

Meditations: Saturday after the Epiphany

Some reflections that can assist our prayer in these final days of the Christmas season.

- Baptism for the purification of our sins
- John the Baptist leads his own followers to Jesus
- Leading people to Christ

IN TODAY'S GOSPEL we see Jesus in Jerusalem with his disciples: *and [he] was baptising (Jn 3:22)*. Baptism as a rite for the purification of sins was

prefigured in the Old Testament by many signs: Noah's ark, passing through the Red Sea, crossing the Jordan.... Jesus himself, even though He had no need for it, went to be baptised to show his solidarity with those in need of redemption: *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21).*

Saint Paul connects Jesus' baptism with his death: *All of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death (Rom 6:3).* In fact, this is how Jesus' baptism is represented in Eastern art and spirituality: "The icon of Jesus' Baptism depicts the water as a liquid tomb having the form of a dark cavern, which is in turn the iconographic sign of Hades, the underworld, or hell. Jesus' descent into this watery tomb, into this inferno that envelops him from

every side, is thus an anticipation of his act of descending into the underworld.”^[1] We too are invited to share in being baptised into Christ’s death, to carry our daily cross so that one day we may rise with Him. This is the meaning of the atonement that purifies the remains of sin in our lives.

As Saint Josemaría reminds us, we don’t have to seek this purification only in extraordinary things: “Penance is fulfilling exactly the timetable you have fixed for yourself, even though your body resists or your mind tries to avoid it by dreaming up useless fantasies. Penance is getting up on time and also not leaving for later, without any real reason, that particular job that you find harder or most difficult to do. Penance is knowing how to reconcile your duties to God, to others and to yourself, by making demands on yourself so that you find

enough time for each of your tasks. You are practising penance when you lovingly keep to your schedule of prayer, despite feeling worn out, listless or cold. Penance means being very charitable at all times towards those around you, starting with the members of your own family. It is to be full of tenderness and kindness towards those who are suffering, towards the sick.”^[2]

NOW A DISCUSSION AROSE between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness – look, he is baptising, and all are going to him” (Jn 3:25-26). John the Baptist's disciples were understandably concerned, given their affection and admiration for their teacher, on seeing his prestige decline at the expense of Jesus' popularity. It is only natural that a comparison between

the two baptisms arises, which is basically a question about John's identity and that of Jesus.

John answered, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him’.” (Jn 3:27-28). John corrects his disciples' zeal by reminding them of his own teaching and mission. He was the voice announcing the coming of the Word, just as the friend of the bridegroom proclaims the presence of the bridegroom: *The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete (Jn 3:29).*

“John was a great educator of his disciples, because he led them to the encounter with Jesus to whom he

bore witness. He did not exalt himself, he did not wish to keep his disciples bound to himself. Yet John was a great prophet, his fame was very great. When Jesus arrived John drew back and pointed to him: *After me comes he who is mightier than I ... I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit* (Mk 1:7-8). The true educator does not bind people to himself, he is not possessive. He wants his children, or disciples, to learn to know the truth and to establish a personal relationship with it. The educator does his duty fully; he is attentive and faithful because his objective is that the person being educated listen to the voice of truth speaking to his heart and follow it on a personal journey.”^[3]

TODAY’S GOSPEL CONCLUDES with a resounding affirmation by Saint John the Baptist, which has become a motto for Christians throughout

history: *He must increase, but I must decrease* (Jn 3:30). Since the cause of original sin was the pride of Adam and Eve, Christ redeemed us by humbly accepting the will of the Father. His example is the way for us to walk on earth, and the Baptist's motto is a specific way of putting into practice the reality expressed by Saint Paul: *It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me* (Gal 2:20).

Saint Josemaría made this attitude the key for his own life, and therefore he often said that his way was to hide and disappear, so that only Jesus would shine forth: “Ever since I became determined to listen to God’s voice, after sensing Jesus’ love, I have felt in my soul an eagerness to hide myself and disappear; to live those words *illum oportet crescere, me autem minui* (Jn 3:30) – that the glory of the Lord should increase, and I should not be seen.”^[4] Pope Francis said: “This is

the rule of holiness: our humiliation, so that the Lord may increase ... The difference between heroes and saints is the witness, the imitation of Jesus Christ. To go the way of Christ, the way of the cross. So many saints ended up so humbly, the great saints! And it is also the way of our holiness. If we do not allow our hearts to be converted along that path of Jesus – to carry the cross every day, the ordinary cross, the simple cross – and let Jesus grow; if we do not go along that path, we will not be saints. But if we go that way, we will all bear witness to Christ.”^[5]

As we begin a new year, we ask God to help us to follow more faithfully this path of service and humility, this new conversion to imitate Christ. Our Lady said that God had looked upon her humble estate. With words from the *Collect* of today’s Mass, let us ask that, with Mary’s help, Christ may grow in us: “Grant, we pray, that

by your grace we may be found in the likeness of him, in whom our nature is united to you.”^[6]

^[1] Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Bloomsbury, London & New York, 2007, p. 19.

^[2] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 138.

^[3] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 8 January 2012.

^[4] Saint Josemaría, *Letter 29 December 1947-14 February 1966*, 16.

^[5] Pope Francis, Homily, 9 May 2014.

^[6] Mass on Saturday (after the Epiphany), *Collect*.

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