

# **THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD**

## **FIRST WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME**

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- Sun.     **The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord**  
13       **LET JESUS' OBEDIENCE BE YOURS**  
          A reflection from a sermon by St. Hippolytus
- Mon.     **Monday of the 1<sup>st</sup> Week in Ordinary Time**  
14       **LIVING OUT JESUS' CALL TO ONENESS**  
          A reflection from a homily by St. Gregory of Antioch
- Tues.    **Memorial of Sts. Maur & Placid, Disciples of Benedict**  
15       **LIVING AS DISCIPLES OF ST. BENEDICT**  
          A reflection developed from a homily by St. Aelred of Rievaulx
- MONASTIC PRAYER DAY
- Wed.     **Monthly Remembrance of the Dead**  
16       **ACCEPTING THE GIFT THAT IS COMMUNITY**  
          From Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini
- Thurs.   **Memorial of St. Anthony the Great**  
17       **THE STRUGGLE TO LOVE GOD WHOLLY**  
          A reflection from The Life of Anthony by St. Athanasius
- Fri.     **Beginning the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity**  
18       **LOVE OF GOD IS THE SOURCE OF UNITY**  
          A reflection from homilies by St. Pope John XXIII
- Sat.     **Memorial of Our Lady**  
19       **THE TASK OF SPIRITUAL PURIFICATION**  
          A reflection taken from a homily by Bl. Gueric of Igny

# LET JESUS' OBEDIENCE BE YOURS

A reflection from a sermon by St. Hippolytus

When Jesus came to John and asked to be baptized John hesitated. Wasn't Jesus the One whose sandal strap John was unworthy to untie? Listen to Jesus: This is what God wishes and we must do it. Jesus offers himself as the perfect example of one who always obeys the Heavenly Father's word and will; he shows us that we are to turn away from the destructive example of our First Parents and not to seek to decide for ourselves what is good and bad. Rely on the leadings of your God. John himself was the first to do as the Lord commanded. I hear your command, Lord; in obedience I baptize you who obey love's call from God.

Can you grasp what great blessings, and how many blessings, we would have lost if Jesus had not followed perfectly the Heavenly Father's word? Scripture says: "*When Jesus had come up out of the water after baptism, immediately the heavens were opened and the Spirit of God descended in the form of a dove and rested upon him; a voice from heaven said: This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased*". Having descended into sin by our own will, had we tried to ascend to God we would have been acting on our own will. Only in doing only the will of the Heavenly Father, and leading John and all of us to do the same, could Jesus raise us up to heavenly reality and make us again children of God.

We are no longer slaves to what we think is our own will but are caught up with the Lord into heavenly reality. Now God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. That is why we say the doors of the heavenly bridal chamber are flung wide open. We become one with God in the unity that is Jesus the Christ. What was it that Jesus did when he descended into the waters that are this world except give himself wholly into the hands of the Father? This is the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus, when Jesus rose from the waters the Holy Spirit was seen to be upon him and to abide in him. The voice that spoke says words that are intended for us, precisely as one with Christ. In doing the whole will of the Heavenly Father we are each and all God's beloved children.

That is why Noah's ark is a symbol of baptism; it realizes God's will to save all who will obey and so love with all the heart and mind and soul. The Spirit came to Noah to show him what to do and when to leave the ark. Jesus knew hunger though he feeds millions; he had nowhere to lay his head though his hand upholds the universe; he suffered while healing, he received a blow on the cheek while giving freedom to the entire world, and from his pierced side sprang the life-giving water of obedience. All was done in obedient love.

Listen to me carefully. I call you to return to the life-giving fountain. I call you to contemplate its healing waters at their source. The Son has come into the world to baptize us with the water that is the Spirit and so give us a new birth. What does this water show us? It shows us the love with which we are loved and calls us to love others as we ourselves are loved. Did you ever ask, how can we come to all this? Follow Christ in love. Love is the fullest obedience and the fullest obedience is lived love. Come, as we say symbolically, to this water and this Spirit. What God calls us to do, God gives us the Spirit's grace so we can do it. Believe and obey this call.

## LIVING OUT JESUS' CALL TO ONENESS

A reflection from a homily by St. Gregory of Antioch

***“This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased”***. This, indeed, is the one who didn't leave the Heavenly Father when he took up his dwelling in Mary's womb. This One was never separated from the Heavenly Father or from us; whole and undivided, the Son is in heaven and yet is at home in the Virgin's womb. There aren't two—the Only Son of God and the son of Mary. Just so, the same One lay in the manger and was adored by the Magi. There was only one who was baptized, even though having no need to be baptized. This is the Heavenly Father's Son, the only Son. He isn't simply the object of thought but an object of bodily sight; he is one and the same invisible God and yet a human beheld by humans. He belongs both to eternity and to time.

