# the CATHOLIC NAVIGATOR

*Aboard St. Peter's Barque with the Catechism Charting Our Course*

**12 January 2014; Cycle A, *The Baptism of Our Lord*** ***Volume I, Issue 7***


## Chasing Holiness

While "God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism" we must always remember that "he himself is not bound by his sacraments." (*CCC 1257*) And, not being bound, he can draw to himself whomever, whenever, wherever, and however he wills. "Baptism" comes from Greek words meaning 'to immerse (v.)' and 'ceremonial washing (n.).' This is the rite by which one enters God's family. As a sacrament, it bestows the grace that it signifies. The Eastern Church recognizes seven sacraments but refers to them as "mysteria," Greek for mysteries.

The Church acknowledges two other means by which this entry to God's family is gained: a baptism of blood and a baptism of desire. When a person dies defending the faith, or somehow because of the faith, before she can be baptized, she is said to have been "baptized by blood." Here, actions are in conformity to those of Christ's and are usually in defense of the good. (*CCC 1258*) And, if one dies before she is able to be baptized, but has sincerely desired to be so, she is said to be "baptized by desire" because the disposition of her heart is believed to be conformed to the Gospel message, even without having had the opportunity to have learned about it. (*CCC 1259*) God calls the entire world to himself continually. Whichever baptism one participates in, know that it leaves an "indelible mark," a sort of imprint for life (as does Confirmation and Holy Orders), and thus cannot be repeated. (*CCC 1121, 1272*)

### *Dear Sister Mary Inquiry,*

*I worry about my grandchild. My son and his wife aren't active Catholics and are pretty blasé about religion. They haven't even baptized their little girl ~ and she's almost two! I have these vague memories about a 'limbo' for unbaptized babies. I am so tempted to just baptize her when I give her a bath!*

*Signed,*
*Worried Sick*

*Dear Worried,*

*First, let me put your mind to rest on the whole 'limbo-thing.' While this was taught in some schools by (hopefully) well-meaning Religious, it was never a 'defined truth of faith'. It was more of a theological hypothesis put out to grapple with the effect baptism had on original sin. "Limbo" comes from a Latin word meaning "border" or "edge," and implies a place 'outside' of heaven for those innocents who died before the stain of original sin could be removed. Its use fell out of favor long ago. Pope Benedict (even before he was Pope!) pretty much retired this concept as "too restrictive" a view of salvation. The word limbo wasn't even mentioned in the 1992 Catechism, and I can't begin to number the conflicts this gives rise to when considering God's justice or mercy. We must never get sucked into the "who's not getting into heaven game."*

*You should know though that the Church is against baptizing a baby without the consent of at least one parent. Parents are the lawfully responsible parties for that child (Code of Canon Law, 868). Thomas Aquinas noted this back in the 13th century. Instead, why not get a child's Bible and a book of saints, and pass on the stories of our history and faith? Children love stories and are very good at making them come alive in their minds and hearts. These might help light that fire!*

*Sr. Mary Inquiry*

### In the Year... 337 A.D.

...the Roman Emperor Constantine died. While the Eastern Church venerates him as a saint, the Western Church is a bit more non-committal on this matter. Granted, he first officially tolerated Christians, and then favored them. And, he was baptized, a sure ticket to Paradise according to some. But, he only discarded his royal purple robes and took on the simple white garb of the newly baptized virtually on his death bed. *And*, he left in his wake a string of imperial executions- a son and second wife included among other close friends!

There were, of course, other eyebrow-raising matters of imperial statecraft that might have strained Christian believability, but the job of Emperor was too often down and dirty and just had to be done, like it or not (or, so they say). Common sense would pretty much dictate that anyone taking on the job of Emperor while flirting with Christianity might well put off baptism until all the really big sins were behind him. Constantine wasn't the first person (or the last) to think of baptism as more of a last-minute shower for one's soul. Yet, his approach to life and the sacraments does give one pause. For most of us, the reception of sacramental grace requires a lifetime of cooperation to bring it to fruition. Whatever his outcome, it is good not to think of Baptism as a drive-through wash.

