

Homily based on the readings from January 6, 2024 (1 John 5.5-13;
Mark 1.7-11)

Depending on how one chooses to count them, there are only about eleven events in the life of Jesus that are explicitly mentioned in all four Gospels. Even an occurrence as important as the Nativity – the birth of Christ – is only depicted in Matthew and Luke. The Baptism of the Lord is not only one of those eleven events, but it is actually the first among them to appear in each of the Gospels. This episode is so important, in fact, that it essentially serves as the opening of the Gospel of Mark. It is also worth noting that this moment marks the first time in Sacred Scripture that we see – or, at least, hear – all three persons of the Holy Trinity together in one place.

In view of its centrality within the Gospel narratives, it is possible that we do not always give the Baptism of Jesus as much attention it deserves – although, to be fair, it has attained a greater degree of prominence since Pope Saint John Paul II introduced the Luminous Mysteries of the

Rosary in 2002. In principle, the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord is supposed to be celebrated tomorrow, but it has been moved to Monday in the United States because of the way we observe Epiphany.

Any time we hear one of the accounts of Christ's baptism, it raises an obvious and somewhat thorny question: why would Jesus Christ – the coeternal, coequal, consubstantial Son of the Father – need to be baptized at all? According to the Catechism, human beings receive the Sacrament of Baptism in order to be:

... freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; [to] become members of Christ, [and to be] incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission.

Clearly – from Christ's perspective – these effects would be completely superfluous. In fact, Matthew's account tells us that John the Baptist *himself* was disturbed by this paradox: "I need to be baptized by *you*, and do *you* come to *me*?"

So, what are we supposed to make of this situation? There are many possible explanations, all of which may be correct, but the simplest and the most persuasive was articulated by Saint Maximus of Turin in the 5th century: “Christ is baptized, not to be made holy *by the water*, but to make the water *holy*.” In other words, through his direct participation in what had previously been a human ritual, Jesus was instituting a God-given sacrament that would last until the end of time. Saint Maximus elaborates further:

For when the Savior is washed, all water for our baptism is made clean, purified at its source for the dispensing of baptismal grace to the people of future ages. Christ is the first to be baptized, then, so that Christians will follow after him with confidence.

This event, in fact, was the culmination of thousands of years of divine prefigurement and foreshadowing, from Noah’s flood to the escape of the Israelites across the Red Sea. Water had always been used as a sign of purification and salvation. At this particular moment in our history, that sign became a reality.

On those occasions when I have had the incredible privilege of baptizing an infant, I typically tell the child – or really his parents – that there will be never be a day in the child’s life that is more important than the day of his baptism. Christ’s own baptism was the precursor to every one of those days, the day on which Christ himself entered the waters to wash away *our* sins. *That* is certainly a day worth celebrating.