This is part of what we mean when we say this One is the mediator between God and his fellow servants. In this One, unity with God is restored to sinners. This One is Son of God, Lamb of God, priest and victim, offeror and offering, the sacrifice and the one who receives the sacrifice. We have heard the Heavenly Father's testimony to the Only Begotten Son. This testimony was given at his baptism in the Jordan and at his transfiguration on the mountain when he was seen as more radiant than the sun. On both occasions the same voice testified to him and called us to obey him.

Because of Our Lord's oneness with God, in him we are drawn into that oneness. ***“I am in the Father and the Father is in me”***. That is what he says. He goes on to say: ***“One who has seen me has seen the Father too”***. This tells us more than clearly that we have been called by God to peace and not to conflict. We need to be steadfast in our response to this call. At the holy altar we take part in heavenly mysteries and are made one with them. We can't at the same time be guests at this one table and stumbling-blocks to one another. We can't be sharers in the Eucharist—and so in Christ's very self—and go out to be inflamed against one another in discord.

Who would want to hear the Lord Christ say, ***“I have begotten children and reared them, I have fed them as my own kin but they have rejected me”***. God has called some of us to help preserve the unity of the Lord's one flock. God has called all of us to help bring into one sheepfold all those who stray. God wills that there be one flock and one shepherd. God wills that there be one Savior for all. But this cannot be apart from our obedient response to the one God's love for all of us united as One Body. What keeps us apart?

Perhaps someone thinks, ***“I am greater than that other person so why don't I receive the greater honor?”***. But Christ himself says, ***“the Father who sent me is greater than I”***. We see him abasing himself yet we forget that in God all are one and there are no differences such as can divide us against one another. All that matters is being one with the One Father and his One Son. When we believe and live this all reasons for conflict and discord are removed. We can even compete with one another in showing the other greater honor than is shown us. This is the lesson of Christ's love. We must open ourselves to obey that love and imitate it in all we do.

# LIVING AS DISCIPLES OF ST. BENEDICT

A reflection developed from a homily by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

St. Gregory the Great tell us that St. Benedict was filled with the spirit of all the just. In his Rule sparkles the gold of Augustine, the silver of Jerome, the double-dyed purple of Gregory, and the jewel-like sayings of many other holy fathers. But his most precious memory is that of his disciples and their way of life. St. Paul says, "*The temple of God is holy and you are that temple*". In us the Lord will reign forever, and yet presently we are only pilgrimage, tabernacles more than temples. Such a tabernacle is born by many shoulders, yours too. From whom do you learn how to carry it?

Listen to what St. Benedict teaches: "*Let them most patiently bear one another's infirmities, whether of body or of habit*". Think of the example of this given by two of his disciples, Maur and Placid. Acting in obedience Placid took upon himself a task he wasn't fully prepared for and, without intending, it found himself in "over his head", as we say. He was being carried away without being able to master himself and cried out in his heart for help. God revealed this to his spiritual father, who immediately sent a more mature disciple to help him. This one so forgot himself in love for his spiritual father and for his fellow disciple that the Lord worked a miracle through him and saved the endangered brother.

This is the kind of thing that will happen as long as the tabernacles we are remain in the world. We have to be carried by others and so we have to love both the Lord and one another with all our heart, forgetting ourselves and our ordinary fears and concerns for the sake of the obedience of love.

Each one of us has a unique gift from God, one this gift and another that one. One can make an offering of extra work, another of extra prayer, another of extra fasting or extra lectio. But Benedict cautions us, "*no one shall say or presume to think of anything as his own*". This is not just a matter of cowls and robes but far more of our strengths and spiritual gifts. No one, therefore, should boast about any grace given by God. That is what we learn especially from the examples of St. Maur and St. Placid and the persons they became through obedient love.

No one should envy another because of some grace. God can immediately bring to perfection anyone he pleases and bestow on that person any virtue he pleases. In his caring way, however, he causes each to need others. Thus, humility is cultivated and preserved, charity increased and unity is recognized. Each thus has the benefit of the virtues of others while preserving humility by the consciousness of individual weakness.

The greatest sweetness is that of fraternal love. Don't let flies get into this ointment and die, then its sweetness is ruined. I am talking about things like cupidity, envy, and suspicion. This sort of fault can lead even to a kind of spiritual homicide. The worst sort of homicide is killing oneself by vice or another by bad example. It is to avoid such disasters that we must continue in spiritual exercises. It is a part of being buried with Jesus so that we may be like him in death to all that is not the Father's will or love. We must always seek to walk in newness of life. We do this best when, like Placid and Maur, we help one another out of love for our spiritual fathers and for one another.

