



From A Bishop's Journal (652)

Major Elements of Baptism (1)

In my last excerpt from my pastoral letter I recalled the great missions given in our diocese in 1992 and 1993. I would like to make two wishes: “That those who took part in the Great Missions (1992 and 1993) recollect what they experienced and retained, and share it with those around them. And that in the case of a major campaign of evangelisation occurring, an important place be given to the marvel of baptism.” I now give you the second part of the pastoral letter, titled “A Teaching to Receive.” I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to those who have given me their thoughts on baptism. I had asked them a summary of those elements they considered major, for a deepening of the reality of baptism. With you my brothers and sisters, I accept this teaching which, to me, is most important. The first reflection is from Sister Claire Lafrance, f.m.a., coordinator of the diocesan School of Pastoral Formation [Francophone Sector]. The second is by Sister Marie-Thérèse Nadeau, C.N.D., professor at the Dominican College in Ottawa, and the third is by Father Lucien Robitaille, professor emeritus of Laval University. Once again I thank them gratefully.

What Does Christian Baptism Have to do with Human Life?

An answer to this question requires that we consider the human person. What do we all seek, if not happiness? But then there arises another question: How can we be happy, with all that limits us, hampers our progress, and opposes our deepest yearnings?

We are created in the image of God. What the Book of Genesis says (Gn. 1:26) is not trivial. It follows that such a beginning entails for us a special, incomparable and extraordinary vocation to which it is impossible to respond with the very intervention of the One who has, we could say, inserted it into our genes. We all know through experience that this ideal inscribed in the depths of our being cannot be achieved without returning to our depths where the Holy Spirit resides. We are born as if exiled from ourselves, exposed to what is foreign to us and which leads us, fashions us, and imprisons us.

Called to be truly sons and daughters of God, the human being seeks – at times without realising it – the path to the Father because the human being knows instinctively that it is in Him only that the happiness sought can be found. Like the younger son in the parable (Lk. 15), we must come back home. That is where one finds oneself and where one's being will be fully fulfilled, where one will be truly happy. “Leave your country,” God said to Abraham. (Gn. 12:1). “Go to the land that I will show you, the unknown land that awaits you.” Experience teaches that this return is in reality a turning back, a conversion.

But then, what is this conversion?

It is a decision to progress towards a state of communion with God. This is a major enterprise, and it cannot be achieved by one's own strength alone. This decision challenges the darkness of one's own heart and directs it in the direction of the Light. The Holy Spirit does his work. The human being is in need of salvation, he/she *needs* God's Salvation. In other words, God alone will be able to change His creature's heart, call him/her back to Him, and achieve the project He has had for His creature from the very moment of his/her conception. And then Jesus Christ appears, Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, the One who came to gather together the children-of-God-becoming, and give them everything they need to be with him, in him, and to follow him as true sons and daughters of God.

Such a vocation is ignored by most humans who hardly know about it. However, the Church was given the secret of this filiation and of the path that leads to happiness. The Church was given by her Master the mission to immerse in Christ every human of every nation: "Go and teach all nations, and baptise them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt. 28:19).

It seems to me that we can consider Christian baptism as a *call* to live as sons and daughters of God and as a *decision to answer that call* by following Jesus Christ. If someone receives that inescapable call from God, if he/she knows Jesus who alone can lead one to the Father, that person is addressing the Church. This Church welcomes and baptises him/her. Baptism is, therefore, a response to God's love and a proclamation of one's decision to follow Christ, "the first-born of all creation" (Col. 1:15). "Sell everything and follow me" ! (Mt. 19:21) Baptism is the gateway to discipleship. Through it, we bind ourselves to Christ who totally clears every obstacle, to Christ the "bar-abbas," the son of the Father in us. I have always loved the metaphor of the caterpillar changing into a butterfly, in talking about the development of what we are from the moment of our conception.

Christian baptism is, therefore, an act of the Father who calls, of the Son who saves, and of the Church that welcomes, and of the person who answers "yes". Such beautiful cooperation! Such work of communion! If one of these "actors" is missing, there is no baptism. God created us partners, and this is a wonderful example of God's loving will.

The Most Beautiful Gift

Christian baptism is the undertaking of a journey towards our final achievement willed by God in His great love, a journey of perfect communion with Him. Baptism, in fact, is the most beautiful gift that a human being can receive. My wish would be that all those who have received it welcome it and develop it, so that the grace of God not be in vain.

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