



KNOW THE DATE AND CELEBRATE

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Margret Hofheinz-Döring (1910-94). *Stern von Bethlehem*
(1973) Galerie Brigitte Mauch (Göppingen)

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In a general audience during the Year of Faith, Pope Francis asked the participants in the audience a startling question: whom among them remembered the date of their Baptism? Few hands were raised, so Pope Francis gave a homework assignment to those ignorant of their “second birthday”: “Find out the day on which you were born to the Church, and give thanks to the Lord, because at Baptism he has opened the door of his Church to us.”¹ Why does the Pope impute such importance to the date of our Baptism? After all, most of us have no memory of this day. Wouldn’t it be more meaningful to celebrate the dates of our first Holy Communion and Confirmation with the other important milestones of our life, such as a wedding day, priestly ordination, or entrance into the consecrated life, as most Christians do already? Pope Francis replies to this inquiry with a counter question:

We can ask ourselves: is Baptism, for me, a fact of the past, relegated to a date, that date which you are going to go look for today, or is it a living reality, that pertains to my present, to every moment? Do you feel strong, with the strength that Christ gave you by his death and his Resurrection? Or do you feel low, without strength? ... Are you a man or woman of light? Or are you a dark person, without the light of Jesus? We need to take the grace of Baptism, which is a gift, and become a light for all people!²

Indeed, Baptism, the first sacrament of initiation, has a transcendent value as it opens to us the “door of faith” and of Christian life.³ Heeding Pope Francis’ call to reflection, I would like to recall the significance of Baptism for the Christian journey and, following upon this, to examine the responsibility given to parents of neophytes to lead and accompany their children on the path to holiness. I will then highlight aspects of a pedagogy of Baptism by which we conform ourselves to Christ in and through our daily lives. Finally, I will consider the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary at the baptismal font and throughout the baptismal journey.

BAPTISM: OUR SECOND BIRTHDAY

The Christian life does not simply begin with human dispositions and endowments, but with a sacrament assisting the neophyte in becoming a new creation in Christ. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that being “a new creature” signals a new level of existence, comparable to a second birth. The neophyte becomes an adopted child of God, who is a “partaker of the divine nature” (2 Cor 5:17; 2 Pet 1:4; cf. Gal 4:5-7), a member of Christ as well as co-heir with him (cf. 1 Cor 6:15; 12:27; Rom 8:17), and a temple of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 6:19).⁴ Baptism thus effects a profound spiritual transformation which sets Christians apart.⁵ Our participation in Christ is set in motion with the new life received in Baptism, and it is nurtured by the sacramental life of the Church,⁶ reaching its summit and fullness in the Eucharist in which our new being in Christ is most completely consummated.

Endowed with these gifts of God’s love, Christians nevertheless experience the dichotomy of being in this world yet not of this world. As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI notes:

The sacrament of Baptism is not an act of an hour, but is a reality of our whole life, it is a journey of our whole life. In reality, behind this is also the doctrine of the two ways, which was fundamental in early Christianity: a way to which we say “no” and a way to which we say “yes.”⁷

The reality of the baptismal transformation includes the mandate to embrace a lifestyle coherent with “the life of God’s family, with true life in Christ.”⁸ Therein consist the dignity, vocation, and mission of the Christian who is challenged “to live, in a post-baptismal journey, both the renunciations and the ‘yes,’ and to live always in the great ‘yes’ of God, and thus to live well.”⁹ The words directed to the neophyte when clothed in white are therefore like a compass for his or her entire earthly pilgrimage:

*N., you have become a new creation, and have clothed yourself in Christ. See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity. With your family and friends to help you by word and example, bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven.*¹⁰

