

Baptism of the Lord
January 12, 2014
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Matthew 3:13-17

When we heard last week about the visit of the wise men to the infant Jesus, the gifts they brought indicated not only who Jesus is, but what Jesus would do. The Son of God is the King of Kings, hence the gold; He is the eternal high priest, hence the frankincense; and He is also the Victim, hence the myrrh. Today's Gospel is similar in this regard, as a voice from heaven reveals that Jesus is the Son of God even as He comes up out of the water. The Baptism of our Lord thus shows that Jesus the Son of God will both die and rise to newness of life, the going down into the water pointing to his death and the rising from it pointing to His resurrection after Calvary.

Jesus' command that we too be baptized, therefore, points to His will for us. In the same way He tells us that we must take up our cross and follow Him if we want to be His disciples, so we must die if we are to rise to newness of life. Not only must we die to sin in the waters of baptism if we are to live according to God's will, we must physically offer our lives for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ if we hope to inherit the reward promised to all who love Him.

How we live out that offering in our bodies will vary from person to person, but the willingness to die a martyr for the faith must be universal. We cannot submit to baptism, nor can we vouch for children as parents and godparents, if we are not willing to die some day as a witness to the Truth, if we are not willing to see our own children die in defense of the Faith.

This is a hard teaching, but one I saw reflected in an autobiography I received from my wife for Christmas. Joseph Fadelle, formerly Muhammed Musawi, wrote *The Price to Pay* about his conversion to Catholicism from Shia Islam, a conversion that ultimately took thirteen years.

Joseph Fadelle was a soldier in the Iraqi army under Saddam Hussein, when he met a Christian in their barracks during the Iran-Iraq war. After reading the Gospel of John, given to him by his Catholic bunkmate, Mr. Fadelle yearned to partake of the Bread of Life—the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ which we receive in Holy Communion. For months they discussed the Faith, but Mr. Fadelle had to keep his conversion secret because the penalty for apostasy in Islam is death.

In the course of his conversion he found it very difficult to find a priest who would baptize him, because they didn't want to expose the Catholic community in Iraq to the accusation of proselytizing and the violence that always accompanies such an accusation. Eventually though, his family does find out and, not yet baptized, the convert to the Faith is thrown into prison, where he languished for over a year. He flees to Jordan with the help of the Catholic Church, but his family from Iraq tracks him down and shoot him, leaving him for dead on the side of a road outside the capital, Amman.

At this point, however, he had been baptized, along with his wife and children, and he thought honestly that he would die a martyr for the Faith. Indeed, he knew as soon as He chose Jesus, or rather assented to Jesus choosing him, that such a death was possible, so as he recovered from his wounds, he gave thanks that he was able to suffer for the sake of our Savior. The book ends in France, and Joseph Fadelle admits quite frankly that the cross he bears now is the necessity that he forgive his family for all

they did to him because of his conversion. Permanently exiled from the land of his birth, he lives even today under a religious decree from his home country demanding his death for his entry into the Church.

Stories like this one cause us to think about the sacrifices we would be willing to make in order to remain true. In a sense, however, those of us who are baptized have already been committed to the sacrifices Joseph Fabelle made even before his baptism. Our descent into the waters of rebirth were a declaration that we would be willing to bear our cross even unto death, the promise being that our fidelity means not even a hair of our head will perish. Joseph Fabelle, throughout his ordeal, trusted that promise from Jesus, and it sustained him as it must sustain us in our darkest hour.

An important distinction here is necessary, though, to counter the accusation of fanaticism. That is, almost every day we read about Muslims willing to die, who in fact do die, in the name of their religion. At the same time, they call themselves martyrs and insist they are willing to die because of the promise of eternal life. How is our descent into the waters of baptism different from the Muslims' readiness to die?

Very simply the Christian willingness to die for the Faith is in imitation of Him who died first for us. Our death is a participation in the redemption of the world, a union with him who prayed for His persecutors, "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do." Even today this is the prayer the persecuted Christians of Iraq pray for their countrymen, who since 2004 have forced two-thirds of the Christians there to flee the country. When Christians die for the faith, they do so in service to their fellow man and in defense of the sanctity of life, with love even for those who would do them harm. Joseph Fabelle recognized in the prologue of his autobiography that he too must love his enemies if he is to be a true servant of the cross. He must desire life for those who tried to kill him.

Contrast this love with the motives of the enemies of the cross. While they may be willing to die, they die not as servants of life but as servants of death. They do not kill out of love either, but because of their hatred and contempt for those they consider to be infidels. And indeed they are following the example of the founder of their religion, who spread his ideology by the sword. In other words, they are willing to die so that they may kill and oppress. Christians are willing to die in order that others, even their enemies, may live. This does not constitute fanatical hatred but the most profound love, exemplified by the One who offers Himself to us in the Mass so that we have the strength to do what He did.

Muslims, too, are capable of such love, even if we don't often see it in action. Just this past Monday a 15-year-old high school student in Pakistan thwarted a suicide bombing at his school by tackling the would-be mass murderer, who then detonated his explosive vest. His act of love and courage cost him his life, but the sacrifice he made is compelling in the way baptism is—my life to save the lives of others. Even unbelievers can figure this out, without deliberation, in the heat of the moment. This represents the reality that in baptism we see the final triumph of the cross, for it is the triumph of the love for which and in which we were made.