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The Epiphany of the Lord - Liturgical Year C

Preachers on this Feast of the Lord's Baptism are inevitably and correctly drawn to the mystery of sacramental baptism. The mystery of Christ's baptism sheds a great deal of light on the mystery of Christian baptism in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Today's Gospel pictures Christ baptized in the waters of the Jordan. Christians too are washed in water at the font or, better still from a liturgist's view, plunged into a pool. After Jesus' baptism, he sees the Holy Spirit descend on him in visible form. Likewise, the baptized Christian emerges from the waters confident in faith that he or she is filled in a new and wondrous way by the power of Christ's own Holy Spirit. In prayer at the river Jordan, Christ hears God's very voice declaring him the beloved and favored child. Each baptized Christian enters the waters of sacramental baptism precisely to emerge graced and favored by a new and eternal relationship to God which will last beyond the gates of death itself into eternal life.

With all this emphasis on the grace and power of Christ's baptism and ours, I choose today to lift up an aspect of baptism very easily and often overlooked. For Christ at the Jordan, baptism was both the declaration of and acceptance of his mission in this world. Emerging from the Jordan's waters, Jesus begins the journey of preaching, healing, forming disciples, and proclaiming God's will that will lead him to death on the Cross. In the mystery of his baptism, Jesus accepts in a unique and public way his mission on the world's behalf so poetically described by Isaiah four hundred years earlier:

Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I am pleased.

Upon whom I have put my Spirit. He shall bring forth justice to the nations.

Jesus, at his baptism is called, in Isaiah's words, "for the victory of justice" to bring light into darkness, freedom and power into a world in the captivity of greed, oppression, and injustice.

Will I now draw a comparison between Christ's mission and ours? To a certain extent there are similarities. Baptism for us immerses us in the mystery of Christ's saving love and gives us a share in Christ's mission. The Catholic tradition, however, adds a particular nuance at this point. For it is not an individual baptized in Christ to whom Christ's ongoing mission is entrusted. Our Catholic tradition proclaims that each of us at baptism becomes a member of the Body of Christ, the Church. And it is to this community of disciples, this Body of believers that the singular mission of continuing Christ's presence in the world is confided.

Here the Catholic tradition parts company with the majority of evangelists and preachers heard regularly on radios and television. For us, it is not sufficient to "accept Jesus as my personal Savior" and be baptized. For Catholics, unlike many of our Christian brothers and sisters, faith, decision for Christ, and baptism bring us to the doors of the Church and lead us into the gathering of Christ's disciples. From here – together in Christ's unity, the company of disciples sets out together to proclaim, to celebrate, and to witness together the saving power of God in Jesus. We are unabashedly, unashamedly, a community of faith.

Why is this a particularly urgent point of our tradition to recall on the Lord's Baptism in 1997? Because there is, both in the religious and in civil society, a turn to the individual, the private, the personal, which, if uncorrected, could undermine our identity as the baptized community, the Body of Christ. Much social pressure today seeks to drive the church back into the sacristy. Religious voices in America are ignored or silenced in the name of privacy, personal choice, or individual rights.

Apart from the tendency to make religious faith an entirely private individual affair, an equally perilous trend is afoot in American civil society. There is evidence that the spirit of collaboration, of association, of joining for mutual support is fading in American society. Our people, it seems, are losing a sense of mutual responsibility and common enterprise. Symptomatic of this is the slow demise of the formerly huge numbers of fraternal associations, leagues, and charitable societies that flowered in past generations. We are retreating, it would seem, into a perilously individual and unconnected world. With this comes almost inevitably a loss of the need for association in faith, for membership and life together in the Church.

What need we recall on this feast of Christ's baptism and ours?

First, baptism is for both salvation and mission. Baptism calls us to a share in Christ's work of bringing justice, light, and healing.

Secondly, we are baptized into Christ's mission by membership in the Church. In particular, our Catholic tradition calls us to a new awareness of each other. We are not called to be Christians alone but in the body of Christ.

Finally, this is where our Sunday Eucharist makes such sense and meaning in our faith. Here we assemble as Christ's Body. Here we see one another not as anonymous passers-by but brothers and sisters in the Lord. Here together we call down Christ's Spirit to make us what baptism destines us to be: "one Body, one Spirit in Christ". From this table and this gathering, we are sent forth in peace to work for the victory of justice, to be light and power for the world which waits for Christ.