

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

Last year on this feast day, I wrote a rather long and, perhaps somewhat dry, theological history of the development of the Sacrament of Baptism. It's now been a year since the Rite of Baptism for Children was revised, based on the strict translation principles created by John Paul II over two decades ago; it takes a while for church people to get around to doing these things! So I thought it would be a good time to look at the sacrament through another lens.

This anniversary of the new translation brought to mind one part of the Rite of Baptism that is probably overlooked by most Catholics: the anointing with chrism. We're all familiar with the Trinitarian formula that goes with the pouring of water, and that is, indeed, the central act of the Sacrament. But the anointing after Baptism includes some powerful words that spell out exactly how we are to live our baptismal calling. As the priest (or deacon) makes the Sign of the Cross on the crown of the child's head, he says:

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, has freed you from sin and given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and joined you to his people. He now anoints you with the Chrism of salvation, so that you may remain as a member of Christ, Priest, Prophet and King, unto eternal life.

Priest, prophet and king: those are the three roles our baptism charges us to fulfill as believers. But what do they really mean? Every Catholic isn't an ordained priest, certainly not a king (or queen), and our understanding of what it means to be a prophet wouldn't fit into most lives. This is what those three terms really mean. To be a **priest** is to be, first of all, a person of prayer. An ordained priest fulfills that role primarily by presiding at the Eucharist; but every baptized Catholic is to be a person who values the grace and strength that prayer provides, both personally and communally. The role of **prophet** in the Old Testament (or the New) wasn't to foretell the future but rather to speak the truth regardless of the cost. That prophetic truth-telling is what brought both Jesus and John the Baptist to their deaths! Every baptized Catholic is charged to speak God's truth in a world that, all too often, prefers its own version of the truth.

Finally, when we think of **kings**, we picture people sitting on thrones and being waited on hand and foot by obedient servants. But the primary job of Old Testament kings was to serve the needs of their people, not to *be* served. The kings who failed to do that came to a bad end, either by God's hand, the hands of their enemies or those of their own people. As baptized Catholics, we are to put ourselves at the service of the Church and the service of others. Even the pope is known as "the servant of the servants of God." And note that this anointing takes place on the *crown* of the head. Get it? So, as we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord, it's a good time to refresh our awareness of all that this Sacrament should mean for each of us.

Fr. Bob