God desired to save us by going to the bottom of this abyss himself so that every person, even those who have fallen so low that they can no longer perceive Heaven, may find God's hand to

cling to and rise from the darkness to see once again the light for which he or she was made. We all feel, we all inwardly comprehend that our existence is a desire for life which invokes fullness and salvation. This fullness is given to us in Baptism.

We have just heard the account of the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. It was a different Baptism from that which these babies are about to receive but is deeply connected with it. Basically, the whole mystery of Christ in the world can be summed up in this term: "baptism", which in Greek means "immersion". The Son of God, who from eternity shares the fullness of life with the Father and the Holy Spirit, was "immersed" in our reality as sinners to make us share in his own life: he was incarnate, he was born like us, he grew up like us and, on reaching adulthood, manifested his mission which began precisely with the "baptism of conversion" administered by John the Baptist. Jesus' first public act, as we have just heard, was to go down into the Jordan, mingling among repentant sinners, in order to receive this baptism. John was naturally reluctant to baptize him, but because this was the Father's will, Jesus insisted (cf. Mt 3: 13-15).

Why, therefore, did the Father desire this? Was it because he had sent his Only-Begotten Son into the world as the Lamb to take upon himself the sins of the world (cf. Jn 1: 29)? The Evangelist recounts that when Jesus emerged from the waters, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove, while the Father's voice from Heaven proclaimed him "my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3: 17). From that very moment, therefore, Jesus was revealed as the One who came to baptize humanity in the Holy Spirit: he came to give men and women life in abundance (cf. Jn 10: 10), eternal life, which brings the human being back to life and heals him entirely, in body and in spirit, restoring him to the original plan for which he was created. The purpose of Christ's existence was precisely to give humanity God's life and his Spirit of love so that every person might be able to draw from this inexhaustible source of salvation. This is why St Paul wrote to the Romans that we were baptized into the death of Christ in order to have his same life as the Risen One (cf. Rom 6: 3-4). For this reason Christian parents, such as you today, bring their children to the baptismal font as soon as possible, knowing that life which they have communicated calls for a fullness, a salvation that God alone can give. And parents thus become collaborators of God, transmitting to their children not only physical but also spiritual life.

Dear parents, I thank the Lord with you for the gift of these children and I invoke his assistance so that he may help you to raise them and incorporate them into the spiritual Body of the Church. As you offer them what they need for their growth and salvation may you always be committed, helped by their godparents, to developing in them faith, hope and charity, the theological virtues proper to the new life given to them in the Sacrament of Baptism. You will guarantee this by your presence and your affection; you will guarantee it first of all and above all by prayer, presenting them daily to God and entrusting them to him in every season of their life. If they are to grow healthy and strong, these babies will of course need both material care and many other kinds of attention; yet, what will be most necessary to them, indeed indispensable, will be to know, love and serve God faithfully in order to have eternal life. Dear parents, may you be for them the first

witnesses of an authentic faith in God!

In the Rite of Baptism there is an eloquent sign that expresses precisely the transmission of faith. It is the presentation to each of those being baptized of a candle lit from the flame of the Easter candle: it is the light of the Risen Christ, which you will endeavour to pass on to your children. Thus, from one generation to the next we Christians transmit Christ's light to one another in such a way that when he returns he may find us with this flame burning in our hands. During the Rite I shall say to you: "Parents and godparents, this light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly". Dear brothers and sisters, always feed the flame of the faith by listening to and meditating on the Word of God and assiduous communion with Jesus in the Eucharist. May you be assisted in this marvellous if far from easy role by the holy Protectors after whom these 13 children will be named. Above all, may these Saints help those being baptized to reciprocate your loving care as Christian parents. May the Virgin Mary in particular accompany both them and you, dear parents, now and for ever. Amen!

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