## **ACCEPTING THE GIFT THAT IS COMMUNITY**

From Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

Community is a gift. It isn't founded on our collaborative efforts, nor on our sincere desire for friendship. These things are important and must be kept in mind but 'being together', as it is called in the New Testament, is a gift from God. It is a participation in the 'being together' that we call the Trinity. We find the model of this in Jesus being together with his disciples. God shares this Trinitarian community with the Church and in the Church each how to share in this community experience.

We are not only together with other now-living members of Christ but with those who have left this world and entered that of God's Kingdom of everlasting life. As long as we are joined in Christ, we are together with one another. This means that we are helping and being helped by all who are together in this way. By accepting the Word of God, we become members of an authentic community in Christ, living according to the laws of Trinitarian fellowship; i.e., of mutual love.

Lived Christian fellowship begins in the heart. It is from within that intentions come and from them come acts of love, or its opposite. The failure of love and the dominance of evil intentions are what causes division and all that results. But we know that people bound in fellowship with us in Christ are animated by love, a love like Christ's that fills hearts. Those who are already with God are filled with love for us; it is inseparable from their love for God. Are we mindful of their love? Are we always aware, in some way, that we are loved actively and without hesitation by the many who have gone before us, especially those we knew and were joined with in fellowship already upon this earth?

A description of a community based on charity is given us in St. Paul's letter to the Philippians. We are told this charity lives on God's word as ordinary life depends on breathing. The Word of God, not just the Scriptures but Christ, dwells all around us and within us. A Christian community finds in this its Bread of Life. This bread is an indispensable food for community.

Listen to St. Ambrose: "*When I read the Divine Scriptures God returns to walk in the earthly paradise. Christ and Divine Scripture are the remedy for every distasteful thing and the only refuge from temptation.*" What is temptation but the pull of something or someone other than God, hinting that it can free us from whatever is bothering or worrying us at present. But that is a lie. We turn to God and to God's Word, and we do this not simply on our own but by the help of others, itself given us in love and as a sign of love.

We remember those who have gone before us, and we remember how they persevered to the end in clinging to God and God's promises, especially by recalling Scripture passages to their mind and praying with them. To think of these friends is to be drawn to God and to God's promises. What more do we need than this gift of grace? In it we are actively united around God and in love. This is part of God's gift of community.

# **THE STRUGGLE TO LOVE GOD WHOLLY**

A reflection from The Life of Anthony by St. Athanasius

After Anthony's conversion temptations came to plague him. The Devil, the hater and envier of good, couldn't bear to see a young man make a resolution to love God above all things. So, he began by deploying his ordinary tactics against him.

First, the devil tried to cause him to desert the life of training in love of God by reminding him of the property he had, his responsibility to care for his younger sister, the bonds of kinship and its obligations, the love of wealth, the desire to be well-known, all the various pleasures connected with eating, as well as every other amenity that can make life nicer.

Second, the devil caused him to imagine all the hard things and austerities and the hard work that goes with the struggle to acquire virtue. He called attention to the fact that the body is weak and an entire lifetime is a long time. In short, the devil caused a kind of great dust cloud of arguments to rise up in his mind that worked to get him to abandon his set purpose of giving his entire life to God.

However, the Enemy quickly saw that he was powerless so long as Anthony kept his determination firm. Indeed, the devil saw that he was the one who was losing the struggle because of Anthony's steadfastness. The devil was being overcome by a solid faith supported by means of constant prayer.

The Enemy put his trust in the weapons furnished by a person's own body, especially that part of the body located near the belly button. This is the devil's preferred snare for the young, and he was proudly confident. So, he attacked this young man (Anthony was a teenager at the time of his conversion and choice of the monastic way) at night and made his life difficult by day. Even those who saw Anthony could tell that a struggle was going on between him and the Enemy.

The devil would provoke filthy thoughts but the young man would dissipate them by prayer. The Enemy would try to incite him to lust but Anthony, would fill himself with shame and so surround his whole body with faith. The desperate devil even masqueraded as a woman who came at night, making her attractive in every possible way simply in order to deceive Anthony. But he filled his mind with thoughts of Christ, reflected on the nobility of a soul as it comes from God, and thought of its spiritual character. That put out the burning of temptation.

Again and again, the Enemy caused him to imagine pleasure's seductive charms. But Anthony reacted by getting angry and feeling sadness, keeping his imagination fixed on the threat of hell-fire and its pain and corruption. He used these thoughts like a shield and came through all the temptations unharmed.

This whole sequence of events put the Enemy himself to shame. He had imagined himself to be like God and here he was being made a fool of by a mere youth. In his conceit he had looked down on all creatures of flesh and blood and here he was being driven off by a being of mere flesh. Indeed, the Lord works with and in young Anthony and in us. The One who took on flesh and blood for our sakes gave Anthony complete victory in his body and over the Devil himself. Let this be a lesson for all who struggle in earnest for God. As St. Paul says, "*Not I, but the grace of God within me*" wins the victory.

