

Homily for the Baptism of the Lord

Today is the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. Jesus was baptized by St. John the Baptist in the Jordan River when He was approximately 30 years old. This event launched His public ministry as He was revealed as the true Son of God the Father, who was anointed with the Holy Spirit. Jesus' public ministry lasted for about 3 years. So yes, with today's feast, we've zoomed right from Jesus' birth on Christmas Day, 30 years later to His baptism. Today, then, officially marks the end of the Christmas Season, and we continue on with Ordinary Time – a time of following in the footsteps of Jesus as He carried out His public ministry.

I'd like to do a little something different today for the homily. I like to call it Catholic show and tell. You remember show and tell from elementary school days. Essentially, you bring in something and show it to the class and tell everyone about it. So, on the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, I'd like to talk all about those things in our church related to baptism.

Now many years ago, there was often a separate area of the church called a baptistery. The baptistery was a dedicated part of the church, usually near the entrance, where the **baptismal font** was located. Which, by the way, why a baptismal font? I thought we heard Jesus was baptized in a river? He was. But, there were also no churches back then. But in the 300s, when Christianity became legal in the Roman Empire, churches began to be built. And since many churches were not near rivers, baptismal fonts were used to conduct baptisms.

But back to the point of why the baptistery was often at the entrance of the church. Well, it has to do with baptism being the very first sacrament of initiation we receive as Christians. Therefore, the baptistery was located near the entrance of the church, since we first must receive baptism in order to be able to enter into the Church, and become members of the Body of Christ. Now, here at IHM, we do not have a baptistery. Instead, we have a space near the sanctuary dedicated for baptisms (this area). You can see the baptismal font here, which I already spoke about.

But, why do we believe that baptism enables us to become members of Christ's Body, which is the Church? Well as I said on Christmas, the whole reason our Savior was born for us a child, was so that He would grow into the man, who would die on the cross for our sins. Again, 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 in the Sacrament of Baptism, as I mentioned, we become members of the Body of Christ, which we call the Church. Therefore, really becoming part of His Body through baptism, we actually enter into Jesus' Paschal Mystery – that is, His very suffering, death, and resurrection. 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. Therefore, in baptism, all our sins are washed away. And the symbolism of the sacrament shows 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 on Easter Sunday 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. As Catholics, our journey of salvation begins with baptism.

OK, a few more things in this area of the church. I just spoke about the Paschal Mystery. Remember, that's a phrase that refers to Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection, which we enter into through baptism. Well, this special candle, called the **Paschal Candle**, reminds us that Jesus truly is the light of the world. And just as Jesus was born into the darkness of our world, covered with sin and brokenness, so too does He enter personally into our lives through baptism to bring us into His Father's kingdom of light. During a baptism, a small baptismal candle, lit from the fire of the Paschal Candle, is given as a sign of the light of Christ coming to dwell within that person.

We also have a **holy water dispenser**. Holy water is ordinary water that I pray a special blessing over. We use holy water as a reminder of our baptism, by which we were saved. That's why we make the sign of the cross over ourselves with holy water when we enter the church. We can also take some of this holy water home to sprinkle there or over ourselves when we need the Lord's blessing.

So about that **banner** – that big blue banner on the wall! I've heard various interpretations of that design, including a silhouette of the Blessed Mother and Judas' money bag with coins spilling out. Actually, the banner depicts baptismal imagery. It's blue for the waters of baptism, and the shell with the wavy lines represents that those waters flowed over us at our baptism by which our sins were washed away. Beneath the banner is a cabinet we call the **ambry**. The ambry houses the three holy oils that are used in various sacraments – the oil of the sick, the oil of catechumens, and the sacred chrism. These last two holy oils are used during baptism.

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 another 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 Body and Blood of Jesus, we enter into His Paschal Mystery, and receive the needed strength in our lives of discipleship as we follow in His footsteps. And so, this day we give thanks to our great God for the sacraments of Baptism and holy Eucharist, by which we are truly formed into and sustained as His beloved people. God bless you.