

SLAM...DUNK!

No, this blog is not about basketball but Baptism. Sorry about that, you sports fans! Baptism is the first of the seven sacraments and the sacraments are an expression of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ which we celebrate at Christmas. The sacraments focus on divinity in matter and in the events of human existence. We need to be reminded that we live in a sacramental /incarnational universe and we celebrate these sacraments which are physical and spiritual at the same time.

The Catholic Catechism succinctly summarizes Holy Baptism in these words: “It is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the spirit and the door which gives access to the others sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as children of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated in the Church and made sharers in his mission” (CC, # 1213).

This is a pretty dull and doctrinal definition as most of the Catechism is. We look to our experience to understand its meaning in a fuller way. Unfortunately, our comprehension of the sacraments for the past few centuries has been a very juridic, legal, passive meaning, a requirement for us to get into heaven. This worked to a degree when Baptism was mainly administered to adults, who were converting to Christianity. Saint Augustine in his repudiation of Pelagian teaching which denied original sin, tended to stress sin and the need for the gift of grace. The death of infants who were not baptized presented a real dilemma. Someone thought up the idea of “Limbo” which was to be neither heaven nor hell but a place for these non-baptized children. This image prevailed into the twentieth century. I can remember hearing of grandmothers baptizing their grandchild in the kitchen sink because the parents neglected to do so. They were rescuing these children from Limbo, erasing original sin, and opening them to heaven.

Gratefully, there were always some people who had more trust in the mercy of God. I have been moved by visiting the “Church of the Women” lying outside the gates of the Monastic City of Glendalough in Ireland. The women buried these infants as they could not be buried in consecrated ground, and prayed for them. This was the “sense of the faithful” speaking.

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The revival of theology in the nineteenth century led to the Second Vatican Council and a return to the gospel and early roots of the Church. Baptism came to be emphasized not as a negative and legal escape from sin but as the celebration of the baptized into the body of Christ, the Church. The baptized become “other Christs” and are recognized for being touched with the priesthood of the faithful. In fact, Baptism makes the baptized sharers in Christ’s triple office of priest, prophet and king. These newly baptized were seen to be active members of the Church. In the Mass they were to be celebrants and offerers of the Eucharist along with the priest, and not just passive receivers of communion. They were committed to be followers, companions of Christ in bringing the gospel to the world. Of course, with infants this has meant relying on parents and godparents who would educate them, introduce them to reading the scriptures, help them to find an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. Baptism is the beginning, not the end, of “being christened.” At Confirmation Baptism is strengthened by deputizing the confirmed Christian to be an evangelizer of the good news of Jesus especially in his social teaching.

Does this all sound familiar? Probably not. The post-Reformation church revolved all around the priest. He was the church, He did everything. The laity were there to be passive, to “pay, pray and obey.” It was the priests’ church and most priests would not brook any lay interference or even suggestion.

The Second Vatican Council recognized the centrality of Baptism. It spoke of the “Universal call to holiness.” It meant lay people would again fulfill certain liturgical roles. When, for instance, they proclaim the scriptures as lectors, they are speaking in the name of Christ. In October the Synod of the Church in Rome saw participants organized around round tables – Cardinals, bishops, priests, lay women and men all there because of their right as baptized people. All equally present to speak of the church and its need to face some issues brought forth by baptized people all over the world.

The Church is open to everyone, saints and sinners alike. My Irish cousin, James Joyce, once described the Church as “Here comes everybody.” Some people just hang on or take part as a sense of obligation. We hope they will turn to the church when they need it. But, as we continue to live in a society adrift, a culture that is secularized and leaves God out, country and church will need all committed religious people to live their faith, to witness to the belief that there is

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more to life than our own needs and the accumulation of power, prestige and possessions. Christians who live their baptism and are happy to walk with Christ will be needed more and more. This is our privilege as well as our right. What do you think? You can let me know at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.