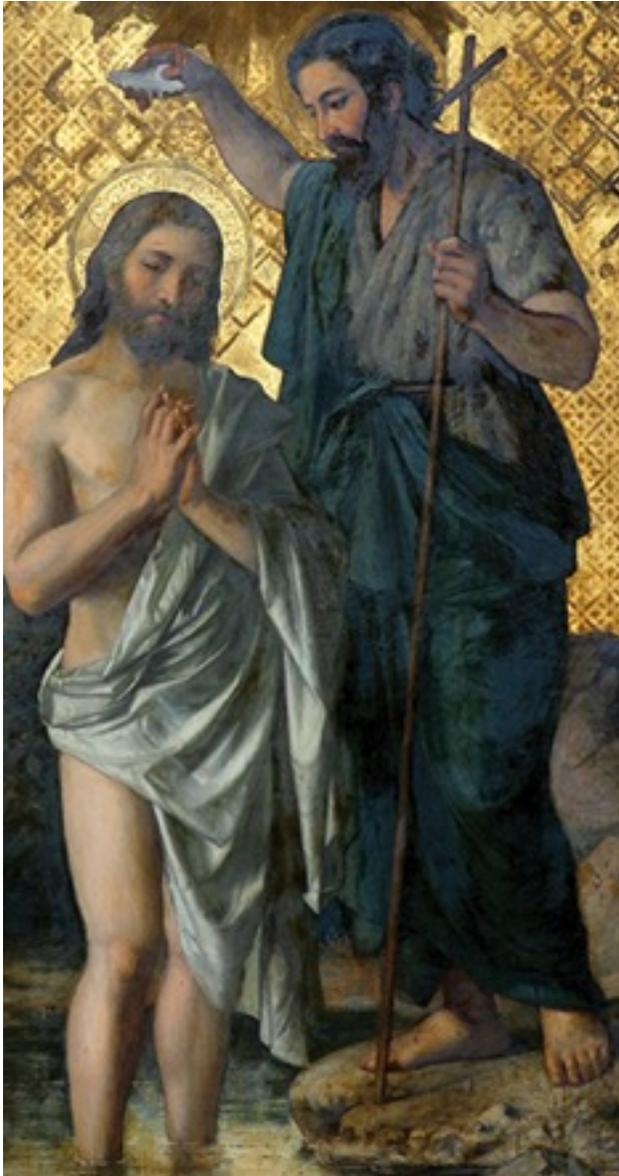


What Is the Meaning of Jesus' Baptism?

By descending into the Jordan, Christ fully embraces His mission to save us from sin

by: **Bishop Donald J. Hying** *The Catholic Answer*

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We Christians reflect upon and celebrate the baptism of Jesus in significant ways: liturgically, at the conclusion of the Christmas season; devotionally, as the First Luminous Mystery of the Rosary; and theologically, as the scriptural prism for the meaning of Christian baptism.

But if the baptism performed by John the Baptist was meant as a sign of repentance of sin and conversion to a new way of life, it's reasonable to ask: Why did Jesus, as the sinless Son of God, receive baptism?

Narrated in each of the four Gospels, the baptism of Jesus marks the inauguration of His public ministry — His emergence from a life of seeming obscurity into a life of growing popularity on account of His preaching, miracles, healings and proclamation of mercy and forgiveness.

Jesus steps into the Jordan River and into His mission of redemption through this public religious act. The descent of the dove symbolizes the anointing of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus receives as the Christ, Greek for “the Anointed One.”

Jesus' Identity

This mark of divine blessing is accompanied by the voice of the Father in heaven who proclaims, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3:17). This mysterious utterance reveals Jesus as the Son of God, the One sent from the Father to accomplish the salvation of the human race. In this dramatic scene we already grasp the identity and function of the Most Blessed Trinity — we see the Father as the One who begets and sends the Son to redeem the human race, the Son as the obedient servant who accomplishes the will of the Father, and the Holy Spirit as the Sanctifier who empowers the mission of redemption.

Feast Day

The feast of the Baptism of the Lord marks the end of the Christmas season. Typically celebrated on a Sunday, it moves to a Monday if Christmas falls on a Sunday. This year the feast of the Baptism of the Lord is celebrated on Monday, Jan. 9.

Already at the beginning of His ministry, Jesus' fundamental identity is situated in this Trinitarian relationship. In the early Church, the visit of the Magi, the baptism of the Lord and the miracle at Cana together constituted the meaning of Epiphany, for each of these three events reveals, manifests and unveils who Jesus is.

Drawing profound parallels between Jesus' baptism and our own, we can see that, just as Jesus is revealed as the beloved Son at the Jordan, so, too, we receive a new identity in baptism as adopted children of the Father. The fruit of Christ's victory over the power of sin and death is the divine invitation for us to share in the very life of the Trinity. Jesus Christ — namely, the Son — freely shares His very nature with us through the transforming waters of baptism. At the moment of our spiritual rebirth in the font, the Father beholds us with delight, exclaiming, "This is my beloved son, this is my beloved daughter with whom I am well pleased." Christianity first and foremost is about whom we have become in Christ before it is about what we do or how we act. This saving act of spiritual adoption draws us into the very life of God and His merciful grace.

