

BAPTISM OF THE LORD January 11, 2015

"We praise you, Lord, for Brother Wind and Air, fair and stormy, all weather modes by which you cherish all that you have made.

"We praise you, Lord, for Sister Water, so useful, humble, precious and pure."

You may recognize these words from St. Francis' Canticum of the Creatures. He give wind and air their counter qualities of fair and stormy, but attributes only the gentle qualities to Sister Water. What about the flood at the time of Noah, or the New England Perfect Storm, or the 2004 tsunami from the undersea Asian earthquake that killed nearly a quarter of a million people? Yes, Sister Water is destructive but also refreshing and life sustaining in its useful and gentler qualities.

As we celebrate today the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan by John, we see an extraordinary new quality added to Sister Water. As the fathers of the church say, Christ is baptized, not to be made holy by the water, but to make the water holy. Jesus, the sinless one, lines up with the sinners waiting their turns. John's baptism was a ritual bath that symbolizes the longing for forgiveness by the repentant sinner. To those who come to John for baptism, he wants signs of repentance, a change of heart, of mind to get rid of old ways. Like the prophet Micah, he tells soldiers and tax collectors "Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before your God."

John insisted that he baptized only with water. There was one coming after him who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. When Jesus came up out of the water with the dove hovering over him and a voice from Heaven, John knew he was the one he was told to look for. The voice confirmed that Jesus is God's Son, the one the Father sent, the one who existed before John. The prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled: "Here is my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit."

A homilist wrote in a current periodical that if we really knew what is happening when we are baptized or baptize a person, the stupendous spiritual event that is happening would make us want to wear a crash helmet and a flak vest. We hear in Mark's gospel, "he saw the heavens being **torn open** and the Spirit descending upon him." To be struck by such spiritual lightning is awesome. God's Holy Spirit is poured into the baptized, completely washing away all effects of their sins that would separate them from God. Peter had not finished his evangelizing of the centurion Cornelius and his household, when suddenly the listeners were sort of slain in Holy Spirit. They began to speak in tongues with uncontrollable praise of God. So he gave orders they were to be baptized by water in the name of Jesus Christ. When we were baptized, it is not likely there were extraordinary manifestations of the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit on us. As we grow up and mature in our faith, the fact that we have been claimed for Christ and marked with the sign of his cross prepares and enables us to follow the inspirations of the Holy Spirit that we have been given to dwell in us.

The importance of the sign of his cross. That reminds us that there are three that give Jesus testimony: the water, the Spirit and the blood. Jesus spoke of another baptism he would have to undergo. "I have a baptism to receive. What an anguish I feel till it is over. Do you think I have come to establish peace on the earth?" When the sons of

Zebedee asked Jesus for first-place favors in the kingdom, Jesus asked them, "Can you drink the cup I shall drink or (in Luke's version) be baptized in the same bath of pain as I?" They did not know what they were asking.

But we know now that to be true to our baptismal promises, we must take up our crosses daily in imitation of Jesus. Surely we want to be able to hear our Father God say, "Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit." To help us arrive at such a blessing, Jesus has remained with us in his sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist. As we return to the altar of sacrifice, let us gratefully unite our small offerings with his, the most acceptable sacrifice pleasing to our God. The goal is to grow into the full stature of Jesus Christ, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit is to be adored, worshipped, glorified and obeyed now and forever. AMEN