

Baptism of the Lord 1-9-11

Did you have a busy week? Since the three Magi dropped their gifts last weekend, Jesus has lived in Egypt a year or so, settled in Nazareth, and is now 33 years old! (What is that disease that makes little kids grow so fast?) Now, he has just walked 70 desert miles down to the Jordan River to listen to John the Baptist. Not bad for seven days!

Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River, in a place where no one is baptized today: the water there is very shallow, very polluted, and is at a border checkpoint with Jordan.

And hopefully when we entered the church today, we plunged our hand deep into the Baptismal Pool to remind ourselves that too are baptized Christians.

Well, let me ask you directly: does it mean anything at all that we are baptized Catholic Christians? Does the water make any difference to us between Sundays? Do Catholics think or act any differently than person at the other end of the bar, or the guy who says, "On Sunday, my parish is St. Mattress?" Are we any different than them?

when Jesus was baptized, he was anointed with the Spirit and with Power, St. Peter says. Peter says that after Jesus was baptized, he went about "doing good." Followers of Jesus ought to do good; that's hard, especially if we are not doing so good ourselves.

Isaiah prophesied that the Chosen One was called for "the victory of justice." Doing justice is even harder. Doing good would be to give a hungry person a bag of groceries. Doing justice would be to write a letter

to Jean Schmidt or Sherrod Brown or President Obama and ask, "Why does this powerful and rich country allow so many to be hungry?" Doing good gets you called a saint. Trying to do justice can get you called a socialist or worse.

I am just back from a challenging conference in Michigan about the state of the institutional Catholic Church. Perhaps you have heard some of the numbers: one in ten Americans is a former Catholic. The largest religious group in America is Catholics; the second largest religious group in our country is former Catholics. Only 23% of adult Catholics attend Mass every week or more. In 1975, there were 8414 Catholic elementary schools in the US; now there are 1500. There are 18000 parishes in the US; 3400 of them do not have a resident priest. 70% of active diocesan priests are older than 55. (that's me!) The institutional Catholic Church is in crisis.

At the conference, our speaker said over and over that we Catholics—and not just bishops and priests--need to be able to articulate our "story." Who are we Catholics? What Gospel do we preach? The Catholic story is not accepting Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior. It's not the Gospel of prosperity, or of physical fitness, or the gospel of Dr. Phil, or the Republican gospel or the Democratic Gospel.

In short, imagine being on an elevator tomorrow for ten floors. And your fellow passenger has a question: "what does it mean to you to be a baptized Catholic?"

Let me ask this: after Mass today dip your hand deeply into the Baptismal Pool water. Get really wet! Then....think about it.