Identification with Sinners

In his book "Jesus of Nazareth," Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI insightfully offers another facet of the baptism of the Lord. The baptismal action of

John the Baptist was markedly different from any other religious rituals that had preceded it. The baptism he offered the crowds that came from Jerusalem occurred only once, signifying a radical break from a former life of sin and a new way of thinking and acting — all of which was framed by the imminent emergence of One greater than John who would “baptize with fire.” The crowds responded to John’s baptism as a reaction to his fiery preaching against sin and the call to conversion.



In many ways Eastern Christian iconographical depictions of Jesus’ baptism, such as this one, symbolically relate the event to the Paschal Mystery. Dmitrydesign / Shutterstock.com

The retired Pope Benedict sees Jesus’ baptism as an expression of His fundamental submission to the will of the Father and His complete identification with sinners. By submersion in the waters of the Jordan, Jesus is publicly seen as one in need of repentance and forgiveness himself, although He has no need of it in actuality. Jesus is already embracing the enormous weight of humanity’s sinfulness, just as He will do again in a definitive and final way on the cross — labeled then as a criminal

and blasphemer. The mysterious events at the Jordan River already foreshadow the saving acts of Christ's death and resurrection.

Pope Benedict notes that the icons of the Eastern Church visualize this intrinsic connection between the baptism of the Lord and the Paschal Mystery by depicting the waters of the Jordan "as a liquid tomb having the form of a dark cavern, which is in turn the iconographic sign of Hades, the underworld, or hell." Just as the Lord descends into the swirling waters of death at His baptism, He goes down to the netherworld after His crucifixion to rescue the souls of lost humanity.

Divine Condescension

In this downward descent, this complete identification with sinners, we grasp the radical humility of Jesus. He is the One who empties himself, not clinging to His equality with God but becoming a slave for the sake of our salvation. This is so beautifully articulated in the kenotic hymn of the second chapter of St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians. God could have saved us in any manner that He chose, but He seems to embrace the most difficult and arduous way — the path of Incarnation and accompaniment.

Christianity is the only world religion that believes the omnipotent and mysterious God humbled himself to become one of His own creatures, embracing the fullness of our humanity in order to redeem us from inside our own nature and condition. The Church has never gotten over the wonder of this divine condescension. We celebrate the Word made flesh not only in the glory of Christmas, but in the fullness of the liturgy, prayer and moral life of the Christian tradition.

Jesus' solidarity with us

"Jesus shows His solidarity with us, with our efforts to convert and to be rid of our selfishness, to break away from our sins in order to tell us that if we accept Him in our life He can uplift us and lead us to the heights of God the Father. And Jesus' solidarity is not, as it were, a mere exercise of mind and will. Jesus truly immersed himself in our human condition, lived it to the end, in all things save sin, and was able to understand our weakness and frailty. For this reason He was moved to compassion, He chose to "suffer with" men and women, to become a penitent with us. This is God's work which Jesus wanted to carry out: the divine mission to heal those who are wounded and give medicine to the sick, to take upon himself the sin of the world."
— From Homily of Pope Benedict XVI on feast of the Baptism of the Lord 2013

We can place the baptism of Christ into the total context of His humble identification with us, beginning with the eternal Second Person of the Trinity assuming our flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary and continuing with Jesus' ministry to the sick and sinful, His table fellowship with tax collectors, His loving conversations with people of ill repute, the vulnerability of the Eucharist — as Jesus places himself completely at our disposal in the wondrous sacrament of His body and blood — and His doing the work of a slave during the Last Supper foot-washing.

The Cross of Christ becomes the sacred intersection of God's redemptive mercy and our ancient curse of sin and death. Without ever having sinned himself, Jesus embraces the consequences of our sin, which is death and alienation, and accepts a horrible death, filled with pain and suffering. Wrapping himself in our sins, He lifts it all up to the Father as a radical offering — a complete holocaust of the self. Executed as a criminal and a blasphemer, crucified outside the city gate as one seemingly cut off from God, Jesus seals His identification with sinners in His own blood.

How does the Father respond to this murder of His Son, this obedience even unto death? When the centurion pierces the side of Christ, what flows out from the side of the crucified One? Not divine vengeance or wrath or retribution, but blood and water, symbols of baptism and Eucharist — instruments of mercy, love, forgiveness and redemption. By accomplishing the saving deed of our salvation through His death and resurrection, Jesus himself becomes the baptismal fountain of the New Covenant.

Clarity of Mission

In Christian baptism, we become adopted children of the Father, members of the Church, the Body of Christ, and temples of the Holy Spirit. Baptism washes away our original sin and claims us for the kingdom of God. Through this saving sacrament, God fills us with sanctifying grace, with the fullness of the Trinitarian life. To understand the meaning and implications of our baptism is to fundamentally grasp our identity, vocation and mission as disciples of the Lord Jesus and members of the household of God.

In Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, we see Him anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Christ, we hear the Father proclaim His fundamental identity as the beloved Son, and we perceive Jesus' mission as one of humility, a self-

emptying love and sacrificial identification with everything in us that was lost, broken and dead.

We spend time and energy seeking a lost object to the extent that we value it. I will spend much more time looking for my wallet or cellphone than I will a misplaced magazine. How infinitely valuable we must be to the Lord God that He sent His own Son to seek and save us in the valley of death! The whole Christ-event finds a clarity of mission when Jesus is submerged in the waters of the Jordan at the hands of John the Baptist.

Most Rev. Donald J. Hying, D.D., was installed as fourth bishop of the Diocese of Gary in 2015. A native of Wisconsin, he was a former seminary rector and auxiliary bishop in Milwaukee. Follow him on Twitter [@bishophying](#).