

Jesus' Baptism & Our Own

Developed from a reflection by Bernardo Olivera, OCSO

Jesus' self-awareness, as the Son of the Father sent into the world, reached a high point on the day of his baptism. Jesus is not just a model for all Christians of what mystical life is; he is the image of the invisible God, the reflection of God's glory, and the exact imprint of God's very being. This is why He is the only way to the Father's house and the one in whom we contemplate the face of God. So let us look for a moment at Jesus' own experience during his baptism.

What interests us first is to understand what happened within Jesus. The baptism is an historical event that occasions something of a scandal: Is Jesus less important than John the Baptist—one who is baptized is usually less important than the one baptizing. Yet all the evangelists emphasize the descent of the Spirit. It is the inauguration of the prophetic ministry of Jesus. It shows that Jesus is God's final, definitive message. This was solemnly proclaimed from heaven: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased". (Lk 3:22) He experienced this revelation while he was praying after having come up from the water. It showed him that he was Son in relation to God, the Father, and that he has power coming from the Spirit. This special understanding of his identity was something he immediately put into practice.

It is possible that the idea of being "Servant of the Lord" as prophesied by Isaiah was already in Jesus' mind. But on the day of his baptism it came to signify something very special in relation to his mission. When God reveals himself to Jesus as a father reveals himself to his son—i.e., fully. It is not strange, then, that some years later Jesus says: "All things have been handed over to me by the Father and no one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him." (Mt.11:27) Likewise, all things have been handed over to the Son". The Father also reveals the mystery of his will to save the world through Jesus' messianic labors. Jesus is to communicate all this to others; and that is precisely what he does. He reveals the mystery of the Kingdom to his disciples. He reveals the mystery as though to infants. The disciples see and hear what former prophets did not know. Jesus fulfills revelation.

Thus through his baptismal experience Jesus discovers his identity as Son, the continual presence of the Father in his life, the indwelling power of the Spirit, and the mission to be achieved through the proclamation of the Kingdom and through suffering. Listen again to Isaiah's Servant Song: "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out prisoners who sit in darkness". (Is.42:2ff) From within his deepest identity Jesus discovers a mystery to be revealed to others, and a mission to be accomplished. Jesus is the Mystery of God. Our experience—our mystical experience—is wholly an experience of Jesus' mystery: To live in Christ, to die and rise again with him is what we long for. This experience will reach its climax in the next world but it has already begun here and now.

Baptism Means Life in the Spirit

A reflection taken from a homily of St. Hippolytus

What an astonishing thing it was for Jesus to come and receive baptism in the Jordan at the hands of John. The endless river that gives joy to the city of God is bathed in a poor little stream. The bottomless well whose unfailing waters are source life for all peoples is immersed in a trickle of water that will one day disappear! The Christ, who fills all creation, leaving no place empty of his presence, who is incomprehensible even for angels and is invisible to humans, came freely to be baptized. Behold, the heavens were opened and a voice said: This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased!

The Beloved calls forth love. The divine light radiates divine and unapproachable light. Jesus is called the son of Joseph but in the divine nature is the only begotten. Jesus knew hunger, yet fed thousands; Jesus toiled and yet gave rest to the toil-worn. Jesus had nowhere to lay his head, yet upheld the universe. Jesus suffered and yet healed our wounds. Jesus accepted a blow on his cheek yet gave freedom to everyone. Jesus' side was pierced yet he redeemed even the fault that sprang from Adam.

Now please give me your full attention. I want to return to the life-giving fountain and contemplate its healing waters at their source. The immortal Father sent the immortal Son and Word into the world. This Son came to us to baptize us with water, and with the Spirit. In this way we were given new birth such as would make both our souls and bodies immortal. The Son breathed into us the breath of life and so clothed us with incorruptibility. But if we have become immortal we shall also become divine. If we become divine after baptismal regeneration through water and the Holy Spirit we shall also be joint-heirs with Christ after the resurrection of the dead. So my cry is this: Come, peoples of the earth, and receive the immortality that flows from baptism.