## It's Been Said…

…by critics that the Catholic Church is wrong to baptize babies. Infant baptism is deemed by some to be unbiblical because there is no explicit reference in the Bible to a baby being baptized. Moreover, an infant is said to be incapable of *accepting the Lord as his personal Lord and Savior*. Actually, these folks haven't considered that it is the Lord who does the accepting-- infants, children and adults alike. In Luke 18:15-17 Jesus specifically embraces the little ones, adding the warning to us: "Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it. St. Peter (Acts 2:38-39) specifically includes children, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is made to you and to your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call." Additionally, Scripture cites whole households being baptized (Acts 16: 15; Acts 16:33; 1 Corinthians 1:16). Inclusivity seems very biblical to me! (*CCC 1226*)

But more important than my opinion is the Church's reflection on its own history as well as Sacred Scripture. "The practice of infant Baptism is an immemorial tradition of the Church. There is explicit testimony to this practice from the second century on, and it is quite possible that, from the beginning of the apostolic preaching, when whole 'households' received baptism, infants may also have been baptized." (*CCC 1252*) Also, "…The sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant Baptism…" since it highlights God's generosity in transmitting saving grace through a gift that none of us deserve nor earn. (*CCC 1250*)

## CATECHETICAL CORNER

Why would Jesus be baptized? Isn't baptism for those born under the shadow of original sin? Our catechism explains that Jesus "voluntarily submitted himself to the baptism of St. John … 'in order to fulfill all righteousness.'" (*CCC 1224*) What does *that* mean? A look at Isaiah's "Suffering Servant" might help here. As is reviewed in *Scripture Secrets* today, the "suffering servant" is like no other. In one sense, he is like any idea one has of a 'servant': obedient and pleasing to his master. Yet, *this* servant will "bring forth justice to nations!" In my experience, it is only a "lord" or someone pretty high up the chain-of-command who could accomplish this.

Jesus brought justice and salvation when he opened heaven and did so without resorting to the worldly power-plays we are so used to. His bearing was more reflective of a "servant" than a "boss". Yet, he was not a doormat. (Let's not forget that little dust-up in the Temple with the money changers.) So what is this type of power? *This power is by nature one defined by and as humility*. Jesus' baptism is the first public example of his humbling of himself before his Father… and man! In a servant's posture, he descends into the waters of the Jordan and emerges burdened with the sins of mankind: "Not my will, but yours, Father." In this action, he shows the self-denying love that the Father has for all and foreshadows his final act of will in Gethsemane.

This servant behavior culminates in the behavior shown in Philippians. As the Word, he "…not counting equality with God a thing to be grasped… emptied himself, taking the form of a servant… (and was) born in the likeness of men." (2:6-7) Jesus, the God-man, then humbled himself further and "became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." (v. 8)

Birth gives us a biological life; baptism gives us a divine one. Jesus emerged from the Jordan burdened with mankind's sin so that we might emerge from baptism free from sin. We must make ourselves small in humility if we are to grow in this grace and find not only death/ purification but regeneration/ new birth in the Holy Spirit. (*CCC 1262*)

## SCRIPTURAL SECRETS…

Today's first reading is taken from the second (*deutero)* portion of Isaiah and is referred to as *The First Servant Song* (v. 1-4). It is one of four in Isaiah. In each song, the focus is on a servant. But this servant is unique: this servant is one who is 'upheld,' 'chosen,' brings 'delight' to his master. He 'will not cry,' 'bruise a reed,' nor even 'put out a dimly lit candle.' Yet, he will "*bring forth justice to nations"?!* Who did they believe this servant would be? No one knows.

Scholars hold that this portion of Isaiah was written during the Babylonian captivity. (It is believed that "schools of Isaiah" picked up writing where the original left off.) Jerusalem had already been destroyed, and the Hebrews still lived in exile. The words in this song are meant to bring comfort and hope to a people who had lost their land, priesthood, and dynasty. Ezekiel had made it clear that individuals were not punished for the sins of their parents. How were they to understand their own suffering then? What was the reason?

At a time when the sacrifice of an animal was offered to gain forgiveness for sin, these songs point instead to the self-sacrifice of a single individual who would come and take on mankind's sin, making himself the sacrifice by modeling the self denial required to allow God's will to live. This chosen one gives meaning to suffering! Again we are left to ponder the seemingly absurd: suffering and death somehow would bring all to life? In the New Testament, in the person of Jesus, we see this Servant Song come to life. His very life becomes a pattern for ours.

It would seem that such a passage has a message for every age. It speaks not only of the times in which it was written but uniquely maps the interior journey for all: from exile through suffering and death to finally returning home. This path must be chosen by each.

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