

Homily Second Sunday Ordinary Time January 8, 2017

In my ministry as a priest among the most powerful and therefore joyful events are the celebrations of the sacrament of baptism. If I kept a diary I could tell you how many infants, children, young people and adults I have baptized over the past 39 years since I first baptized an infant as a young deacon at Our Lady Star of the Sea in Bremerton. I can't.

Because of the powerful nature of the sacrament and my responsibility there have certainly been challenging moments in the efforts to move parents to recognize and accept the details of their responsibility in presenting their child for baptism. I take very seriously the Church's expectation of me, as a pastor, that in baptizing a child I know there truly is what canon law calls "a founded hope that a child will be raised in the Catholic Faith." And I have discovered that not all people agree on what constitutes being raised in the Catholic Faith, and what might give a pastor the concern that allows him to, in fact, delay a baptism until that "founded hope" can be more clearly recognized. Throughout the baptism ceremony these parents will be asked to acknowledge their responsibility and intention to fulfill it. The pastor wants the parents' responses to be as informed and honest as possible.

Today's Gospel presents John the Baptist's witness about who Jesus truly is as he noted the new baptism that Jesus would bring. I thought this might be a good occasion to review our understanding of baptism and further an appreciation of our own baptism even as we work to see this gift extended to others.

In the Gospel John the Baptist affirmed that Jesus was the one his baptism was preparing for. John's was a water baptism, a purification rite that symbolized a person's desire to be spiritually cleansed and to change their lives. John referred to the baptism that Jesus would introduce as baptism with the Holy Spirit. That is the baptism that Jesus gave to His Church, that He commanded the apostles to perform as He prepared to ascend into heaven.

Indeed, in every baptism water still flows at least over the head of the person. But there is more to it. It goes beyond symbol of some separate spiritual action. With the pouring of the water in baptism Jesus reaches into the one being baptized and forgives, removes, washes away sin. And simultaneously the Holy Spirit is poured into that person giving them a share in God's own divine life making them adopted children of God. So God, when looking at the baptized, sees more than His created image. He sees one who has been transformed to receive His own divinity within them. God sees His beloved child.

Baptism graphically illustrates our basic understanding of sacrament. The one who baptizes and the water used are the instruments that Jesus uses to give new life. The ritual action of the sacrament is part of what causes the divine action. Baptism and the other sacraments are all signs that in fact do what they signify. They do not merely symbolize or point to some separate spiritual action, they cause it.

Once again, all of this underscores my sense of responsibility when I am the one who is to pour the water. I want to be sure that the depth of the baptismal action is not trivialized as some mere cultural event. The expectations related to parents of those to be baptized is seemingly surpassed with regard to sponsors. Interestingly sponsors are not absolutely required. Canon law says "in so far as possible" one should be given a sponsor. But when canon law describes the qualifications of the sponsor the word "must" is used. In addition to the more objective requirements of age (16) and full initiation (baptism, confirmation and Holy Eucharist) there is the more subjective requirement that sponsor be one "who leads a life of faith in keeping with the function to be taken on." It is left to parishes, with the guidance of their diocese to clarify what that means. Various specifications of the qualifications include regular participation in Mass and sacraments. (In a recent discussion I have come to realize that there are different interpretations of regular and some would equate occasional with regular.)

Some parishes have forms that call for the sponsor's pastor to affirm the specific qualifications. Sometimes that pastor may have no evidence on which to make an affirmation. I can recall at least two times when people essentially asked me to lie. I remember a call from a gentleman when I was in Vancouver. He needed a letter from me stating that he was an active member of the parish, attending Mass regularly etc.. He had already volunteered as he began the call that he was not attending Mass. So after he told me what was specifically to be affirmed by me as true, I then asked him whether this was all true: "No, Father." "Well then, can I say that it is true?: "No Father."

Here at St. Cecilia parish, and increasingly at other parishes, a self-affirmation form is used. This shifts responsibility from the pastor to the sponsor. The intended sponsor notes, affirmatively or negatively, meeting some specified qualifications. They are then asked to sign their declaration in the presence of some parish official where they reside. The pastor or other person is only affirming that the sponsor actually signed the document. It makes the self-affirmation a bit more serious. So, if the intended sponsor

wants to misrepresent their qualifications their misrepresentation is more solemnly expressed.

Parents and grandparents should be concerned about the baptisms of the next generation. But they also should encourage greater participation in the Faith as well as the pursuit of a baptism for their child. And all of us should treasure the gift and the responsibility of our own spiritual rebirth. We are initiated into the Church and the family of God in baptism, we are sealed to work in the Church in confirmation. Those sacraments occur only once. The third sacrament of initiation is Holy Communion. It is intended to be repeated. Every time we participate fully in the Mass and come forward for Holy Communion we are renewing our baptism both as precious gift and awesome responsibility. And parents of infants and sponsors will be all the more effective at baptism if they are doing the same.