

Insights into Liturgy

The Baptism of Jesus: A Look at His Humanity

By Msgr.
WILLIAM H. SHANNON

Sunday's feast of the Baptism of Jesus invites our reflection on the significance of His Baptism for His life and for ours. The emphasis in the Gospel is not on the fact of the Baptism, but on its aftermath — the religious experience of Jesus that followed the Baptism. This religious experience — Luke tells us it happened when Jesus was about thirty years of age — is presented in a symbolic way. The Spirit descends upon Him, the voice of the Father declares Him to be the Beloved Son on whom God's favor rests.

A better translation of the Greek word used by Luke is

"servant" rather than "son". What the Gospel tells us is that in His Baptismal experience Jesus becomes aware that His role is to be identified with the servant of Yahweh, a mysterious figure described by Isaiah (See the first reading), a suffering Servant who by His suffering will bring salvation to many. This religious experience of Jesus is a sign that He has arrived at full human self-awareness. He understands fully and clearly who He is and what He is to do. This event needs to be connected with an earlier event of Jesus' life described by Luke — Jesus' visit to the temple when He was 12. Here we are told that Jesus grew physically, intel-

lectually, emotionally and spiritually: "He grew in age and wisdom and grace before God and man."

These two events — the gradual growing up of Jesus at the age of 12 and his achieving of full maturity at the age of 30 — help us to appreciate the reality of Jesus' humanity. So often we are tempted to ignore that humanity, drowning it in the divinity. We tend to think that He had a full-blown human consciousness of who He was and what He was to do from the moment of birth. As has been said, facetiously, we are inclined to picture Jesus on the day of His birth sitting up in the manger at Bethlehem, reading the *New York Times*. The Gospels give us no basis for underestimating the importance of Jesus' humanity: they make it clear that He grew in human consciousness, that only gradually did He come to know fully who He was and what He was to do. That is why the liturgical feast of the Baptism of Jesus is so important: it represents the full-flowering of Jesus' human self-awareness.

It is worth noting that Jesus' arrival at full awareness of Himself and His mission coincides with His deepened understanding of His relation to the Father and to others. His self-awareness coincides with His public commitment to goals that relate Him to others. This is the paradox of self-awareness: no one arrives at full self-awareness simply by being aware of himself. Self-awareness comes only with a mature awareness of the other — of God who is supremely Other and of fellow-men. Self-awareness helps one to learn to be at home with his freedom, while at the same time helping him to realize the paradox of freedom, namely, that freedom exists not to make a person independent of others, but to help him relate properly to God and fellow-men. To ignore my relationship to the Other who transcends me and to the others who surround me is to trap myself in a narrowness and immaturity that darkens my understanding of who I am. Self-awareness is impossible without a deep awareness of the other.

His deep self-awareness was the reason for the deep serenity of Jesus that you find presented on every page of the Gospels. Read the Gospels carefully and you will be struck by the tranquility of Jesus' life, by the certainty that He had of the direction in which His life was moving. This is not to say that as man He knew all the details of the future. But He knew unequivocally the direction in which He was moving into that future: He knew where He was going, where He stood and what He had to do.

The Baptism of Jesus marks a high point in his life: In this experience He came to know that He was ready to face whatever the future might bring as He moved ahead in His role as Suffering Servant of His Father. What the future would bring was the Passion — and the Resurrection. And He was ready.

ruins. Organized religion, with its temple sacrifices, was gone. How then were they to be a light? By their presence and witness only. The fact that a remnant still survived in Babylon and among the nations in conditions of liberty and dignity, clinging to their God and His will, was a striking testimony to God's special care for them. "They said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them'" (Ps. 126:2).

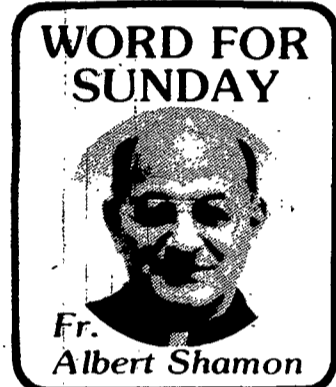
Baptism calls the modern Christian to give a similar witness today. In some nations organized religion is all but wiped out; in others, it is vehemently or subtly attacked. Yet the call still goes forth to God's children to be lights no matter how deep the darkness.

In World War II Nazis destroyed organized religion. God-fearing men and women were herded into concentration camps. Today, there is steadily coming to light the heroic Christian witnessing that went on in these hell-holes. St. Maximilian Kolbe in Auschwitz, where men strove to dehumanize other men before killing them, freely offered his life for another. His executioners confessed, "The like of this man we have never seen."

You have read, no doubt, the book *The Hiding Place*. Two Dutch women, Corrie and Betsie ten Boom, when asked in the prison of Scheveningen by a sympathetic guard if she could get them anything, answered, "A bible." God's word became for them "the hiding place" (Ps. 32:7). In the notorious women's extermination camp at Ravensbruck, where women were literally worked to death, these two women transformed their horrible barrack into a place of prayer and Christian charity.

