



Things to Ponder

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A Double Solidarity (Based on Luke 3:15-16, 21-22)

By Rev. Msgr. Kevin T. Hart

Why in the world was Jesus ever baptized? At the time of John the Baptist the Jews saw baptism as a penitential rite, a sign of the one's acknowledgment of sinfulness and the acceptance of John's call to conversion. So why did Jesus, absolutely sinless, see a need to be baptized? John himself had strong reservations about baptizing Him. He tried to refuse by objecting that he was not fit to loosen Jesus' sandal strap, that is, not fit to be His slave. John also objected on the grounds that Jesus would bring a superior baptism; whereas his was of water, Jesus' would be a baptism in the Holy Spirit.

The key to understanding why Jesus submitted to baptism by John is found in His name, a name found in the prophecy of Isaiah uttered 800 years before Jesus' birth: "The maiden shall be with child and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel" (Is. 7:14), literally, "God-with-us." When He stepped forward to be baptized, He affirmed His solidarity with us, who are sinners in a public way. He became God-with-us-sinners, in the flesh.

Jesus' whole life shows how deeply He wanted to identify with every aspect of our humanity. He was born in poverty. He struggled with human weakness and temptation. He worked for a living. He made friends and enemies. Jesus desired to be completely one with all humankind, so it should not be surprising that He joined the crowd of self-admitted sinners at the Jordan. He stood in solidarity with them, and submitted to a baptism that He did not need. Eventually, Jesus' solidarity with sinners would lead to the Cross, His body stretched to suffocation not merely by the weight of His own body, but by all the consequences of every sin ever committed, and to be committed. His baptism, His standing in solidarity with sinners, prefigures His ultimate solidarity with us in dying for our sins.

The solidarity of Jesus with humanity also works in the other direction. By His solidarity with our sins, He gives us in exchange the gift of eternal life. We notice at His baptism by John that God intervenes and does something that John could never do or say. As Jesus rises from the water, the sky opens wide, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus, and God the Father says to Him, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." Because of Jesus' solidarity with us in everything human, we are in solidarity with his divinity.

These same words were spoken to each of us as well, just as they were to Jesus, in the course of our baptism. We too received the absolute assurance that God is our Father and we, too, are His beloved sons and daughters. Our baptism is the official recognition that God is intensely and immensely interested in us, and that He is well pleased by us, despite all our human frailty, our smallness, our weakness.

It's important to realize that God revealed that He was well pleased in Jesus prior to His public ministry, prior to His preaching, prior to His miracles, prior to doing anything. He loved Jesus not for what He did, but for who He was. And the same is true for us. At the moment of our baptism as an infant or a small child, God proclaimed His love for us before we were capable of doing anything good. The sins and weaknesses that befall us after our baptism are powerless to weaken the bond of love that God has for us at the moment of our conception until the moment of our death.

That's why we celebrate today the baptism of Jesus. He stood in solidarity with sinners and submitted to a baptism He did not need, so that we can stand in solidarity with His Father's love for Him and for us and receive something we could never deserve: eternal life in solidarity with Christ. And that's why today we recall our own baptism: to be reassured that no matter what and how serious our sins and weaknesses may be, we are good, because we are good enough for God.

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