

Baptism of the Lord “Remember your Baptism”
Fr. Frank Schuster

I have been to the Holy Land twice and there is nothing like remembering your baptismal vows in the Jordan River. Although the Jordan River is dried up most of the time now due to damming for irrigation purposes, there is a park that recreates a stretch of the Jordan River, just south of the Sea of Galilee, or Lake Gennesaret, as this body of water is also called. This park is a very meaningful place to visit. As you wade into the waters of the Jordan River, your imagination can be stimulated as the little fish nibble at your toes. Honestly, there are little fish there that nibble at your toes. For the record, I wouldn't recommend drinking the water given how many feet were near mine that day. Nevertheless, a pilgrimage to the Holy Land is special because you never read the bible the same way again. It is a place that makes you think.

You can imagine the scene. John is present performing one baptism after the other. All of the sudden Jesus is standing before him who he knows is also the Son of God. Before he baptized Jesus, John says “I am not worthy to loosen the thongs on his sandals”. Jesus disagrees. The whole point of the incarnation is that God submerged himself into our reality, sanctifying us in the process. This is what John means in the Gospel reading when he says that Jesus baptizes not only with water, but also in spirit and fire.

As a priest, I have celebrated a number of funerals. And yes, I say “celebrate” on purpose. Not because I preside over these liturgies but because funerals in the Catholic tradition are supposed to be celebrations of life rather than celebrations of endings, even as we justifiably grieve. Why? This is because of what we celebrate this Sunday, the celebration of the Baptism of the Lord. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has submerged himself into our reality and sanctifies us by his presence in our humanity.

The celebration of Christian funerals makes no sense without the sacrament of baptism. Perhaps the best catechesis on Baptism can be found in Paul's letter to the Romans. St. Paul encourages us to remember that we who are baptized into Christ Jesus are also baptized into his death. If we die with Christ, we will also rise with him on the last day. That's our perspective. When I am at a grave side, I sometimes make a comment that another word for burying a body into the earth could be the word “gardening”. Like Jesus tells us, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a grain of wheat, but if it dies, it will yield a great harvest. And so, this is what we do when we bury someone into the ground. Because we believe in the resurrection of the body, we believe we are planting a seed that will bear fruit into everlasting life.

I love connecting the dots between baptismal liturgies and funeral liturgies because I believe, in many respects, they are intrinsically connected. On the day of our baptism, we are baptized by water and the Holy Spirit. During the celebration of Christian funerals, the first thing we do at the beginning of the liturgy is sprinkle the casket with Holy Water. On the day of our baptism, we are given a white garment. At a funeral celebration, usually a large white cloth, called a pall, is placed on the casket reminding us of this baptismal garment. On the day of our baptism, we were given a baptismal candle, lit from the paschal candle. At funeral celebrations, the paschal candle is lit reminding us of our baptismal candle. We are given the choice of white,

purple, or black for the liturgical color of a funeral celebration. It is understandable at times to wear a purple or black vestment, depending on the circumstance. Whenever possible, however, white is the preferred color of most priests, including this one, because that is the liturgical color of the celebration of Easter and therefore baptism. It is the color of the robes of the messengers at Jesus' tomb after the resurrection. Their message to us was, why look for the living one among the dead. He is not here. He has risen!

Every so often a parishioner will approach me after mass to tell me that today was the anniversary of his/her baptism. I think it is inspirational when people remember the day of their baptism. We celebrate birthdays and this is a wonderful thing to do. On the other hand, we should also consider celebrating the anniversary of our baptism. You see, our first birth is a celebration first and foremost about beginnings and giving thanksgiving for the gift of life while we have it. In the sacrament of baptism, however, the fate of eternal death is wiped away. When Jesus submerged himself into our reality on the day of his baptism, he offers us sanctification in the exchange if we allow ourselves to be baptized into his death and so rise with him on the last day. Given that perspective, can any of us imagine a more important day than the day of our baptism? Something to think about!

If we live the sacrament of baptism, we can live our lives with a broader perspective than what this life has to offer us. We are invited to live our lives with the perspective of the everlasting life awaiting us. This hope in the future should have an immediate effect on our decision making today. This consciousness has implications on how we treat ourselves, our family members and friends, our neighbors and co-workers, and people of other races, nationalities and religions. A baptismal consciousness invites us to order our lives around the priorities of the Kingdom of God rather than the lesser priorities we get ourselves worked up over so often each day.

And so, in that spirit, on this feast day of the Baptism of the Lord, we will renew the vows of our own baptism, reject sin, and embrace the Gospel. By doing so, the day of our funeral won't be a celebration of an ending, but rather the beginning.