

The Baptism of the Lord

Baptism was the beginning of Christ's public ministry – and for the rest of us, our own baptism marks the beginning of our own lives as Catholic Christians. Most of us were baptized when we were infants, so we don't remember it. And the chances are, if you have been a part of a baptism – as a parent or a godparent or just a relative looking on – there's a lot going on that you may not have noticed.

This Sunday, the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, is a good opportunity for us to notice what we may have been missing – to look beyond the water and the oil and the prayers and the crying babies and the christening gown. This feast is a chance to reflect on what this sacrament means – and, in particular, how it is celebrated.

It comes down to the "Three C's of Baptism": Creation, Commitment, and Community.

First, Creation. One of the things you notice about the baptism ritual is that, unlike most of our liturgies, it doesn't begin with a hymn or a song or a prayer. It begins, instead, with a question:

"What name do you give your child?"

It sounds obvious. But those seven words are deceptively simple. Everything that follows flows from them. Baptism, the first sacrament of initiation, is fundamentally about who we are—and who we will be. To be baptized is to be defined in a new way: as a Catholic Christian. We are transformed. As the rite states, we become a new creation. Having a name, an identity, is critical to that. In Genesis, you'll recall, one of the first things Adam did was name everything around him. In naming their child, parents continue what began in Genesis – and, in effect, declare that they are continuing God's creative work in the world.

So yes: baptism is about creation – in all its beauty and joy and wonder.

The second C is Commitment. It is the commitment of parents – and, significantly, godparents. Being a godparent entails *commitment*: a commitment to the Catholic faith, and to living that faith with fidelity, enthusiasm and joy. That means living it in such a way that their

godchildren will see what they do, how they pray, what they value, how they love and they will say: "I want to be like that."

To make that possible, the Church insists that at least one of the godparents must be Catholic. The other one, if not Catholic, must be a baptized Christian. I have lost track of the number of times parents have asked me about having one of the godparents be Jewish, or Muslim, or even atheist. They assure me that these are good people and dear friends. I'm sure they are. But we are talking about more than friendship here. We are talking about a role that has responsibilities, to help raise the child in the faith that they profess. During the baptism, godparents publicly profess their belief in Christ, the Trinity, the Virgin Mary and all the other tenets of our faith. They make a commitment to the faith, and to helping these children live that faith.

Finally, there is the third C, Community. Early on in the rite, the priest or deacon says, "My children, the Christian community welcomes you with great joy." The Church celebrates this sacrament as a *community*—because as a community, we pray together, rejoice together, grieve together, grow together. The Christian life isn't lived in isolation. And we don't celebrate our sacraments that way, either. The guidelines for baptism make clear: "All recently born babies should be baptized at a common celebration on the same day." This is why we baptize several children together on the first Sunday of every month. It is an experience to be shared.

The scriptures acknowledge as much. In today's gospel, St. Luke mentions other people who were there and baptized along with Jesus. It wasn't something he did alone. He had his community around him.

And so do all of us. And that community is wider and greater and more wondrous than we realize. Because of baptism, I'm connected to you, and you're connected to me. And we're all connected to a billion other believers.

That connects us, as well, to the man baptized in the Jordan two thousand years ago. Near the end of the baptism rite, there's a prayer reminding us that because of baptism, we call God our Father. Because of it, too, we call Jesus our brother—the one who showed us by his example how to begin the great mission of the gospel, through water and the Spirit.

My friends, today *his* mission is *our* mission. The same Spirit that accompanied him accompanies us as we strive to live the gospel, to love beyond all measure, to make the world new. Baptism gives us the grace to do that. It has made each of us a new creation.

As we recall the baptism of Christ, and its significance for our own baptisms, let us strive every day to be that “new creation”; to embrace our commitment to our baptism and all that it entails; and to support and welcome those in our community celebrating this sacrament.

Creation. Commitment. Community. I might also add a fourth “c,” one that underlies all the others: Charity—the great bond of love that uplifts us, inspires us, and inflames our hearts.

These are the raw ingredients of what it means to be a Catholic Christian. Or as the baptism rite puts it so plainly – but so beautifully:

“This is our faith. This is the faith of the Church. We are proud to profess it, in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

- Fr. David M. Chiantella