PARENTS: FIRST EDUCATORS IN THE FAITH

The early Church took it for granted that the Christian life of neophytes did not simply blossom without cultivation.¹¹ Tertullian, for example, emphasized that Christian identity is precisely not inherited from Christian parents but is taught and cultivated in daily life.¹² It is meaningful, therefore, that the Rite of Baptism for Children addresses the parents, whereas in the pre-conciliar formula, the priest questioned the infant and the godparents answered as proxy. During the sacramental preparation, parents are told that, by asking to have their child baptized, they are simultaneously accepting the responsibility for educating their child in the practice of the Catholic faith. Moreover, they are asked if they clearly understand what they are undertaking.¹³ It becomes evident that the solemn commitment made during the infant's Baptism does not bind the child per se; it charges in the first place parents, godparents, and the local Church community to practice their faith in such a way that the neophyte may organically embrace this divine gift with conviction and gratitude.¹⁴

By underscoring the essential role parents have as the first teachers responsible for safeguarding the baptismal grace and guiding the spiritual growth of their child,¹⁵ we see more clearly the dignity and responsibility of the Christian family as the domestic Church. By virtue of their own Baptism and the sacrament of Matrimony,¹⁶ parents are entrusted with a truly ecclesial ministry.¹⁷ Thus, priestly fathers and mothers¹⁸ are called to create an atmosphere in their home where the ideals and virtues of the Holy Family can be assimilated by all members of the family. Parents are therefore encouraged to create family customs and rituals including, but not

limited to: keeping Sundays and days of obligations as “the festival of the ‘new creation,’”¹⁹ arranging time for morning and evening prayers, saying the blessing at meals, and celebrating the liturgical seasons as well as the baptismal and saints' days of each family member. Moreover, Christian homes should be recognizable as such through the presence of religious symbols and sacramentals, which center the family's prayer life. Should it not be a privilege for a priestly father and mother to bless each other and their children daily with holy water, to light a candle for a special intention, or to pray the Rosary together? The family table could be a reminder of the altar in church. The sacrifices connected with reserving time and paying attention to the needs of others truly become a prolongation of the liturgy. Solely the fact that each member of the family has a place reserved for them instills a feeling of belonging. Sharing meals and conversations forge family bonds and identity, and cultivate forgiveness, generosity, sacrifice, patience, joy, and much more.²⁰

As educators of their children, parents can take their bearings from the example of the Holy Family at Nazareth. The example of Joseph of Nazareth can teach fathers still today what it means to be the nourishing, protecting, and life-giving head of the family. Mothers, as heart of the family, do well to emulate Mary's mission by bearing Christ to and serving Christ in every member of the family. In this endeavor, parents may “share in the very authority and love of God the Father and Christ the Shepherd, and in the motherly love of the Church.”²¹ Naturally, they may also count on the collaboration of the child's godparents and the Christian community in general. Nevertheless, it is an awesome challenge for parents to lead and accompany their children on the journey they have chosen for themselves: the path to holiness.²²

The inclusive perception of all baptized in the vocation to holiness permits a greater variety of responses to God's call. It highlights that perfection consists in Christian love rather than in a commitment to the evangelical counsels, or, rather, that all Christians are invited to follow the evangelical counsels in love according to their state of life. To meet the challenge of this high standard of ordinary Christian living, St. John Paul II called for a concrete "pedagogy of holiness,"²³ which above all must include a "spiritual path" without which "external structures . . . will serve very little purpose."²⁴ At stake is not some kind of extraordinary existence, possible only for a few "uncommon heroes,"²⁵ St. John Paul II argued, since it would be a contradiction for someone on the baptismal journey to settle for a life of mediocrity. In his opinion, "to ask catechumens: 'Do you wish to receive Baptism?' means at the same time to ask them: 'Do you wish to become holy?'"²⁶ With confidence that all Christians *can* become holy, we must now ask *how*.

