

The Baptism of the Lord
January 9, 2022
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
116 Theodore Street
Scranton, PA 18508
Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

Our Lord's baptism, which we heard about in today's Gospel, is a prefiguration of our Lord's Passion. As He descends into the water and then rises from it, we see symbolized His death, burial, and resurrection. Thus, the beginning of Jesus' public ministry corresponds with the end of it three years later. We see from the very start what Jesus wills for us, how He has gone before us into the waters of baptism, and how they issue in eternal life.

What we notice, also, is that Jesus begins and ends His public ministry without any clothes on. While artistic representations of both events portray our Lord with a loin cloth, the literal reality was that He was naked in each instance. His nakedness demonstrates both His humility and His complete self-oblation for the sake of our salvation, that no mere indignity would inhibit Jesus' salvific work. His voluntary nakedness at His baptism also indicates that He enters into His Passion voluntarily, that it is not forced upon Him, but originates in the Divine Will.

Yesterday Bishop Lopes wrote to his priests and asked us to preach about the tenth anniversary of the erection of our diocese, which took place last week. It occurred to me that the nakedness of our Lord at His baptism corresponds, though not in a literal way, to the nakedness of so many of our clergy in the Ordinariate. In order for our priests to take up the Pope's invitation to enter into full communion through this new jurisdiction, many of them had first to lay aside everything from their former life. They had to quit their employment and end all the benefits associated with it—housing, medical insurance, pension, and, of course, the clerical state. They went from being Anglican pastors to being laymen, never guaranteed that their application to be ordained a Catholic priest would be accepted. Though figurative, this nakedness was real enough, as was the nakedness of the congregations, most of whom had to seek shelter in local Catholic parishes in order to continue worshipping together.

Perhaps the worst part was being made to feel naked. My wife and I had basically read our way into the Church. Our conviction that we needed to become Catholic was based on our exposure to the Truth the Church taught, not on our personal relationship with Catholics who invited us to come home. So we didn't really know many Catholics here in Scranton when we began to assist at Mass. The parishioners stared at us, but hardly anyone spoke to us. One of the few people who went out of her way to intentionally welcome us was Mrs. Casey, the widow of our late governor of happy memory, Robert Casey, may he rest in peace. Otherwise, we often found ourselves alone and could enjoy fellowship only when we gathered for catechism and evensong every Sunday afternoon.

St. Peter says in our lesson from Acts, *"Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."* We understood intellectually

that this is true, that God shows no partiality, and the fullest expression of this is in the teachings of the Catholic Church. Yet at the same time, it could not be said that we had felt accepted. When I shared my experience with some of our other members, they told me that had experienced the same thing, that hardly anyone had spoken to them, and fellowship after Mass was non-existent. We knew we were acceptable to God but had not experienced acceptance.

Just last week, a lady from Brooklyn explained this phenomenon to me. She reminded me that many Catholic parishes in America are based in close-knit neighborhoods. The people they went to Mass with were the very people they went to school with, worked with, shopped with, and lived with in immediate proximity. They had fellowship all week long, so they didn't need it organized after church; they would see each other soon enough at some social event. I took consolation after all these years that our isolation was not intentional, but at the same time I knew that this phenomenon had not been explained to any of us who had felt naked and alone the first time we went to Mass.

Therefore, I think one of the reasons God worked to form the Ordinariate in this country was to help this ideal of acceptance come alive, to be manifested corporeally in Catholic parishes. There are so many Protestants looking for a home in the Catholic Church, yet their first experience of Catholic parish life could be described as anything but homey. Yes, the liturgy and hymnody here are familiar to a lot of people coming from Anglicanism and its many offshoots, but what is familiar to even more people of the Ordinariate is the welcome and the friendliness that former Protestants experienced at their places of worship when they were growing up. This welcome is what has transformed their experience of Catholic parish life, from a perceived lack of acceptance to an environment in which they are welcomed and mentored to welcome others.

We need to welcome the newcomers, that they might know God accepts them, so that they will be prepared for the nakedness that baptism points to. After all, we don't enter into this missionary endeavor for ourselves only, but so that we can bring others home, too. This means carrying our cross, being exposed to the mockery of those who do not share our faith, so that by our love they may come to faith in Him who is Love. The consolations we receive here are what enable us to endure the sufferings in the valley below. Going to church is not supposed to be the suffering but the means of grace and experience of joy by which future trials are faced, borne, and overcome. If the faithful feel clothed here, they will be better ready to be completely exposed later; for having been loved, they will be able to love others.

Ten years in, it's clear our work is not done. It has barely begun, but in every place a community like ours is founded, we see another outpost where our separated brethren will be welcomed without some of the awkwardness we experienced a decade ago. May the increase of our labor be a refuge for the wandering, as well as an example to our neighbors of how the stranger can find the acceptance he desires.