By the water of baptism united to the Spirit, paradise, as it were, is irrigated and the earth made fertile. Plants grow, animals bring forth their young and, in short, by this water all is regenerated and given new life. This is the water of Christ's baptism; into it the Spirit descended in the form of a dove so that everyone who, with faith, goes down into this bath of regeneration renounces the devil and is joined to Christ. Such a person repudiates the Enemy and confesses Christ to be God. Such a one throws off servitude and is raised to the status of a child of God and co-heir with Christ. A person like this is able to live the love shown us by and in Christ, and through the power of the Spirit. It is in the Spirit that we can live the life proper to a child of God. To Christ such a person gives glory by the good, holy, life-giving Spirit, and from Christ such a person will receive glory and life forever. To God, revealed through us as Savior for all, be power and glory now and always, through all ages.

Friendship in the Spirit Seeks God

From the Treatise “On Spiritual Friendship” by Aelred of Rievaulx

Our Lord and Savior has written for us a formula for true friendship by saying: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”. Look in this mirror. You love yourself. Indeed you do, especially if you love God. If you are a person worthy of being chosen for friendship with God you love God. Tell me, then, do you think you should expect any reward from yourself in return for loving yourself? No indeed! You don’t expect the least reward. From the very nature of things each creature is dear to itself. Each loves itself “gratuitously”. So unless you transfer this same affection to the other that you love—loving that person gratuitously because from very nature such a one seems dear—you cannot appreciate what true friendship is.

Truly the one whom you love is another self if you have transformed your love for that person in this way. St. Ambrose says, “friendship is not a tax paid but is full of beauty and full of grace because it is a virtue and not something acquired by purchase, at least with money. It is acquired by a kind of competition in generosity rather than by haggling to raise or lower the price of some good thing.” So the intention of those chosen as “friends” has to be tested in a subtle way so that both know they are joined in friendship gratuitously and not in the hope of gaining some advantage or possession. That is to think of friendship in a mercenary way and not in terms of gratuity.

The extraordinary thing we await from God is that he will enact and share with creatures who have been uplifted the capacity to love one another as God himself loves them. God does this among the degrees and orders distinguished by divine decree, and among the individuals who have been chosen so they know charity and friendship. In this way, just as each rejoices in what is its own so will it rejoice in the good of others. The happiness of each one taken individually will be the happiness of all and the totality of the happiness of all will be the possession of each individual.

In God there is no hiding of thoughts or dissembling of affection. There is true and eternal friendship. It begins in this life and is perfected in the life to come. Where few are good it belongs to just a few—as is the case here on earth. But in heaven it will belong to all, because there all are good. Here we have to test ourselves and others because there is a mingling of the wise and the unwise. There no such testing is needed; angelic and divine perfection beatifies all. This is the norm by which we here measure friendship. Whom shall we love as we love ourselves? To whom are we to share confidences and from whom we shall receive confidences? Who will be firm and stable and constant in friendship? Genuine and spiritual friendship is sought on account of God and as a good in itself. Reflect on the divine example of love so you may perceive and be able to detect both the quality and greatness of real spiritual friendship.

Where Does Christ Lead Us?

From a sermon by St. Augustine of Hippo

Is there anyone who knows all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden beneath Christ's human neediness and poverty? "Rich though he was, he became poor on our account so that through his need we might become rich". When God's Son assumed human mortality and destroyed our death, he seemed to us just a poor person. It was not because someone had robbed him but because his riches were promised and so kept in reserve. How great is the goodness that Christ holds in store for those who fear him, for those who trust in him!

We have but a partial awareness of the fullness yet to come. One who was by nature equal to the Heavenly Father accepted the condition of a slave so that we might be re-modeled and be like God. When God's only Son became a son of our race it was to make many of us into children of God. Christ taught us using the condition of a slave and showing how even such a one might live in the freedom of a child of God and have the capacity to see him even in the divine nature. "We are already children of God, what we are to be has not yet been revealed; we only know that when this revelation does take place we shall mirror God as God's likeness because we shall be able to see God as God is."

Indeed, how could the treasures of wisdom and knowledge—divine wealth—be insufficient for us? How could such abundant goodness fail to satisfy us? Show us the Father, as one of the apostles said, and it will be enough for us. One of our own race, speaking both for us and in our person, says to the Lord in a psalm: My longing will be fulfilled when your glory is revealed. Since the Son and the Father are one, anyone who sees the Son sees the Father too.

