

Baptism of the Lord, A – January 12, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 735 words

It may seem unusual that the Christmas season begins with the birth of Christ and concludes this Sunday with his baptism, which happened some thirty years later. Why the time leap? But one of the Fathers of the Church, St. Maximus of Turin,¹ explains that Christ's baptism is a kind of birth. That first Christmas morning he was revealed as the Son of the Virgin Mary, found cradled in her arms. But at his baptism, he is revealed as the beloved Son of God the Father. The two feasts are as bookends around the mystery of who Christ is: fully man, fully God.

Now just as there was no necessity that God should become a man to save us – he could have saved us any way that he could imagine – so also there was no necessity that Christ, the God-man, should be baptized. He is the paragon of holiness – the exemplar. There was absolutely no sin from which he needed to be cleansed. Why, then, did Jesus seek baptism? Maximus addresses this also; there are various reasons. One was to set an example for us to follow. But another was to confer upon water the power to cleanse the human soul of sin.²

Baptism was not invented by Saint John the Baptist; it was already a concept in some branches of Judaism at the time that he appeared on the scene. But it was also more of a rite of passage – an external act signifying (but not effecting!) a change of heart. Let's draw an analogy. Suppose that someone has a spending problem and has incurred a lot of debt. That person might ceremoniously cut up all his credit cards. It is a decisive act; it theoretically changes things going forward. But it does not erase the existing debt. That is what the baptism of John was like.

Jesus took baptism to a new level. He gave water the power not merely to be a sign of a better future, but one that could also reach back into the past and wash it clean. And by coming in the flesh and employing material things like water, we see that Jesus intended to sanctify not just the human body and soul but the entire world. Thus the Church has formal blessings for so many ordinary, material things. An outsider might scoff: Why do you Catholics bless beer and wine, power plants, pets, homes, beehives, bells, and so many other things? – But why not!?

(We even have a blessing for lard!)

Yes, Jesus Christ's birth has brought with it the power for the whole world to be sanctified. That sanctification flows into our lives from the Incarnation through baptism, which sets us aright with God and gives us the power of blessing and the power to order our lives and everything in them to the Lord. There are, of course, different roles: a parent can bless his or her children; a priest may bless not only people but also objects; we can all be a blessing to others. Baptism is the fount or source of every blessing, the gateway to the blessed life of God.

It falls to us – to the baptized – to be intentional about claiming the people and the things around us for God. Have you had your home blessed? Your vehicles? Do you bless your children before they go to bed, tracing the cross on their foreheads? Do you offer grace before meals? Have you formed the habit of wishing God's blessings on others? Do you seek out other blessings from the priest when appropriate? Christ came in the flesh to redeem a fallen world – not just spiritually but also materially. He gives us all a role to play in ordering creation to God.

And we have that role, in particular, because through baptism we have been made sons in the Son. He loves us and is pleased with us, also – especially when we strive to cooperate with his grace and be his friends. He always sees so much potential in us. Thus our role is not to be understood as a duty but a privilege: God has made us active participants in his work! Our baptism set us on the trajectory to heaven. Along the way, we are to bless and to be a blessing; we are to claim our homes, our families, and our world for God, ordering all things to him.

¹ St. Maximus of Turin, *Sermo 100*, “De Sancta Epiphania”, excerpted in the Liturgy of the Hours, Office of Readings, for the Friday after Epiphany.

² Cf. *Ibid.*