From behind the Iron Curtain, voices in our desert, like that of Solzhenitzen and Wurmbrand, who wrote *Tortured for Christ*, are proclaiming the witnessing to Christ still going on in the gulag archipelagoes that dot "holy" Russia.

In neo-pagan America, we now are called to give similar witness until He comes who once gave perfect witness even to dying on a cross.



Fr. Albert Shamon

WORD FOR SUNDAY

Whenever anyone celebrates a birthday, there are generally candles on a cake. Did you ever wonder why candles? In the ages of faith Christians celebrated, not their birthday, but their re-birthday: the day of their baptism. At baptism, you know, a candle is lighted. This candle used to be given to parents after the baptism so that each year it could be lighted again when one's baptismal day was celebrated.

Baptism is a decisive life-moment. It was for Jesus. It was for Cornelius. It is for us. Nowadays, in the eyes of many, the distinction between Christian and non-Christian, is no longer baptism (as it should be), but the quality of a Gospel-oriented life. Baptism effects a radical change in one's being. In philosophy we call this change "ontological"; in theology, it is called "sanctifying grace." As a consequence baptism relates a person to God as a child is to his own parents. The Father can truly say, "You are my beloved son." An unbaptized person lacks this relationship — and that makes all the difference in the world.

Baptism is also the call to live the faith: to give testimony to the new life received by a new way of life lived.

The first reading is one of the four Servant Songs. These Songs are independent poems distributed throughout the works of the Second-Isaiah (about 548 B.C.). The mission of the Servant, who was Israel at this time, was to be a light to the nations. Not by preaching. For at that time Israel was captive in Babylon, and Jerusalem and its Temple a heap of

Deaths

Sr. M. Eugene

Sister Mary Eugene Wahl, SSND, died Dec. 8, 1976, in the Norwalk (Conn.) Hospital. The funeral was held Dec. 11 in the chapel of the School Sisters of Notre Dame Motherhouse, Wilton, Conn.

Sister Eugene was a music teacher, and for many years served as supervisor of music in the local elementary schools staffed by her order. She also gave private piano lessons. Early in her religious life she taught for more than a decade at Notre Dame of Maryland in Baltimore, and conducted some classes also at the Catholic University of America. Her last assignment here was at St. Boniface. Injuries suffered in a fall forced her retirement to the Lourdes Health Care Center at the motherhouse.

Three of four Wahl sisters entered the Notre Dame order. They included the late Sister Mary Hortense. Surviving are Sister Mary Evina of Bishop Kearney High School and Miss Addie Wahl of Rochester. Other survivors are two nephews, Joseph R. Wahl of Rochester and Francis J. Wahl of Webster; a niece, Marjorie Wahl Smith of Toronto; nine grandnieces and grand nephews and two great-grandnieces.

Sr. Hortense

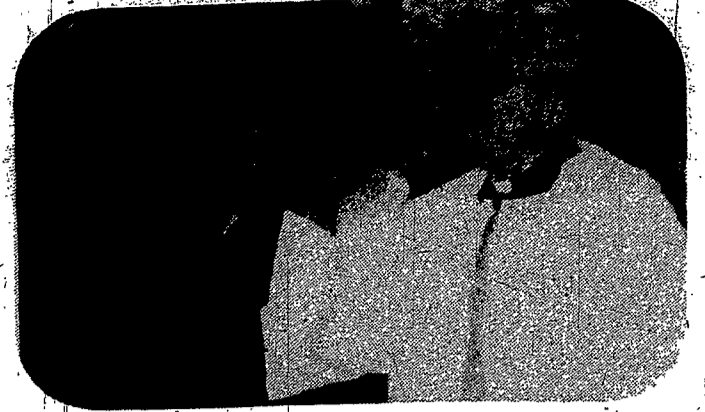
Sister Mary Hortense Schenck, a music teacher and local superior in the diocese for 53 years, died Dec. 29, 1976, in the Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse, after a long illness. The Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated last Friday.

Sister Hortense served in Hornell for 22 years and in Corning for 13. She began her 33 years as a music teacher in 1915, at Holy Cross School, Rochester. She taught also at St. John's, Clyde; St. Francis, Auburn; St. Cecilia's, Elmira; St. Ann's, Hornell, and St. Mary's, Corning.

In 1948, Sister Hortense retired from music teaching and became superior at St. Mary's, Corning, while also teaching first grade. She was local superior at St. James Mercy Hospital in Hornell from 1955 until 1961, and later at St. Louis, Pittsford, and St. Charles Borromeo, Greece. She retired to the Motherhouse in 1968.

Sister Hortense, a native Rochesterian, entered the Mercy congregation in 1911 and made her perpetual vows in 1915. She studied music at Canisius College, Manhattanville, St. Bonaventure's, the Paulist School of Music and the Eastman School.

Survivors are her sisters, Mother Mary Magdalene Schenck, RSM, and Mrs. Nicholas Konz of Naples, and several nieces and nephews.



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