

**Solemnity of the Baptism of the Lord
Mass for Pastoral Visit, Sacred Heart Parish
Franklin, Illinois
January 12, 2014**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

In 1947 a young Bedouin shepherd boy stumbled across a cave in the desert of Judaea. Inside the cave was a jar, and inside the jar was a scroll. Over the next two years, more and more scrolls were found and excavations began on a ruin near the same place. This has now become world-famous as the settlement of Qumran, with its Dead Sea Scrolls.

What do these discoveries have to do with us? The Dominican friars who excavated the site, and the scholars who examined the scrolls, concluded that in the period before and during the time of Jesus there had been a monastery of Jewish monks on this site, and they were the writers of the scrolls. The scrolls tell us a great deal about the religious life in Judaea at the time of John the Baptist and Jesus. They are copies of biblical books, and other works that tell us of the prayers of the community and their hopes for the coming Messiah. The monks led a disciplined life of prayer

and work, and were obeying the words of the prophet Isaiah, "In the wilderness prepare a way for the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." They were carrying on the tradition of Elijah and Elisha, and the other sons of the prophets.

This is part of the background of John the Baptist. He emerges from the desert wearing a prophet's habit to announce the arrival of the Messiah. This is why he is so prominent during Advent. But today there is another new beginning, the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus. John, in a way, represents the old covenant, which must now be fulfilled and give way to the new. Elsewhere, John says that he is the friend of the bridegroom, that Jesus must increase and John must decrease; John's mission is coming to an end as Jesus' ministry begins: "I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

This being the case, we might wonder why Jesus submits to being baptized by John. We believe not only that Jesus is God, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, who creates and sustains everything there is; but also that, as a human, he is sinless, and had no need to wash for repentance.

Traditionally, there are two answers to this. Firstly, Jesus wished to be ritually washed by John to show full solidarity with us: like a good leader, he doesn't ask us to do anything he hasn't done himself. Secondly, by going down into the waters of the Jordan, he sanctifies the waters of the whole world, to make them fitting for his own life-giving sacrament of baptism, which he gives to us through the Church. Saint Maximus, the first known Bishop of Turin asked the question, "Why would a holy man desire baptism?" He answer the question this way: "Christ is baptized, not to be made holy by the water, but to make the water holy, and by his cleansing to purify the waters which he touched. For the consecration of Christ involves a more significant consecration of the water. For when the Savior is washed all water for our baptism is made clean, purified at its source for the dispensing of baptismal grace to the people of future ages. Christ is the first to be baptized, then, so that Christians will follow after him with confidence."

As Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, it is a privilege for me to celebrate and preach at this Mass with you today. Usually when a bishop comes to a parish, it is a special occasion, like administering the Sacrament of Confirmation or celebrating a parish jubilee. I am not here for

any of those reasons today. I am here for a regular Sunday Mass because I want at some time to visit every parish in our diocese, in order to get to know the people and the places that make up our Catholic community in central Illinois.

What does a bishop look for when he comes to a parish? Well, I didn't come to see if the floors were cleaned and the pews were polished! Though I must say, your church looks very nice! I take my cue from the Gospel passage where Jesus asks, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8).

First and foremost, when a bishop comes to a parish, he looks for the presence of the Catholic **faith**, to see whether it is strong and vibrant, whether it is growing, and if the conditions are present for its continued growth in the future. So it is good to see people of faith gathered here.

At the same time, a pastoral visit is not just a time for a bishop to see the parish, but also for the parish to see the bishop. The Church is all about relationships. As the three persons of the Trinity are an intimate communion of Father, Son and Spirit in relationship to each other, the Church exists as a communion in relationship to God and in relation to each other, the People of God, the Body of Christ. As a bishop, I have a

special relationship with you, and you have a special relationship with me, and one of my roles is to bridge the relationship between you and the Pope and the rest of the universal Church, so that we may all be one in Christ's Body, into which we have been incorporated by the grace of Baptism.

One of the great strengths of the Catholic Church is its sense of history. Our faith goes all the way back to the time of Jesus and John the Baptist. It goes back to the monks of Qumran, to Elijah and Elisha, to Joshua, Moses and Abraham, who all believed in the divine Messiah, the one who was coming into the world.

Many of their adventures took place in and around the Holy Land. Moses led the people as far as the Jordan, and Joshua led them through it to enter the Promised Land. Elijah was taken up from Elisha beside the Jordan. This is one of the reasons Jesus goes there to be baptized; the Jordan stands between the desert and the Promised Land.

That symbolism is continued in the sacrament of baptism; through it we share the same faith as these ancient figures. Sacramentally, we cross the Jordan, go down into the Jordan with Christ, leaving the desert of this world, so that we can one day enter the promised land of heaven. Physically, of course, we still live in the world, in this desert. But we too

can prepare a way for the Lord, by living out our baptismal vows, by letting Christ feed us in this desert with himself as heavenly food, by working with Christ to establish his kingdom of peace and justice. At his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus sums up all that history of salvation, and begins his public mission of preaching the kingdom. He passed that mission on to the apostles and the whole Church, and we carry on that mission today.

In this Eucharistic liturgy as we officially bring this season of Christmas to a close, we experience Jesus as the beloved Son of God united in loving relationship to His Father and the Holy Spirit. As we approach Christ in communion at every Mass, you and I can truly say that we who have been washed clean in the saving waters of Baptism now share in the same loving relationship of the Holy Trinity. May our gathering around this altar and our celebration of the Eucharist always fill us with an awareness of the grace and peace that comes to us from God our Father through the Lord Jesus Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever.

May God give us this grace. Amen.