So the Lord of Hosts, the King of Glory, will bring us back to what we had lost. His face will shine upon us and we shall be saved. We shall have our fill and God will be enough for us. Until all this is accomplished, and God gives us the vision that will satisfy us—until we are able to drink deep at the fountain of life, of which God is the source—while we are still apart from God and walking by faith we hunger and thirst for righteousness and are eaten up with longing to see the beauty of the Godhead, let's humbly and devoutly celebrate the Son's coming to us in a servant's condition.

At present we can't form even an idea of how the Son is generated from the Father from before there was a day. Let's dwell in thought on the Son's birth from the virgin and through the baptism of John. The Son's Name, older than the sun, is beyond our understanding. Yet we can grasp the dwelling place the Son made beneath our earthly sun. If we cannot yet behold the only Son abiding with the Father, we can ponder on his coming forth from the waters as a bridegroom comes from his marriage tent. We are not yet worthy to take a seat at the Heavenly Father's table yet we can recognize one like us who came to eat and labor among us. He leads us into the waters of baptism and up from them to prayer, and to a testing of our love for the Father and for our fellows. We must follow him day by day until we come to the realization of the promises.

God Makes Salvation Known Through Us

From a sermon by St. Leo the Great

God saw the world was on the way to perdition and was determined to rescue it. God fore-ordained the salvation of all peoples in Christ. They constitute the offspring without number promised to Abraham, offspring to be had not through nature's laws but according to the fruitfulness of faith. His descents, he was told, would be like the countless stars—a posterity not of earth but of heaven.

Let the full number of the nations take their place among those of Abraham's family. Let the gentiles enter and as children of the promise receive the blessings foretold for those of Abraham's race. In the person of the Sages from the East let all peoples worship the Creator of the universe and let God no longer be known only in Judea but throughout the entire world. In every place let God's name be magnified.

Beloved friends, since we have been taught through the mysteries of God's grace, we now celebrate the coming of the "first fruits" to God and the first call to the nations and let us be filled with spiritual joy and gratitude. We give thanks to the God of all mercies who has, in the word's of St. Paul, qualified us to share in the lot of the saints in light and has freed us from the power of darkness, transferring us into the Kingdom of the Beloved Son. As Isaiah prophesied, the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light; day has dawned upon those who dwelt in the shadow of death.

Now the prophet also declared: Nations to whom you were unknown will call upon your name, and peoples who never knew you will fly to you for refuge. Abraham saw this day and he rejoiced to know that in his offspring—in Christ—the children of his faith were to be blessed. By their believing he was to become the father of "all" nations. He gave glory to God, in the firm conviction that God was able to fulfill what God had promised. This is the day of which David sang in a psalm: All the nations you have made will come and adore you, Lord; and they will give glory to your name. And again, The Lord has made known salvation; God has displayed holiness in the sight of all the Peoples.

We know that all this has begun to come to pass, for the three Sages from the East were called from their far-off land and led by a guiding star to recognize and to worship the one King of Heaven and Earth. The leading of a star also draws us to imitate the quest of these Sages and their act of homage. We must respond with all our hearts to the grace which invites every human person to come to Christ and then follow him. Aren't we too stars to lead others to Christ and show them the way to live as he lived. Doing this you begin to shine like stars; you begin to be children of the Kingdom of God. All gain admittance to that Kingdom by faith and by good works and now you see how faith itself, when shared, is a good work and how ordinary good works shine with the light of faith. We do all this through our Lord, Jesus Christ, who with God the Father and the Holy Spirit live and reign and draw all to their Kingdom, now and forever. We are little lamps from which that light shines and in which God works.

Humility Born of Trust and Obedience

From the “Dialogues” of St. Gregory the Great

At Subiaco Benedict shone as a light of virtue and through him God did wonders. Many of those consecrated to God as solitaries came to him for guidance in the service of God and he organized them into twelve groups, each under an abbot. He kept with him only those who needed special help in being formed for perfection. By reason of his example, a number of Roman nobles entrusted sons to him so that they might be formed in the ways of piety and love of God. The Patricians, Aquitius and Tertullus, brought him Maur, already outstanding for purity of life, and Placid, still only a boy. Maur became Benedict's assistant.

