

Day 135 (Friday, July 31)

Broadening our view of Baptism

Baptism—and all sacraments, for that matter—are much more than the moment of celebration. They neither begin nor end with the liturgical ritual. They are celebrations of lived experiences. They exist before, during and after the celebration. The ritual of Baptism does not bring God’s love into being as if that love did not exist before the ceremony. Baptism is the Church’s way of celebrating and enacting the embrace of God who first loved us from the moment of our conception. Baptism is a ritualization and manifestation of something real—of the outpouring of God’s Spirit and of our acceptance of that transforming love. It remains for us to grow into what we already are: daughters and sons of God. Baptism celebrates a family’s and a community’s experience of that love in the baptized.

There are other life experiences—birth, death, washing, growing and so forth—that are celebrated in Baptism. The sacrament is multifaceted, as is revealed in the Scripture references and the symbols of Baptism. Let’s look at these symbols and the Scripture passages from which they originate.

Water and spirit

Water is the obvious symbol that we associate with Baptism, representing life, death, cleansing and growth. It is interesting that our initiation process begins with water just as the beginning of time portrayed in the very first pages of Scripture also begins with water—chaotic waters that are put into order by the Spirit hovering over them. That life-death meaning of water continues through the pages of Scripture. Consider, for example, the flood waters of Noah’s day and the saving waters of the Red Sea parted by Moses. Those waters of the Red Sea, even if they killed the Egyptians, opened the way for the Israelites to pass from slavery to freedom, and later crossing one more body of water (the river Jordan) to pass into the Promised Land.

In the New Testament, then, it is appropriate that John the Baptizer baptized in the Jordan River, symbolizing that the baptized were also to leave the slavery of sin for the freedom of a new Promised Land. Nor is it without significance that Jesus began his ministerial journey by being baptized in the Jordan, and that the Spirit was present.

Then there are the references to fruitful, life-giving waters offered by the prophets. For example, speaking for Yahweh, Ezekiel announces: “I will sprinkle clean water on you and...give you a new heart” (see 36:24 ff), and Isaiah promises, “I will pour out my spirit on your children” (44:3). In the Acts of the Apostles, we see how the Spirit of Jesus, poured out on the new Church at Pentecost, brings order and strength (Acts 1 and 2). Water and Spirit are strong and important symbols of Baptism. To be baptized is to be plunged into the waters and to open oneself to the Spirit of Jesus. To be baptized is to have the Spirit help us make order out of the chaos of the sinful world into which we are born. To be baptized is to be welcomed into the Church (the new promised land) and to be nourished there as we journey with each other and with Jesus in his ministry.

In the light of eternity, we’re here for a very short time, really. We’re here for one thing, ultimately: to learn how to love, because God is love. - James Finley

Sincerely,
Fr. Jim Kaptein