A PEDAGOGY OF BAPTISM

Being and ever more becoming a new creation in Christ involves a life-long spiritual transformation for which St. Paul uses the metaphor of wrestling with the old person while putting on the new person created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (cf. Eph 4:24, Col 3:9). It is a fitting image for the pedagogical process as well, which is aimed at effectively combatting the forces of the lower person in the lower person's attempt to gain priority over the spiritual new person. In other words, a pedagogy of Baptism needs to begin with human formation since the divine life depends on, builds on, and perfects the natural.²⁷ It is, therefore, worthwhile to revisit St. John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*, which in his own words "is, at the same time, a pedagogy." Indeed, "This theology of the body is the basis of the most suitable method of the pedagogy of the body, that is, the education (the self-education) of man."²⁸ The body is "a sign of the person, as a manifestation of the spirit," and, indeed "proper to the person."²⁹ Hence, baptismal education needs to take into consideration the individual's degree of physical, emotional, and intellectual maturity, so as to provide the most suitable conditions for openness to grace. The hoped-for fruit of this (self) education is beautifully described by St. John Paul II:

In earthly life, the dominion of the spirit over the body—and the simultaneous subordination of the body to the spirit—can . . . express a personality that is spiritually mature. . . . In fact, in the composite, psychosomatic being which man is, perfection cannot consist in a mutual opposition of spirit and body. But it consists in a deep harmony between them, in safeguarding the primacy of the spirit. . . . However, that must not be understood as a definitive victory of the

spirit over the body. The resurrection will consist in the perfect participation of all that is physical in man in what is spiritual in him. At the same time it will consist in the perfect realization of what is personal in man.³⁰

Striving to conform oneself to Christ means, as we have already seen, to respond generously to the sublime vocation to love God, self, and neighbor. Thus the pedagogical process shaping a person's growth in holiness is primarily directed toward the continuous exercise of love freely given in communion with him who loved us first and sacrificed himself for us. It goes without saying that this transformation does not occur instantaneously. Rather, it is an ongoing laborious purification of the human heart—the seat of the inner person—and the interior state of the human will, until grace will somehow become second nature.

To the human heart God entrusts the gift of love, but in the human heart resides also the capacity of the old person's distorted practice of love: the lust of the flesh, the senses, and the pride of life.³¹ An honest evaluation of the desires of one's heart and an evenly sincere desire to "take the white garment unstained to heaven" leads Christians to develop and abide by a personal style of life worthy of their sublime dignity. Inherent to such a style of life is a freely chosen commitment to strive for the integration of faith and morals in the everyday life. The "language of the body" unveils the "new person" or the "new creation," in whom holiness is manifested by "the way we pray at home and in the Mass, the way we speak to and listen to people, the way we decorate our homes, even."³² In sum, the life-style of the baptized requires us to accomplish our ordinary duties and chores in an extraordinary way, that is, as lovingly as possible.

To guide us in the way of life demanded by the pedagogy of Baptism, the choice of a teacher for the pedagogy of Baptism is of crucial importance. According to Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, "the true teacher does not bind people to himself, he is not possessive. He wants his son or daughter...to learn to know the truth and to establish a personal relationship with it; ... his objective is that the person being educated listens to the voice of truth speaking to his heart and follows it on a personal journey."³³ These qualifications are sublimely met in the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is the *Hodegetria* (Our Lady of the Way), pointing and leading us to Christ.

OUR LADY AT THE BAPTISMAL FONT AND BEYOND

Unfortunately, the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary at the baptismal font and in the pedagogy of Baptism is very little considered in today's pastoral practice. Yet, St. John Paul II insisted,

the blessed Virgin is...at every baptismal font, where in faith and in the Holy Spirit the members of the Mystical Body are born to divine life, because with faith and with the power of the Spirit, she conceived its Head, Christ.³⁴

Already in his first encyclical letter, the Polish pontiff emphasized that “nobody else can bring us as Mary can into the divine and human dimension of this mystery”³⁵ and urged everybody to submit to “this Motherhood unique and unrepeatable” which is at the same time “also unique in profundity and range of [educational] action.”³⁶ His successor took the same line encouraging parents and godparents to “entrust these little ones to the Virgin Mary’s motherly intercession. Let us ask her to make them, dressed in their white garments, a sign of their new dignity as children of God, true Christians and courageous witnesses to the Gospel throughout their lives.”³⁷

