

The Baptism of our Lord

Matt. 3:13-17 (ESV)

“And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him.”

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Blessings to all of you, dear ones, on this blessed feast of the Baptism of our Lord. What I just read from the text of our Gospel lesson a second ago includes a certain detail about our Lord’s baptism that for us is easy to recall; it’s easy to remember and retell, and you may be interested to know also that all 4 Gospel writers include in their respective accounts. All 4 of the holy evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John include this detail, and that should tell you something about how important they think it is, about its tremendous, world-altering significance even if it may not be so easy to recognize at first. And what I’m referring to is this: that when Jesus was baptized, the Spirit of God descends from heaven in the form of a dove and rests on Him.

Dear ones, the fact that the Spirit of God rests on Jesus in His baptism brings us and all the saints of the Church for 2,000 years now to recognize the Lord Jesus as God our Father recognizes Him—that is, as His beloved Son in Whom humanity is restored and with Whom the Spirit is pleased to dwell.

- I. And these things are especially precious when we think on the corruption and depths to which man has fallen because of sin—how, because of sin, the human race has become almost completely unrecognizable from what it was when God formed man in the beginning.
 - a. And before we jump into a full-fledged meditation about that, it’s worthwhile to think for a second on examples of people in our own lives we’ve seen that have been corrupted and have taken on a completely different character from what they had before.
 - i. This may well be the case for most, if not all of you, dear ones, but I’ve known people in my extended family and among friends who have seemingly made just one bad decision after another, which have compounded over time. And now, they may be the same flesh and blood human being, but they’re not the same person I once knew them to be. Their character has completely changed for the worse and the life they

now live is manifestly opposed to God, divested of the Holy Spirit.

- ii. This phenomenon also happens over time on a broader scale in cities, in countries, and even whole civilizations—in places where Christianity has been the norm. People become more and more crude and brazen in their sin, parading it in the streets, the arts and the sciences and the government become degenerate. And whole societies in their corporate life together end up becoming manifestly opposed to God and almost unrecognizable from what they were before, from the character the Spirit of God produced in them beforehand.
- b. This is what's been happening all over the Western world for some time now and it's not simply a political problem. It's not a matter of simply getting the right person in office or enacting the right laws or funding certain social programs created by the likes of Dr. Phil or Oprah. Dear ones, this is a spiritual problem rooted in the very depths of our nature; this is a theological problem and it's one that has plagued us from the beginning after man fell into sin.
- c. One of the holy fathers of the Church, St. Cyril of Alexandria, describes the tragedy of mankind's fall this way:

When God made man in His image and likeness, so that the character of man reflected the character of God Himself, it was “through the Holy Spirit [man] was sealed in the divine image...[At] the same time the Spirit put life into the one who had been formed, he also imprinted his stamp on him, in a manner appropriate to God...[and man] was illustrious in the divine image of his maker through the Holy Spirit who dwelt in him. But when he was led astray by the deception of the devil, he despised the creator...[and] the likeness of God was then marked with a false stamp through the sin that rushed in, and the engraving was no longer distinct. It became more obscure in him, so to speak, and darkened by the transgression” (81).

“[Adam] inclined toward disobedience...and, now overcome by decay and death, he conveyed his penalty to the whole race. Evil increased and multiplied among us, and our thoughts always descended to the worse. Sin reigned, and thus human nature was shown to be stripped of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit” (82).

Dear ones, what St. Cyril describes here is the doctrine of Original Sin, this inborn corruption that we've all inherited from Adam when he fell into the corruption of sin. The Holy Spirit had been put to flight, as it were, because of sin reigning in our nature causing us to live a purely fleshly existence, like irrational beasts, completely given over to chase after the lusts of our flesh. People throughout the whole world became like this before the flood.

Think of the wicked man Lamech in Genesis who descended from Cain and once bragged to his two wives of his barbarity in this way: “I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech’s is seventy-seven fold” [Gen. 4:23-24]. Think about how depraved, how deformed in heart and mind one is who would avenge the evil done to them seventy-seven-fold. Now think about a world full of people a world of people without God’s Spirit like this before the flood, a world full of people who may not have all been as extreme as Lamech, but were not unlike him in his wickedness.

And, of course, we do well to think about ourselves when we look into the mirror of God’s holy law and recognize the deformity of our sins, how bizarre we’ve seen ourselves become because of them and when we’ve outraged the Holy Spirit, putting Him to flight.

- II. And all of this, dear ones, is precisely why the Spirit descending and resting on Jesus in His baptism is so unfathomably great—because the Spirit descending and resting on Jesus makes manifest to us the reality that Jesus has restored our nature in Himself. And the Spirit descends from heaven like a finger plainly pointing out that this One—Jesus—is the One with Whom the Father is well pleased; this is the new head of the human race—the Second Adam and the perfect image and likeness of God in our flesh, who has never known and will never know the corruption of sin. And because of this, the Spirit of God dwells in Him permanently. As our text says, the Spirit descended and rested on Him and the Spirit of God finds no reason to depart from His divinized human nature.
- III. And be sure of this, too, dear ones, that the Spirit descends and rests on Jesus so that you would recognize what He does for you in your baptism—that by God’s grace, the Spirit has come down upon you and now dwells in you by faith.
 - a. Dear ones, everything has changed for you because of your baptism into Jesus.
 - i. You went to the font as the defiled habitation of the unclean spirits, but you’ve come up a new creation in Christ and consecrated to be temples of the Holy Spirit, on whom He’s pleased to rest and in whom He is pleased to dwell.
 - ii. Dear ones, you went to the font dead in your trespasses and sins, as part of the old creation doomed to pass away, but in Baptism you were buried with Christ into death and you’ve come up from the font as partakers of Christ’s resurrection, you’ve been justified by grace and made alive to God, now destined for eternal life in communion with Him.

- iii. And you went to the font as those among the fleshly sons of disobedience, having been marred and disfigured and made unrecognizable because of sin, but you've come up from the font as the adopted sons of the living God in Jesus Christ, now being transfigured from one degree of glory to another by the power of His Spirit.

- b. You must recognize that everything has changed for you because of your baptism, because the Spirit has descended from heaven and now rests on you and in you. Let others recognize this about you too.
 - i. Fill your homes with sacred Christian art so people know right away when they come to your homes that the Spirit of God rests with you there; put your Bible and your hymnal and your Small Catechism in your homes out where everyone can see them. And use them with your family. Let your children and grandchildren recognize that they have Christian parents, Christian grandparents, in whom the Spirit of Christ dwells richly.

 - ii. There's no better life in this world, dear ones. There's nothing better.

And to Christ be all the glory forever and ever. Amen.