

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord: Dignity and Commitment

I was pastor of St. Ignatius the Antioch Parish in Tarpon Springs, FL. This is a city with a rich and active Greek Orthodox culture. The highlight for those in the Greek Orthodox Church occurs on the Epiphany when teenage boys jumped into the cold water of Spring Bayou in Tarpon Springs. The dive for the cross was is not just cultural, although it certainly has cultural connotations to it. The dive for the cross is a recreation of one of the aspects of the Epiphany of the Lord, the Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. The boy who rises from the water with the cross symbolizes Jesus accepting his mission, a mission that will conclude with the cross. A dove is then released symbolizing the Holy Spirit who guides Jesus to complete the Mission of the Father.

The Spirit that guided Christ remains active in the church through the sacrament many of us have received called confirmation. Our mission to continue the work of the Lord is too difficult for us to embrace and fulfill alone. Through the sacrament of confirmation we are given the divine grace to continue Christ's work. The fundamental action of the Holy Spirit is to bring people to Christ and through Christ to the Father. We are anointed with the Holy Spirit at our confirmation so that we may have divine assistance to spread the Kingdom.

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord speaks eloquently to us of the commitment and Spirit. First of all, we must be committed to the Kingdom of God. The concert pianist practices a minimum of ten hours a day because he or she has a commitment to the beautiful world of music. Even if the pianist performs before an audience that is going to respectfully applaud any endeavor, the committed pianist is his or her own best critic on the quality of the performance. Similarly, the Olympic athlete doesn't take a break from training because he or she has made a commitment to perfect his or her abilities. And the dedicated professional, doctor, lawyer, nurse, priest, educator, etc, never completes his or her education because he or she must continue to develop along with the advances in his or her profession.

The sincere Christian must be thoroughly committed to the Kingdom of God. This means that we must grow in our faith life through prayer and study. Prayer time is not something that we just add on to our day. It has to be fundamental to our day. When we think about what we are going to do tomorrow or any day of the week, we have to first consider making the time we need to be united with Christ in prayer. For some families that might mean fifteen to thirty minutes before the kids get up or after the children go to sleep. For all of us that means making a prayer schedule and keeping it.

The sincere Christian must be so thoroughly committed to the Kingdom of God that he or she is capable of defending the faith when challenged by those who would destroy the body of Christ. This challenge is most often issued by the hedonists mentality which domineers so many aspects of our society. Hedonism destroys the Body of Christ because its main focus is selfishness. It proposes that we do what is

most pleasing for our bodies here and now without considering our responsibility to others or even to ourselves. It's a rather immature mentality, one that is only interested in immediate pleasure. The committed Christian ascertains the effects of an action upon his or her sharing in the Life of Christ. He or she is not concerned with what a majority of people say. He or she is concerned with the effects of an action upon the spread of the Kingdom.

When Jesus was baptized by John, his human nature received the Holy Spirit. Of course, His Divine nature was always united to the Holy Spirit, but now His human nature was raised up, if you will, spiritualized. As his human nature received the Holy Spirit, so too does the human nature of all who accept the baptism of the Lord. Baptism gives life, the life of God. We often refer to this as the In-dwelling of the Holy Trinity.

Think about this. We are no longer just the rational part of creation. We are spiritualized. We are sons and daughters of God. We have dignity, the dignity of the One about whom the voice from heaven said at his baptism by John, "This is my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

Our Father in heaven says this about each of us when we live our commitment to the Lord.

Called to commitment and led by the Spirit, we Christians must jump into the cold water of the Spring Bayous of our lives. We must search for the cross and come out of the water determined to live the Christian life.