

St. Paul of the Cross Lenten Retreat 2014

Presented by Fr. Donald Ware & Fr. Michael Salvagna

Theme:

Our Baptism and Our Parish... No one is a Lone Ranger!

Introduction

I would like to reflect a bit on what our Baptism means to us and our incorporation into a body of baptized disciples of Jesus. No baptized Catholic is a Lone Ranger. We are all part of the Body of Christ, experienced especially as a local diocese and more particularly as a parish.

I Story

In the Seattle Special Olympics a number of years ago nine contestants, all physical or mentally disabled, assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash.

At the gun they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with a relish to run to the finish and win. All, that is, except one little boy who stumbled on the asphalt, tumbled over a couple of times, and began to cry. The other eight heard the boy cry. They slowed down and looked back. Then they all turned around and went back... every one of them. One girl with Down's Syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, "this will make it better." Then all link linked arms and walked together to the finish line.

Everyone in the stadium stood, and the cheering went on for several minutes. People who were there are still telling the story.

Is life all about winning the race, getting the first prize, exhibiting our prowess and exhilarating in the glow of victory and subsequent prizes?

Not for us Christians. All of us realize that life is not just about me and my Facebook. We are not just consumers purchasing stuff to satisfy our never ending "wants." We are all God's beloved children, even if not perfect and not always number one. As members of God's family we help each other on the journey of our lives. It's about us, not just about me!

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II Pope Francis and Baptism

We Catholics are all baptized. What does that mean?

Pope Francis reflected on this:

Baptism is the Sacrament on which our very faith is founded and which grafts us as a living member onto Christ and his Church. Together with the Eucharist and Confirmation it forms what is known as "Christian initiation", like one great sacramental event that configures us to the Lord and turns us into a living sign of his presence and of his love.

Francis quotes the apostle Paul:

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:3-4).

Pope Francis continues:

"Therefore, Baptism is not a formality! It is an act that touches the depths of our existence. A baptized child and an unbaptized child are not the same. A person who is baptized and a person who is not baptized are not the same. We, by Baptism, are immersed in that inexhaustible source of life which is the death of Jesus, the greatest act of love in all of history; and thanks to this love we can live a new life, no longer at the mercy of evil, of sin and of death, but in communion with God and with our brothers and sisters.

We are all in this journey of life together.

III The Sacrament of Baptism

Baptism brings us into a relationship with the Church, the corporate Body of Christ, the pilgrim community. Baptism prepares the way for the other Sacraments.

The symbols used in Baptism

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Recently I had the joy and privilege of celebrating the Baptism of four infants. Originally there was just supposed to be two – I was helping out a local pastor. The day before the baptisms I got a call from the parish secretary saying that there would be three babies. When I got to the Church and as the families and friends began arriving I counted four babies!

But I must tell you, these babies were beautiful... and quiet – even as I poured water over their heads as they were proudly held by their parents over the baptism fount.

Over 100 family and friends eagerly and joyfully watched the Baptisms.

What was this all about? I simply encouraged those attending to listen to the prayers and observe the materials used. these explain the meaning of Baptism.

Water is the main element used. What does water tell us? What do we use water for?

- To cleanse and wash ourselves...
- to refresh ourselves when thirsty...
- to help make plants and flowers grow...
- to sustain and nourish life.

In the sacrament of Baptism these natural uses of water help us to understand what God is doing to this baby...

God is cleansing and refreshing this baby,

God is entering this baby's life to help this baby grow and flourish.

The blessing of the water used tells us stories involving water in our Sacred Writings, both Old Testament and New Testament... God's people crossing

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the Red Sea escaping from the Egyptians, water from the rock to slake the thirst of God's people in the desert, Christ's own Baptism in the Jordan River...stories of God's loving graciousness toward God's people.

In Baptism we once again bring that redeeming love of God to this infant, using water.

Oil is used in the baptism... holy oil... sacred oil.

- In the ancient world oils were used to prepare a fighter for battle, then were used for healing wounds after the battle.
- In the ancient world oil was used to anoint a king – as a sign of asking God's favor and power and wisdom for the king during his reign.

In Baptism the holy oils are used to anoint this baby and profess that this baby now belongs to Jesus, our King.

This baby is called to live in God's Kingdom, and follow Jesus our King.

The use of holy oils also shows that we pray God strengthen this baby to face the difficulties and challenges that life will present.

A candle is used.

Candles give light in darkness. Today this might not mean too much to us who live in a world of electricity. But in ancient times candles were a necessity.

Our use of a candle, which the parents and godparents will hold, reminds us that this baby is to live in the light of Christ, a light in the midst of the darkness of our world.

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The Participants at a Baptism

Here we must say a word about the responsibilities of the parents and godparents... and indeed the whole community of the Church.

Listen to the prayers. The prayer at the beginning asked the parents what they wanted from the Church. They answer, "Baptism."

Then the prayer continues:

You have asked to have your child baptized. In doing so you are accepting the responsibility of training him in the practice of the faith. It will be your duty to bring him up to keep God's commandments as Christ taught us, by loving God and our neighbor. Do you clearly understand what you are undertaking?

Then the godparents are asked...

Are you ready to help the parents of this child in their duty as Christian parents?

Then the community welcomes this baby... that's us.

In the baptismal ceremony all present renew our baptismal vows – as we do on that greatest of our Feasts, Easter.

All of us as a Catholic community have the responsibility of carrying the light of Christ in our lives and passing that on to the next generation. Who else will do that?

The parish will help.

The priest will help.

Catechists and Catholic religion teachers will help.

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But they can't do it alone.

