



The Holy See

FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

MASS AND ADMINISTRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Sistine Chapel

Sunday, 10 January 2010

(Video)

Images of the celebration

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, this year too I have the joy of administering the sacrament of Baptism to some new-born babies whose parents are presenting them to the Church. Welcome, dear mothers and fathers of these little ones, and you, the godfathers and godmothers, friends and relatives who have gathered round them. Let us give thanks to God who today calls these seven girls and seven boys to become his children in Christ. Let us surround them with prayers and affection and welcome them joyfully into the Christian Community which from this day becomes their family too.

With the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus the cycle of the Lord's manifestations continues. It began at Christmas with the Birth in Bethlehem of the Incarnate Word, contemplated by Mary, Joseph and the shepherds in the humility of the crib. The Epiphany, when the Messiah, through the Magi, showed himself to all the peoples, marked an important milestone. On this day, on the banks of the Jordan, Jesus reveals himself to John and to the People of Israel. It is the first time that he enters the public scene as an adult, after leaving Nazareth. We find him with John the Baptist to whom multitudes have flocked, in an unusual scene. In the Gospel passage that has just been proclaimed St Luke remarks first of all that the people "were in expectation" (3: 15). In this way he emphasizes the expectation of Israel and, in those people who had left their homes and their usual

tasks, the profound desire for a different world and new words that seem to find an answer precisely in the Precursor's words, that may be severe and demanding and yet are full of hope. The baptism John offers is one of repentance, a sign that is an invitation to conversion, to a change of life, because One is coming who will "baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (3: 16). Indeed it is impossible to aspire to a new world while remaining immersed in selfishness and habits linked to sin. Jesus too leaves his home and his customary occupations to go to the Jordan. He arrives among the crowd that is listening to the John the Baptist and queues up like everyone else, waiting to be baptized.

As soon as he sees Jesus approaching, John realizes that there is something unique in this Man, that he is the mysterious Other for whom he has been waiting and to whom his whole life is oriented. He understands that before him stands One who is greater than he, the thong of whose sandals he is not even worthy to untie.

At the Jordan Jesus reveals himself with an extraordinary humility, reminiscent of the poverty and simplicity of the Child laid in the manger, and anticipates the sentiments with which, at the end of his days on earth, he will come to the point of washing the feet of the disciples and suffering the terrible humiliation of the Cross. The Son of God, the One who is without sin, puts himself among sinners, demonstrates God's closeness to the process of the human being's conversion. Jesus takes upon his shoulders the burden of sin of the whole of humanity, he begins his mission by putting himself in our place, in the place of sinners, in the perspective of the Cross.

While absorbed in prayer he emerges from the water after his Baptism, the skies break open. It is the moment awaited by so many prophets: "O that you would rend the heavens and come down!", Isaiah had prayed (64: 1). At that moment, St Luke seems to suggest, this prayer is heard. Indeed, "The heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him" (3: 21-22); and words were heard that had never been heard before: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (v. 22). In going up out of the water, as St Gregory Nazianzen says, Jesus "sees the heaven opened which Adam had shut against himself and all his posterity" (*Discourse 39 per il Battesimo del Signore*, PG 36). The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit come down among human people and reveal to us their love that saves. If it is the Angels who bring the shepherds the announcement of the Saviour's birth, and the star that conveys it to the Magi who came from the East, now it is the Father's voice that indicates the presence of his Son in the world to human beings and invites them to look to the Resurrection, to Christ's victory over sin and death.

The glad tidings of the Gospel are the echo of this voice that comes down from on high. Rightly, then, Paul, as we heard in the Second Reading, writes to Titus: "For the grace of God has appealed for the salvation of all men" (2: 11). In fact, the Gospel is a grace for us that gives life joy and meaning, "training us", the Apostle continues, "to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world" (v. 12); that is, it leads us to a happier, more beautiful life in greater solidarity, to a life in accordance with God. We may say that the skies are opened for these children today. They will receive as a gift the grace of Baptism and the Holy

Spirit will dwell within them as in a temple, transforming their hearts in depth. From this moment the voice of the Father will also call them to be his children in Christ, and, in his family which is the Church, he will give to each one the sublime gift of faith. This gift, which at present they are unable to understand fully, will be sown in their hearts as a seed full of life that is waiting to develop and bear fruit. Today they are baptized in the faith of the Church, professed by their parents, their godparents and the Christians present here, who will then take them by the hand in the following of Christ. Already at the outset the rite of Baptism recalls insistently the theme of faith when the Celebrant reminds parents that in requesting Baptism for their children, they assume the commitment to "training them in the practice of the faith". The parents and godparents are reminded more forcefully of this task in the third part of the celebration that begins with the words addressed to them: "on your part, you must make it your constant care to bring them up in the practice of the faith. See that the divine life which God gives them is kept safe from the poison of sin, to grow always stronger in their hearts. If your faith makes you ready to accept this responsibility... profess your faith in Christ Jesus. This is the faith of the Church. This is the faith in which these children are about to be baptized". These words of the Rite suggest that, in a certain way, the profession of faith and the renunciation of sin by the parents, godfathers and godmothers constitute the necessary premises for the Church to confer Baptism upon their children.

Just before the water is poured on the head of the newborn child there is a further call to faith. The Celebrant asks a final question: "Is it your will that your child should be baptized in the faith of the Church which we have all professed with you?". And it is only after the affirmative response that the Sacrament is administered. Also in the explanatory rites the anointing with Chrism, the clothing with the white garment and the lighting of the candle, the gesture of the "ephphetha" faith becomes the central theme. "These children of yours have been enlightened by Christ. They are to walk always as children of the light. May they keep the flame of faith alive in their hearts. When the Lord comes, may they go out to meet him...". May the Lord Jesus, the Celebrant of the rite of the *Ephphetha* continues, "touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father". Then all this is crowned by the final Blessing that further reminds the parents of their responsibility to be for their children, "the first witnesses to the faith".

Dear friends, today is an important day for these children. With Baptism, they become sharers in Christ's death and Resurrection, they begin with him the joyful and exulting adventure of his disciples. The Liturgy presents it as an experience of light. In fact, in giving to each one the candle lit from the Easter candle, the Church says: "Receive the light of Christ!". It is the role of Baptism to illumine those being baptized with the light of Christ, to open their eyes to Christ's splendour and to introduce them to the mystery of God through the divine light of faith. The children who are about to be baptized must walk in this light throughout their lives, helped by the words and example of their parents and their godparents. The latter must strive to nourish with their words and the witness of their lives the torch of the children's faith so that they may be shining example in this world of ours, all too often groping in the darkness of doubt, and bring it the light of the Gospel which is life and hope. Only in this way, will they be able, as adults, to recite with full

awareness the formula at the end of the profession of faith present in the rite: "This is our faith. This is the faith of the Church. We are proud to profess it, in Christ Jesus Our Lord".

In our days too faith is a gift to rediscover, to cultivate and to bear witness to. With this celebration of Baptism the Lord grants each one of us to live the beauty and joy of being Christians so that we may introduce our baptized children into the fullness of adherence to Christ. Let us entrust these little ones to the motherly intercession of the Virgin Mary. Let us ask her to obtain that, clad in the white garment, the sign of their new dignity as children of God, they may be throughout their lives faithful disciples of Christ and courageous witnesses of the Gospel. Amen.

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