

Homily
Baptism of Jesus
St. Bernard Church
January 9/10, 2015

“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and Fire.”

Virtually all of us here have been baptized. When we think about our Baptism, which for many of us would have taken place many years ago, do we associate our Baptism with the Holy Spirit and Fire?”

In the early 90’s, my oldest sister and her husband moved to the Milwaukee area, and they bought a beautiful home on a lake to attract family members to come and visit.

It worked with our family. Every year, for 15 years or so, in late July or early August, we escaped the heat of Tulsa by heading north to Wisconsin.

On one such family vacation, about an hour northeast of St. Louis, our car broke down. It was a Saturday. We were towed to the only place open, a one-man repair shop in Hamel, Illinois.

We quickly learned that we needed a part that would not be available until Monday. There was nowhere close where we could rent a car.

As the mechanic explained this to us, I looked in one of the stalls, and there was an older model Lincoln Continental, the kind that looks like an aircraft carrier.

I asked the mechanic if we could rent the Lincoln for a few days. He said the Lincoln belonged to him, then he asked, “How do I know you’ll bring it back?”

My wife, Connie, was with me, and I’ll never forget her response. She said simply and with just a bit of emphasis, “We’re Catholic.” “Lady,” the mechanic replied, “That means nothing to me.” No aircraft carrier for us.

So what did Connie mean when she said, “We’re Catholic.”

Well, Connie wasn’t bragging. She’s humble about her faith. But what she meant was that as Catholics we are special in certain sense, that we have high standards and we do our best to follow them, and that though we are not perfect we wouldn’t even think of stealing someone’s car.

I once was part of a group that met every other week at Oral Roberts University to discuss various books dealing with religion. At one of these meetings, I met a

Methodist pastor named Larry who, along with his wife, was seriously studying the Catholic faith and thinking about becoming Catholic.

Larry and I became good friends, and he used to call me, and we'd go through some passages in the Bible, line by line, word by word. Larry had always had a great love for the Bible of course, but now with a Catholic perspective, he found a new richness in his understanding of Scripture.

One time, I think we were studying a passage in 1st Corinthians, Larry became so excited that he was almost screaming into the phone. I said, "Larry, we need to talk about something."

He responded, "I know. You are going to ask me why before I never saw passages in the Bible that support the Catholic understanding of issues like the Pope, Mary, the communion of saints, confessing sins to a priest and the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist."

He explained, "It's like a kind of blindness. You are raised and taught to see the Bible in a certain way, and you literally don't see the parts that support the Catholic position on these issues."

I said to Larry, "I appreciate that. But what I was going to say was to warn you that when you start hanging out with Catholics, you might find that many of them do not share your enthusiasm."

It has been my privilege to know Larry and several other Protestant ministers who have become Catholic and have paid a high price for doing so, alienating friends and family members and often struggling to make a living. Many more Protestant ministers would become Catholic if they knew how they could provide for their families.

There are even examples of non-Christians, Jews, Hindus and Muslims, for example, who left their religious traditions to become Catholic. If we do the research, we will find that anyone who really embraces the Catholic faith and has a comprehensive knowledge of it will never go anywhere else, never join another religion.

The Catholic faith is so rich, so deep, so full, that there is nowhere else to go once we have adequately understood and experienced it.

I met a man from McAlester a few years ago at a Cursillo retreat. During a break, we were chatting and he told me that he was 87 years old and that he had been Catholic for only 3 years. He looked me in the eyes and said with total sincerity, "They have been the best 3 years of my life."

The best way to explain it is that we have the fullness of the Christian faith. The fullness. The "whole enchilada" as one Catholic evangelist calls it.

Pope Benedict expressed it this way:

“Only in friendship with Christ is the great potential of human existence truly revealed...Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open wide the doors to Christ – and you will find TRUE LIFE.”

The fullness of friendship with Christ is found in the Catholic Church.

It's okay to feel special because we are Catholic. But this should make us humble and not lead to a false pride. We are like beggars who have become rich only because we have stumbled upon the greatest treasure, the greatest gift, for which we can take no personal credit.

As we begin 2016, we all know that the darkness in our world is growing, maybe not in our personal lives but in the world around us.

When John the Baptist says that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, he means that by our Baptism we will be plunged into a river of fire, a river of light, that will bring the heat, the brightness of God's love and truth, into a world that needs this fire and light so desperately.

I would like to suggest that all of us reflect today on how we can reclaim our Baptism, on what steps we can take in this New Year to experience in new ways the Holy Spirit and the fire of our Catholic faith.

I'll close with this short prayer:

“Lord Jesus, open the doors of our hearts. We invite you to be at the very center of our lives, to be our Savior and our Lord. Direct all of us by the Holy Spirit and help us to live the Gospel with our whole life. Amen.”