The relationship between Mary and Baptism is described clearly in the Entrance Antiphon of the Votive Mass *Holy Mary, Fountain of Light and Life*. There we pray:

Hail, Mother of light: a Virgin, you gave birth to Christ and became the model of the Church, our Mother, bring to new birth in the chaste waters of Baptism a people of faith.³⁸

How are we to understand Mary’s presence at the baptismal font and her cooperation with the Church, our Mother, in giving birth to and in the education of each child of God?

Since the third century, baptismal formulas included the question *Do you believe in Jesus Christ, who was born of the Virgin Mary?* Reflection on the birth of the Son of God, the Head of the Mystical Body of Christ, from the Virgin Mary, inspired in some Church Fathers the conviction that she is also involved in the birth of the Mystical Body of Christ. Already St. Irenaeus (†202) called attention to the action of the Son of God, the “Pure One who, in a pure way, opened that pure womb that regenerates men in God.”³⁹ Likewise, St. Cyril of Alexandria (†444) believed that “through you, Mary, believers come to the grace of Baptism.”⁴⁰ Drawing on the Mary–Church parallel, St. Ambrose (†397) taught: “In coming upon Mary, the Holy Spirit brought about the conception and accomplished the redemption; in the same way, by resting on the baptismal font and on those who receive baptism, the same Spirit effects the reality of rebirth.”⁴¹ St. Leo the Great (†461) summarized Mary’s unique role in this way: “In the sacrament of rebirth we are united to Christ’s spiritual birth, since, for every person who is reborn, the water of Baptism is a little like the Virgin’s womb, in the sense that the same Spirit who filled the Virgin fills the water of the font.”⁴²

In light of these early testimonies which are echoed in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, Mary’s spiritual maternity commenced at the Incarnation as a consequence of her divine maternity, and implies a real and objective relationship between her and each Christian in the order of grace. At the Annunciation, through Mary’s *fiat* and the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, the Son was incarnate of the Virgin Mary (*ex Maria Virgine*).

Through Christ's Death, a rebirth of water and the Spirit (*renatus ex Spiritu sancto*, Jn 3:5) is made possible for each Christian through the sacrament of Baptism. Mary's co-redemptive ministry suggests the possibility that, like Christ our head, the baptismal birth of the Body of Christ is "*ex Maria Virgine*." In other words, "the individual Christian becomes a child of Mary at the moment when he or she becomes a member of Christ the Head."⁴³ *Lumen Gentium* eloquently describes this spiritual relationship of mother and child:

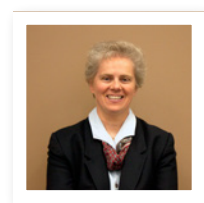
[Mary] conceived, brought forth and nourished Christ. She presented him to the Father in the temple, and was united with him by compassion as he died on the Cross. In this singular way she cooperated . . . in the work of the Savior in giving back supernatural life to souls. Wherefore she is our mother in the order of grace. This maternity of Mary in the order of grace began with the consent which she gave in faith at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross, and lasts until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect.⁴⁴

The nature of a gift is such that it can only be effective when it is accepted. The gift of Mary's maternal activity to the Church and to each of the faithful is no exception. She waits to be chosen by the Church today as "Mother, Teacher, and Guide."⁴⁵ This gift is available to each and every person committed to the baptismal journey as a vocation and mission, and accepting it means that parents entrust themselves and their children to Mary, actively submitting to her guidance on their baptismal journey. Pope Francis underscored the gift of Mary's cooperation in our redemption, which is especially effective at Marian pilgrimage places.