# **LOVE OF GOD IS THE SOURCE OF UNITY**

**A reflection taken from homilies by St. Pope John XXIII**

Unity in the Church is rooted in unity in faith and that is expressed by our common creed: “I believe” in God the Father Almighty and in Jesus Christ his son; “I believe” in the Holy Spirit and the Holy Catholic Church, with all that she has taught from the age of the apostles to our own. Our unity is in love—in one charity! This reminds us of the one heart and mind of the Christians pictured on the first pages of the Book of Acts, and of the triumph of love’s miracles through the centuries.

It is love that burns in the heart and words of St. Paul, eager to lead all to Christ. It is love which governs the mutual relations of Christians and inspired us in our relations with Christian brethren who are separated from us; we show each other respect, meekness, understanding and long-suffering. We are certain that all will become sheep in the one and same fold of Christ.

Unhappily, during the centuries the seamless robe of Christ has been torn and it is still rent. This is what the aged Cardinal Bessarion said in the 15<sup>th</sup> century: *“What excuse can we offer to God for being separated from our brethren when He himself in order to unite us and gather us into a single fold, came down from heaven, took on human flesh and was crucified?”* The entire responsibility for this is to be laid on our shoulders and not only on those of our separated brethren. It is our duty to soften such discord with our behavior as well as by our speech, especially with the example of humility and charity. These two virtues together overcome all resistance.

*“Let them all be one; even as you, Father, are in me and I am in you; let them also be one in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”* This prayer is the culmination of the miracle of love that began at Bethlehem and of which the shepherds and the Magi were the first fruits. The salvation of all is through their union in faith and love. This is the Divine Redeemer’s purpose.

We must do our best to further it; it is a grave responsibility entrusted to every believer’s conscience. On the Last Day all will be asked if each has suffered, prayed, and labored for unity. Did each impose this duty on self, and with a prudent discipline?

Christ’s prayer comes from Christ’s heart. It must persuade us to renew the intensity of our efforts that all may continue faithfully to love and to manifest love and love for unity. O Eternal Word of the Father, Son of God and of Mary, renew once more in the secret depths of human hearts, the miracle of your birth! Re-clothe with immortality all the children you have redeemed. Make all flame with charity, gather all together in unity as your Mystical Body so that your coming may bring real joy, sure peace and true fellowship for all. Amen.

## **THE TASK OF SPIRITUAL PURIFICATION**

**A reflection taken from a homily by Bl. Gueric of Igny**

When we contemplate the life of Mary, we find that she teaches us about spiritual purification. It is a lesson that began when she was presented in the temple for a ritual purification after the birth of her son, but she turned it into a spiritual one. An offering was made of a pair of turtledoves. Our forefathers have shown us that this offering symbolizes chastity of body and simplicity of heart. But they also pointed out that the deeper our understanding of such mysteries becomes the more justly it is demanded of us that we respond with deeds—that person is indeed a sinner who knows what is right but fails to do it. Such a one is like a servant who knows the master's mind but doesn't do what the master wants; he deserves a severe beating.

What is it that we are asked to do? We must bring Christ to others. We are to be tinder for the fire of love. What a sweet love and what a gentle fire it lights in our hearts. It sets our hearts alight because our God is a consuming fire. This is the fire that sets the heart aflame, that licks around the mind, that renews the soul, and that cauterizes all the wounds of sin. Mary rejoices to carry this fire in her arms and close to her heart. She would teach us to do the same.

We must be purified by Christ in order to bear Christ to others! How do we begin? We embrace God's wisdom. This wisdom is Christ and it is a wisdom filled with love and kindness. Close to our hearts Jesus must lodge; even when we restore him to Mary's arms, he remains with us. As a baby, he snuggles close to his mother's breast and heart, yet he still lingers close to mine and to yours. What does this teach us? It teaches mercy and gentle love. Who is Mary if not the mother of mercy, made fruitful by and with divine mercy.

O you who are full of grace, you gave birth to the loving-kindness I have received. O Virgin of Virgins, you clothe the unblemishable Word in unblemished flesh. In the Wisdom of Solomon, it is written of you that all night long your light continues to shine. Whatever the temptation, with this light in our hearts our faith will not fail. The revelation of God's Word gives understanding even to the simple. Every single word that lodges in our hearts and by faith stirs them to love is God's own word taking flesh in us and for others.

What does Mary do as a consequence, all inflamed by love as she is? She does the works of love, as we see in her service of her cousin Elizabeth. How are we to let our own hearts be purified by God's grace even as hers had been? We are to let grace enkindle us to do works of love in service of one another.

Isn't our entire life—whether spent in prayer or in manual labors—a service of love meant to lift up and heal the hearts of others? This labor purifies our spirit. As we imitate our Blessed Mother, Mary, we undergo this purification. It prepares us for God's Kingdom of Love where loving will be our eternal task and our greatest joy.