The family is the first place where the child will learn what it means to be a Catholic and a member of our Church...

Sometimes I ask here, "If a cameraman was to enter your home and film it a bit, would anyone watching the film know you were a Catholic?"

Is there a picture of Pope Francis in your home? Is there a crucifix? Is there a Bible visible anywhere in your home? Are there any pictures of saints, or soon to be saints – Blessed Mother Theresa of Calcutta, John Paul the Second, John the XXIII?

We have TVs and computers and entertainment centers.

What about items or artistic objects to remind us of our faith and to proclaim to our visitors that we are a Catholic family?

We are disciples of Jesus. Do our homes show it?... A challenge and an encouragement.

I remember in my home growing up that we had a crucifix on the wall and some pictures of saints.

As I asked above... "If a cameraman was to enter your home and film it a bit, would anyone watching the film know you were a Catholic?"

We disciples of Jesus are not lone rangers. We don't go it alone. The forces of darkness are too great. Temptation is all around us, as is goodness and God's love.

We are called to carry the light of goodness and love,

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to be compassion-givers and generosity mentors,

forgiveness-bringers and peace-advocates.

We are called to help surround our next generation with this light of God.

If not us, who will do it?

TV? Movies? Newspapers?

If not us, who will do it?

Who will carry the light of Christ and pass it on to the next generation?

Know that we are a people of relentless hope, not cynics and violence condoners.

We believe in God's power and love for all of us.

We believe in God's presence, even in the midst of the darkness of our world.

With God's help and strength we promise to carry that light of Christ into our world, and to pass it onto the next generation.

This is what our Baptism is about.

IV The Parish

We have mentioned that Baptism draws us into a relationship with other baptized persons. A critical expression of our participation in the Church is our participation in our local parish which is part of our diocese.

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Our former Bishop Donald Wuerl and present Bishop David Zubik have both issued beautiful and thoughtful Pastoral Letters which speak of the Parish's role in our diocese.

Bishop Wuerl's letter of September, 2004, was entitled *Envisioning Ministry for the Future*.

Bishop Zubek's pastoral letter of June 29th, 2008 was entitled *The Church Alive*.

Both of these Letters reflect on the meaning of the Parish in the life of a Catholic. They remind us that through our Baptism we were brought into the Body of Christ and made members of the Body of Christ, which is the Catholic Church. This entails two facets:

- ❖ We receive from the Church.
- ❖ We give to the Church.

From the Church we receive...

the teaching and values of Jesus,

the Sacraments,

pastoral or spiritual care,

and fellowship with other believers...

What we receive from the Church brings us

the very life and power of God,

and saves us from the suffering, brokenness, and despair of sin and evil,

the very Powers of Death which are so much a part of our world today.

That is what we receive from the Church...

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What do we give to the Church?

Bishop Wuerl so beautifully describes it...

... All of the baptized are called to share their talent, time and treasure in building up the Church... Therefore the Church of the third millennium will need to encourage all the baptized and confirmed to be aware of their active responsibility in the Church's life. (See Page 3)

Bishop Wuerl reminds us that the future of our Church is in all of our hands.

Where do we experience our Church, the Catholic Church? For the most part we experience the Church and live our Catholic lives in our parish.

Bishop Zubek points to the five essential qualities of a successful parish:

- A worthy and beautiful celebration of the Eucharist
- Evangelization... reaching out to invite others into our parish family
- Catechesis... continued education of youth and adults in our faith
- Formation... "Faith formation is about helping each of us find ways in which we can better live our faith as servants in the example of Jesus Himself." (#99) We need to grow in understanding what it means to walk with Jesus and be committed to Jesus in our world today.
- Stewardship... sharing our time, talents and treasures in service with others, including our parish. Bishop Zubek challenges us "to think first of Christ and others and second of ourselves. (#108)

How different from our culture which constantly tells us that life is all about us – me first, my piece of the pie, having it my way... Sometimes I think our American anthem is, *I Did It My Way*... and stay out of my way if you don't want to do it my way.

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The parish is the place where Catholics work together for the good of each other and of our world – our neighborhood, our city, our state, our nation, and our mother earth.

Our Catholic vision is broad and it is always hopeful – relentlessly hopeful - because as St. Paul says in Romans 5...

... where sin abounds, grace does more abound.

We experience this Catholic vision in the Parish.

Bishop Wuerl said...

In other words, we Catholics today have to work together, especially in our parishes, so that we can carry on the work of Jesus, and be the kind of parish-based Church that God wants us to be... (P. 5, last paragraph)

Conclusion...

What does your parish mean to you?

Why do you come week after week?

- ❖ To receive spiritual nourishment... to help you live with some sense of God in your life.
- ❖ To pass on our Catholic values to our family.
- ❖ To touch the Sacred and be touched by the Sacred.
- ❖ To thank God for your many blessings.
- ❖ To ask God's help and healing.

And what do you bring to your parish?

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What do you give to your parish, besides monetary sustenance to help pay the bills? - And that's important!

How can you help the parish continue to do God's work...

- ❖ Can you become a Lector?
- ❖ Can you become a Extraordinary Eucharistic Minister?
- ❖ Can you help the Catechists?
- ❖ Can you sing in the choir?
- ❖ Can you be a minister of hospitality (an usher)?
- ❖ Can you visit the homebound?
- ❖ Can you take the message forth and invite others to join your parish for Sunday worship?
- ❖ Can you help keep the parish property in good shape?

How can you answer our Bishops' call, and indeed the call of Jesus... to work together for the good of His Body which is the Church?

Do you realize that the future of this Parish is in your hands, you who are the Baptized?