Many Christian parents ask that their children be baptized in a Marian shrine, as a sign of their faith in her motherhood which brings forth new children

for God. There, in these many shrines, we can see how Mary brings together her children, who with great effort come as pilgrims to see her and to be seen by her. Here they find strength from God to bear the weariness and the suffering in their lives. As she did with Juan Diego, Mary offers them maternal comfort and love, and whispers in their ear: "Let your heart not be troubled . . . Am I not here, who am your Mother?"⁴⁶

Baptism initiates the neophyte's new existence as member of Christ. We do well to recall often the day of our christening when these words were directed to us: "N., you have become *a new creation*, . . . See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity . . . *bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven*." Parents are charged to transmit the practice of the faith to their children. In their endeavor they are supported by the family of all believers which is larger and more stable, more open, and more numerous than their own.⁴⁷ Every member of the Church's family is on a baptismal journey which will find its fulfillment at the resurrection of the body when the combat between flesh and spirit will be ended. New awareness of the gift of Baptism—of a pedagogy of Baptism—and of the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary at the rebirth of Christians and of their spiritual growth may just trigger in each child of God the wish to know the date and celebrate!



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NOTES

- 1 Pope Francis. General Audience (November 13, 2013). Cf. John Paul II. Angelus Address: "Celebrate the day of your Baptism!" (January 12, 1997) in *L'Osservatore Romano*, English ed. (January 15, 1997), 1.
- 2 Pope Francis. General Audience (November 13, 2013).
- 3 Cf. Pope Francis. General Audience (November 13, 2013). Cf. Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium* [EG] (November 24, 2013), §104.
- 4 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1994), §1265.
- 5 Cf. John Paul II *Christifidelis Laici* [CL] (December 30, 1988), §15.
- 6 Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [ST] III q.63, a.3; q.72, aa.5-6.
- 7 Benedict XVI. *Lectio Divina: Ecclesial Convention of the Dioceses of Rome* (June 11, 2012).
- 8 Benedict XVI. Homily on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord (January 8, 2006).
- 9 Benedict XVI. *Lectio Divina* (June 11, 2012).
- 10 *Rite of Baptism for Children: The Roman Ritual* [RBC] (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 42, 65, 84, 100. My emphasis. See also: *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* [RCIA] (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1988), 144, 199. For further reading see: Teresa Tsui, "'Baptized into His Death' (Rom 6:3) and 'Clothed with Christ' (Gal 3:27): The Soteriological Meaning of Baptism in Light of Pauline Apocalyptic" in *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 88.4 (2012) 395–417. Here 407ff: "Christ as eschatological garment."
- 11 Cf. Kurt Koch, "Principles for a Christian Theology of Baptism" in *Theology Digest* 52.3 (2005), 231–42. Here 239.
- 12 Cited in Mark Searle, "Infant Baptism Reconsidered" in *Alternative Futures for Worship 2: Baptism and Confirmation*, ed. Mark Searle (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1987), 47.
- 13 For more information see: Diana Klein, "Baptism Preparation: What Happens when we Prepare Parents for their Child's Baptism?" in *Pastoral Review* 4.3 (2008), 37–41. Here 39. Also see *RBC*, 3.
- 14 Cf. Code of Canon Law [CIC] (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), c. 851.2.
- 15 Cf. *CCC*, §1255.
- 16 Cf. John Paul II. *Familiaris Consortio* [FC] (November 22, 1981), §5.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Understood as a participation in the common priesthood of all Christians. Cf. *Lumen Gentium* [LG] (November 21, 1964), §10.1. *CCC*, §1546.
- 19 John Paul II. *Dies Domini* [DD] (May 31, 1998), §8.
- 20 For more ideas on this subject consult: Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood" in *Theological Investigations* 8 (New York, NY: Herder, 1971), 41. Cf. Joseph Kentenich, *On Monday Evening . . . Speaking to Families* [Talks given to couples in Milwaukee, WI 1955–1964] (Waukesha, WI: Schoenstatt, 1998). Joseph Kentenich, *The Family at the Service of Life* [Recollection Days given in 1953 for couples in Madison, WI] (Waukesha, WI: Schoenstatt Family Institute in collaboration with the Schoenstatt Fathers, 1996). See also: Kurt Stasiak, "Infant Baptism Reclaimed: Forgotten Truths about Infant Baptism" in *The Living Light* 31:36–46 (1995), 36–46.
- 21 *FC*, §38.
- 22 Aware of the pastoral challenges facing the family today, Pope Francis called the Extraordinary Synod on the Family in October 2014. To ensure the active involvement of the local, domestic churches in the synod's deliberation, a questionnaire was disseminated by the Vatican. For our purposes, two clusters of questions under the topics *The Pastoral Care of the Family in Evangelization* and *The Relationship between the Family and the Person* are relevant. The following questions were raised under the former: a) Jesus Christ reveals the mystery and vocation of the human person. How can the family be a privileged place for this to happen? b) What critical situations in the family today can obstruct a person's encounter with Christ? c) To what extent do the many crises of faith which people can experience affect family life? The following questions were raised under the latter: a) What experiences have emerged in recent decades regarding marriage preparation? What efforts are there to stimulate the task of evangelization of the couple and of the family? How can an awareness of the family as the "domestic Church" be promoted? b) How successful have you been in proposing a manner of praying within the family which can withstand life's complexities and today's culture? c) In the current generational crisis, how have Christian families been able to fulfill their vocation of transmitting the faith?