One day Placid was sent to get water from a lake near the monastery. As he dipped a pitcher in the water he carelessly lost his balance and fell into the lake. There was a strong current and it carried him away from the shore, perhaps a hundred yards. Benedict was in his cell but he immediately knew what had happened and called for Maur. “Brother Maur”, he said, “run to the lake as fast as you can because the boy sent to get water has fallen in and been carried a good way from shore.”

Maur immediately asked, and received, a blessing and took off running to carry out the task given him by his abbot. What then happened had not been heard of since Jesus called Peter to come to him on the water. Thinking he was still on dry land, Maur ran all the way to the place where Placid was floundering in the water. He grabbed him by the hair and dragged him back to the shore without stopping to think about what he was doing.

Once back on dry land Maur realized what he had done. He looked back and saw he had been running on water. He was astounded and not a little afraid. He had done something he wouldn't have dared to do deliberately. Returning to Benedict with Placid, Maur told the story of what had happened to his abbot. Benedict replied that it was his trusting obedience that made the wonder possible; he was only carrying out a commanded task and hadn't acted by his own ability or powers.

Actually, Benedict was denying that he had done the miraculous deed but the boy, Placid, functioned in effect as the one who settled the matter. “When I was being dragged out of the water”, he said, “I saw the abbot's habit over me; it seemed to me that he was the one who was saving me from drowning”. Benedict and Maur had been engaged in a competition of humility, each attributing the wonder to an other than himself. In fact, both were right and yet both were wrong. God worked the wonder but it was their faith and humble trust in God which was used to accomplish it. God does wonders in all those who trust humbly in his grace.

Learning Mercy from the Mother of Mercy

From talks by St. John Paul II

Without realizing it our world thirsts for Divine Mercy. You and I are called to offer the marvelous water of mercy that Jesus gives. This alone can quench the world's thirst. It brings healing not only to souls but to bodies. And we learn to do this in a very special way from her to whom we pray as "Mother of Mercy". Hers is a motherhood which endures without let up from the moment in which she gave her consent to God's call. She can help all us who work in every sort of apostolic endeavor to serve the Divine Goodness and Mercy which, through Mary's self-gift, has given us Jesus, our Savior.

To those who suffer, who have their own hearts pierced by the swords of sickness and need and loss, she shows how our sufferings can become a garment of salvation and a robe of righteousness. How? By showing us that all suffering which is offered in order to accept God's Providential purposes is one with suffering that comes from our belonging to Christ. There are many kinds of martyrdom, just because there are endless ways of bearing witness to the difference faith in Christ makes to one's life and to all its events, happy or sad. Mary shows that Christ turns everything into an opportunity to trust and to hope in God and in Divine Mercy.

By her "yes" to God's call Mary consecrated herself and her life to God. Many consecrate themselves as she did by explicitly joining themselves to her consecration. This means letting Mary help us to offer ourselves, and our entire race and world, to God—the God who is infinitely merciful. She has a mother's heart and we are her children, given to her by Jesus himself from his cross. He thought not of himself in his sufferings but of us and showed this by giving us the gift of his own mother. From her example we learn to do the same. In John's Gospel, Jesus said at the Last Supper: "I consecrate myself for their sakes". We are among those for whom he consecrated himself and we can join him by consecrating ourselves like Him. What better way than by making ourselves signs and instruments of the mercy God showed us in Jesus, as he hung on the cross for our sakes.

The Mother of Christ summons us, invites us, to join with her and with the entire Church of the Living God in consecration for the salvation of the world. Each and every individual, the world as a whole, is offered to the eternal Loving Father and through the love of the redeeming Christ. The Mother of our Redeemer calls us to join and help in making this consecration real and effective by our lives, and works, and words and attitudes of mercy.

Always remember that the Mother of Jesus is with us in her love and mercy. Her example and her prayer will always accompany you. She invites us to share in her own intimacy with Jesus. She is the model for every consecrated life. May the Lord always keep you faithful to this vocation—in marriage, in religious community, in dedication to ministry, in love for God in Jesus Christ. May you know mercy and may you share it by all you do and are.