

Baptism is a sacrament of ministry

Many people these days are involved in the process of preparing new catechumens for their formal entry into the church in the Easter Vigil ritual. Being related to that process myself only through my own participation in Sunday Eucharist, I really am not involved very directly at all. Still, I have been thinking about baptism quite a lot lately. This might be because of Lent, when we all focus in a special way on our faith and the commitments that are part of our life because of faith.

I suppose too often I associate baptism exclusively with babies or with those preparing for full membership in the church. I only rarely think about my present life as related to my own baptism. Still, it is important to reflect from time to time on the reality of baptism in all our lives.

Over the last half-century or so there have been several significant shifts in our theology of baptism. One of the most important is our recognition again in this century that baptism is not simply a "cosmic insurance policy" granting us a sort of magical exemption from limbo or some other undesirable supernatural location.

Especially through the Second Vatican Council, the church reconfirmed baptism as the sacrament of mission and ministry.



the moral life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

Rather than emphasizing automatic status in the hereafter, which much of my early religious instruction seemed to do, the thinking of the council reclaimed an even earlier emphasis on baptism as moving Christians into the position of carrying on the mission of Christ. All the baptized were invited to understand ourselves as called and sent by Christ to carry on the mission he had begun during his lifetime.

In fact, the council emphasized over and over that the sacrament of mission and ministry for all Christians is baptism. Even ordination to the ministerial priesthood was recast to emphasize that the ministry of priests, bishops, cardinals, even the pope is directed at facilitating the ministry of lay people! The entire struc-

ture of the hierarchical church shifted from seeing the hierarchy as those "with a ministry," to appreciating the ministry of the hierarchy as directed toward and supporting lay ministry in the world.

According to this view, we should all reflect on how it is that we truly do see all the aspects of our life as part of the mission of Christ in and to the world. We should all reflect on how it is that at home, with our families, in our neighborhoods, at our workplace, in our political interaction, in our friendships and organizational associations — in all these places, we are sent by Christ to show forth God and act on God's behalf!

In the Fourth Gospel in his farewell address Jesus is depicted as saying: "The one who knows me, knows the Father." In that statement he acknowledges his own mission in life, which was to make God visible in his own being, in all that he did and said. Through the theology of baptism that I am advancing here, we are called to step into this same mission. As baptized Christians, we are sent to continue Christ's mission in our lives. Thus, those who know us, know Christ and know the Father.

Awareness of this aspect of our "baptized lives" casts a great seriousness over

our ordinary interaction in all the regular spots in which we live, and in all the "ordinary" relationships that make up our days. Today there is great emphasis on the need to show forth God as the God who loves us all. In a world where we are all aware of incredible suffering in our cities, in our families, in other regions of the globe, it becomes more and more important that Christians make a real effort to let our lives make transparent for others the God who loves all of us, but who cares especially for the suffering ones.

Our ministry to the world today probably needs not just to show others that we "believe in God." Our ministry today needs particularly to show others that we believe in a particular kind of God: the God who loves all, and who cares in particular for the suffering. Wherever we are and whatever we are doing, the baptismal commitment we have made to witness to the God of all requires that others find in us a transparency of the God revealed in Jesus to attend to the suffering of every person he encountered. That is the real mission of all of us who are baptized.

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

There is room at the table for all

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 15:1-3, 11-32. (R1) Joshua 5:9-12. (R2) 2 Corinthians 5:17-21.

Have you ever noticed that parents have a tendency to get a little more lenient the more children they have? Most parents are a little more protective and demanding with their first child. It's natural. With their first attempt at being a parent, they want to do it right. With the second child they tend to relax, to become loose as a goose.

The parable of the prodigal son is the most famous older/younger child story in all of literature. A father has two sons. The older wants to please his dad. He stays home, works the farm, does all that he's been taught to do. But the younger lad is a bit spoiled. He hasn't had the strict discipline or the attention given the older brother. He doesn't feel he has to please his parents. He's more for pleasing himself.

One day he says something very cruel: "Dad, I want my inheritance." In other words he's not going to wait till his father dies, he wants what's coming to him now. No doubt the father was tempted to give him what was coming to him. But he cared about the lad, just as much as he did about the older son. He knew they were different and had different needs. So he responded as a loving father. He gave the lad his wish. The father was wise enough



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

to realize that this boy was going to learn — the hard way.

Loving parents know that children are different. You can't treat them exactly the same, because each child is unique. That is why child-rearing is a most complex human task. Wise parents adopt a different strategy for each child.

The father with two sons knew that the younger boy would only grow more rebellious if he were made to stay at home, and so he gave him the money and let him go. You know what happened. He went far away, squandered it all on riotous living, and ended up in a pigsty coveting the pigs' food. Finally he came to his senses and started home. His father saw him from a distance, embraced him and celebrated his return.

But what about the older boy? What was his reaction? You know. He was irate. How often parents have heard children

say, "It isn't fair? You treat him better than me." It's the human response. "You never killed a fatted calf for me." He feels betrayed. He has stayed at home. Worked all his life to make his dad proud of him. Then he is forced to attend a party honoring a good-for-nothing younger brother. He is furious. He refuses to go to the party.

Two sons: One who wasted his inheritance on a wild and destructive lifestyle, and the other who cannot welcome his brother back home. What we ought to see in this story is that both boys were in the wrong. The younger boy turned his back on his father and the older boy turned his back on his brother. Both were wrong. Jesus said, "Judge not that you be not judged." We are all sinners and the sin of pride is as serious as the sin of lust.

Though God loves us all, he treats his children differently. We are still sinners whether we have turned our back on God or whether we have turned our back on our brothers and our sisters. No one has a right to judge another.

Most of us know what it is to be the prodigal. There may be things in our lives that we deeply regret: letting parents down, or our spouse, or our God. We go to confession, but sometimes we still worry about our past. Yet we are still God's children; he loves us and has a place for us at his table.

Some of us have been like the elder brother. We pass judgment. We look down on and even despise those who have not measured up to our standards. We are not as Christ-like as we try to pretend. Still there is room at the table for us as well.

Remember God is the Father of the two sons. He runs out to greet all — those coming back from a far country or those coming in from the fields who have been shunning their brothers. He welcomes all, especially to confession.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, March 23
Isaiah 65:17-21; John 4:43-54
Tuesday, March 24
Ezekiel 47:1-9, 12; John 5:1-16
Wednesday, March 25
Isaiah 7:10-14; 8:10; Hebrews 10:4-10; Luke 1:26-38
Thursday, March 26
Exodus 32:7-14; John 5:31-47
Friday, March 27
Wisdom 2:1, 12-22; John 7:1-2, 10, 25-30
Saturday, March 28
Jeremiah 11:18-20; John 7:40-53

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