



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 12 April 2000

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. The reading just now proclaimed takes us to the banks of the Jordan. Today we pause spiritually at the side of the river that flows through the two biblical Testaments, to contemplate the great epiphany of the Trinity on the day when Jesus is brought into the limelight of history, in those very waters, to begin his public ministry.

Christian art will personify this river as an old man looking with awe at what is happening in his watery depths. For, as the Byzantine liturgy says, "Christ the Sun is washed" in it. This same liturgy, at Matins on the day of the Theophany or Epiphany of Christ, imagines a dialogue with the river: "What did you see, O Jordan, that disturbed you so deeply? I saw the Invisible One naked and I trembled. How can one not tremble and draw back before him? At his sight the angels trembled, the heavens leapt for joy, the earth shook, the sea turned back with all the visible and invisible beings. Christ appeared in the Jordan to bless all waters!".

"This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased"

2. The presence of the Trinity at that event is clearly affirmed in all the Gospel accounts of the episode. We have just heard the most complete one, Matthew's, which includes a dialogue between Jesus and the Baptist. At the centre of the scene we see the figure of Christ, the Messiah who fulfils all righteousness (cf. *Mt* 3: 15). He is the one who brings the divine plan of salvation to fulfilment, humbly showing his solidarity with sinners.

His voluntary humbling wins him a wondrous exaltation: the *Father's* voice from heaven resounds

above him, proclaiming: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (ibid., v. 17). This statement combines two aspects of Jesus' messianism: the Davidic, by evoking a royal hymn (cf. *Ps* 2: 7), and the prophetic, by citing the first song of the Servant of the Lord (cf. *Is* 42: 1). In this way Jesus' deep bond of love with the heavenly Father and his investiture as the Messiah are revealed to all humanity.

3. The *Holy Spirit* appears on the scene in the form of a "dove" "descending ... and alighting" on Christ. Various biblical references can be cited to explain these images: the dove that indicates the end of the flood and the dawn of a new era (cf. *Gn* 8: 8-12; 1 *Pt* 3: 20-21), the dove in the Song of Songs, symbol of the beloved woman (cf. *Sg* 2: 14; 5: 2; 6: 9), the dove that is like a coat of arms to indicate Israel in several Old Testament passages (cf. *Hos* 7: 11; *Ps* 68: 14).

Also significant is an ancient Jewish comment on the passage in Genesis (cf. 1: 2) which describes the Spirit moving over the primeval waters with motherly tenderness: "The Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters like a dove that hovers over her little ones without touching them" (Talmud, *Hagigah* 15a). The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus as the power of superabundant love. Referring precisely to Jesus' Baptism, the [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#) teaches: "The Spirit whom Jesus possessed in fullness from his conception comes to 'rest on him'. Jesus will be the source of the Spirit for all mankind" ([CCC, n. 536](#)).

4. The whole Trinity is therefore present at the Jordan to reveal this mystery, to authenticate and support Christ's mission and to indicate that with him salvation history has entered its central and definitive phase. It involves time and space, human life and the cosmic order, but first of all the three divine Persons. The Father entrusts the Son with the mission of bringing "righteousness", that is, divine salvation, to fulfilment.

Chromatius, a fourth-century Bishop of Aquileia, says in a homily on Baptism and the Holy Spirit: "Just as our first creation was the work of the Trinity, so our second creation is the work of the Trinity. The Father does nothing without the Son or the Holy Spirit, because the Father's work is also the Son's and the Son's work is also the Holy Spirit's. There is but one and same grace of the Trinity. Thus we are saved by the Trinity, since in the beginning we were created by the Trinity alone" (*Sermon* 18A).

5. After Christ's Baptism, the Jordan also became the river of Christian Baptism: in a tradition dear to the Eastern Churches, the water of the baptismal font is a miniature Jordan. This is shown by the following liturgical prayer: "To you we pray, O Lord, that the purifying action of the Trinity may descend upon the baptismal waters and give them the grace of redemption and the blessing of the Jordan in the power, action and presence of the Holy Spirit" (Great Vespers of the Holy Theophany of Our Lord Jesus Christ, *Blessing of the Waters*).

St Paulinus of Nola also seems to have been inspired by a similar idea in some verses he

composed as an inscription for the baptistery: "From this font, which gives life to souls in need of salvation, flows a living river of divine light. The Holy Spirit comes down from heaven upon this river and joins the sacred waters with the heavenly source; the stream teems with God and from the eternal seed gives birth to holy offspring by its fruitful waters" (*Letter 32, 5*). Emerging from the regenerative waters of the *baptismal* font, the Christian begins his journey of life and witness.

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I am happy to welcome to this audience the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially from England, Scotland, Denmark, Sweden, the Philippines, Japan and the United States. May your Jubilee visit to Rome help to strengthen your faith and your resolve to serve Christ in others. Upon you and your families I invoke the joy and peace of the Risen Saviour.

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