

**Solemnity of the Baptism of the Lord
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois
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**† Most Rev. Thomas John Paprocki
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. First, 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. Second, 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."

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.

An important point Saint Luke makes in his Gospel is that, following Our Lord's baptism by John, Jesus was praying. Prayer is a strong theme in Luke's Gospel. It is generally the context for divine revelation, and such is the case here. After Jesus has been baptized, two things happen. First, the heavens open, and the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus. Second, a voice from heaven affirms Jesus as God's beloved Son. Empowered with the Holy Spirit and affirmed as God's Son, the way has now been prepared for us.

When we were baptized, the Holy Spirit descended upon us and we were adopted as a child of God. This makes the day of our baptism the most important day of our lives. What else could be more important or more significant for our lives than the day when we were baptized and became a son or daughter of God? Everything flows from this: at our baptism, we are brought into loving relationship with God the Father, Jesus His Son, and the Holy Spirit, and it is this relationship that will bring us to everlasting happiness.

In his homily for World Youth Day in Rome on August 19, 2000, Pope Saint John Paul II spoke these words, which are as meaningful for all of us today as they were when he spoke them nineteen years ago. He said:

It is Jesus in fact that you seek when you dream of happiness; he is waiting for you when nothing else you find satisfies you; he is the beauty to which you are so attracted; it is he who provokes you with that thirst for fullness that will not let you settle for compromise; it is he who urges you to shed the masks of a false life; it is he who reads in your hearts your most genuine choices, the choices that others try to stifle. It is Jesus who stirs in you the desire to do something great with your lives, the will to follow an ideal, the refusal to allow yourselves to be grounded down by mediocrity, the courage to commit yourselves humbly and patiently to improving yourselves and society, making the world more human and more fraternal.¹

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.

¹ Pope St. John Paul II, Address for the 15th World Youth Day, Tor Vergata, Rome, Italy, August 19, 2000.