d) In what way have the local Churches and movements on family spirituality been able to create ways of acting which are exemplary? e) What specific contribution can couples and families make to spreading a credible and holistic idea of the couple and the Christian family today? f) What pastoral care has the Church provided in supporting couples in formation and couples in crisis situations? While it is infeasible within the frame of this article to explore each aspect in depth, readers are highly encouraged to ponder them in view of their own family.

23 John Paul II. *Novo Millennio Ineunte* [NMI] (January 6, 2001).

24 Ibid. §43.

25 NMI, §31.

26 Ibid. See CL, §16.

27 John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio* [FR] (September 14, 1998), §43. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *ST I*, 1, a.8 ad.2.

28 John Paul II. *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* [TB] (Boston, Pauline Books & Media, 1997), 214ff.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., 241.

31 Cf. TB, 205.

32 Clare Watkins, “Theology, Baptism and the Renewal of the Church” in *Pastoral Review* 2.6 (2006), 35–39. Here 38f.

33 Benedict XVI. Homily for the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord (January 12, 2012).

34 John Paul II. Angelus Address (February 12, 1984).

35 John Paul II. *Redemptor Hominis* [RH] (March 4, 1979), §22.

36 Ibid. §22.

37 Benedict XVI. Homily for the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord (January 10, 2010).

38 *Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. Approved for use in the dioceses of the United States of America by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and confirmed by the Apostolic See (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), 79.

39 Irenaeus, “Adversus haereses” IV, 33, 11 in *Patrologiae cursus completus accurante*. Series Graeca (Paris 1928-1936), 7:1083-84.

40 Cyril of Alexandria, “Homily IV preached at Ephesus against Nestorius” in *Patrologiae cursus completus accurante*. Series Graeca (Paris 1928-1936), 77:992-96.

41 Ambrose of Milan, “De mysteriis” 53, 59 in *Patrologiae cursus completus*. Series Latina (Paris 1958 -), 6:392.

42 Leo the Great, “Tractatus” 24, 3 in *Patrologiae cursus completus*. Series Latina (Paris 1958 -), 54:205.

43 Joseph Kentenich, *Mary, our Mother and Educator* [An applied Mariology in Lenten Sermons 1954] (Waukesha, WI: Schoenstatt, 1987), 140.

44 LG, §§61-2.

45 John Paul II. *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* [RVM] (October 16, 2002), §37.

46 EG, §286. Cf. Nican Mopohua, 118-119.

47 Cf. Benedict XVI. Homily for the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord (January 11, 2009).