

Homily for the Easter Vigil

Baptism is the very first sacrament of initiation we receive as Christians, which enables us to become members of the Church, which is the Body of Christ. But, why do we believe that baptism enables us to become members of Christ's Body? Well, in the person of Jesus Christ, God took human flesh, so that He could take upon Himself the punishment that sin had brought against the human race, and so truly free us. The thing is Jesus did this nearly 2,000 years ago. So how is it that the historical action of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross can have any effect in our lives millennia later? The answer is through the Church that Jesus founded to continue His ministry, in particular through the sacraments of that Church.

And through the Sacrament of Baptism we really become members of the Body of Christ, which is the Church. We really become part of His Body through baptism. And we actually enter into Jesus' Paschal Mystery – which means everything we have recalled and celebrated this past Holy Week – Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection.

Now, this is going to sound a little jarring, but it's true: in baptism we die. Just as Jesus Himself died on the cross, so we too, in Him, die to the old life of sin. This is exactly what St. Paul meant in our epistle this evening from Romans: "Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life."

And so, through baptism, all our sins are washed away so that we can live that redeemed life beginning in the here and now. And the symbolism of the sacrament shows us this: the person to be baptized is lowered down into the font and water is poured over his head three times, symbolizing death and the burial of Jesus three days in the tomb. But then, just as Jesus Himself rose from the dead, which we anticipate and now celebrate at this Easter Vigil, so too the person, who is brought up from the baptismal font, receives the precious gift of eternal life won for us by Christ. We call this salvation. And as Catholics, our journey of salvation begins with baptism.

The thing is, in baptism we **begin** this journey. And so, the newness of life is not just something we're waiting for in heaven. God shares this with us now – already! As St. Paul further states, “We know that our old self was crucified with him, so that our sinful body might be done away with, that we might no longer be in slavery to sin. Consequently, you too must think of yourselves as being dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus.” In other words, we have become a new creation in Christ through baptism. No longer is our identity unredeemed sinner; but now we are truly sons and daughters of God the Father. And through the Holy Spirit, God wants to enable us – empower us – to live the lives He has made us for!

Here's what I mean. We began tonight's liturgy with the service of light. As we'll recall the whole entire church was dark; and nothing but the light of one candle entered the church. That candle is the Paschal Candle – the Christ Candle, which reminds us that Jesus truly is the light of the world. And we remember that Jesus Himself was born into the darkness of our world, besieged with sin and brokenness. But then little by little, as each of us received a share of the Paschal Candle's light, the entire church became brightly illuminated. In a similar way, we remember that Jesus first illuminated our lives when we received our baptismal candles on the day of our baptism. But, that doesn't mean this was a once and done thing in our lives. Rather, Jesus wants to enter ever deeper and ever more personally into our lives, to bring us more and more into His Father's kingdom of light – which means how we live our lives: what we do, and say, and think.

My friends, baptism is the great sacrament given the Church by her Savior. And while we can only receive *this* sacrament one time, Jesus left the Church an ongoing way of entering into His saving sacrifice on the cross to be nourished again and again in the Eucharist. In the Sacrament of Holy Communion, by receiving the very Body and Blood of Jesus, we enter more deeply into His Paschal Mystery, and receive the needed strength in our lives of discipleship as we follow in His footsteps. And so, as we celebrate this Easter Vigil, we give thanks to our great God for the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and holy Eucharist, by which we are truly formed into and sustained as His beloved children. God bless you.