

**Second Sunday of Advent**  
**December 8, 2013**  
**Homily for the Anglican Use Mass**  
**of**  
**St. Thomas More Catholic Parish**  
**celebrated at**  
**St. Joseph Catholic Church**  
**Scranton, PA**  
**Matthew 3:1-12**

In our Gospel today we heard about the baptism of St. John the Baptist, that is, the baptism that he offered to people. This baptism is mentioned several times in the New Testament, and our reading today gives us an idea of its character. John himself says that it was “with water for repentance,” and this implies that it has no sacramental nature. This understanding is confirmed in Acts 19, when St. Paul encounters several people who were baptized by John the Baptist, and St. Paul baptized them again once they confessed Jesus Christ.

Thus, today I’ll talk about the differences between John’s baptism and sacramental baptism, because even today it is important for us to understand why some people have to get baptized again so we can explain to others the teaching of the Catholic Church.

We first have to understand what a sacrament is. It is an outward sign that confers a spiritual grace, but we can also say that it is a sign that effects what it signifies. So with baptism the sign is water, and the sign actually washes away the sins of the recipient, so long as the valid matter and form are used. The sign at the moment of baptism then also makes us members of Christ’s body, the Church and imparts to us the grace of the Holy Spirit.

John’s baptism did no such thing. Whereas sacramental baptism means we are forgiven our sins, adopted as God’s sons, and equipped with the Holy Spirit to live out the baptismal promises we’ve made, John’s baptism did not confer any grace at all. This is because his baptism was purely symbolic. A symbol is a sign that effects nothing, even if it can call to mind graces we received at another time. Therefore, I wear a wedding ring that reminds me of my marriage, my wedding vows, the love of my wife, and much more, but it doesn’t actually confer any grace.

John’s baptism, then, was a symbol of the repentance from sin that each recipient intended, a new beginning and a public commitment to renew one’s moral life. But it did not give any graces, to accomplish that new beginning, nor did it wash away the sins of which the recipient had repented. The purpose was to point to and prepare people for the baptism that was about to come, of which John spoke, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

This one line about the baptism we received indicates its sacramental nature. We do indeed receive the Holy Spirit, and the reference to fire recalls the purifying effect of our baptism. As the water bathed our bodies, our souls were made white in the Blood of the Lamb. But John does not stop there. He also makes reference to belonging to the company of the redeemed by means of sacramental baptism. He says, “He will clear His threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.” We usually associate this line with the judgment to come, when Christ returns, but this sifting has already begun. The Sacrament of Baptism is an entryway into the Kingdom of Heaven, and Jesus Himself declared as much, when He said to Nicodemus in St. John’s Gospel that unless one is born of water and the spirit he cannot inherit eternal life.

Baptism then indicates membership in the Kingdom of God, what we as Catholics should consider to be synonymous with membership in the Catholic Church. This does not mean, of course, that everyone who has been baptized is Catholic, nor does it mean that baptism is one's automatic ticket to heaven. What it does mean is that baptism sets us on the road to eternal salvation by giving us what we need in order to be saved. So long as we walk the earth, we can yet reject that grace and number ourselves amongst the chaff, but if we live in that grace our trajectory is towards the Throne of Grace in heaven. The sifting about which John speaks in today's Gospel will be completed on the Last Day, but it has begun already by the choice we make whether to be baptized or not.

Once we have this proper understanding of baptism it is easy to understand why some people, like those in Acts 19, must get baptized again, why they must receive a sacramental baptism to accomplish what may have been intended in the symbolic baptism. If we seek to be inheritors of the promises of Jesus Christ, then we must enter into them, trusting that He will be true to His word and will in fact be born anew.

The formula for baptism is very simple. In order for our sins to be washed away, for us to be adopted as God's sons and for us to receive the grace of the Holy Spirit, we must be baptized with water while the baptizer says, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The Catholic Church accepts as valid baptisms that have been undertaken in this way and we can demonstrate that just such a baptism took place.

The confusion arises when we realize that a good number of people who call themselves Christian insist that baptism is merely a symbol of a reality that has already taken place. That is, while they baptize people with water, using the proper formula, they also say that the graces imparted by baptism were imparted the moment the Christian believed, rather than when the person received the sacrament. Because it is to them a new symbol, this understanding of baptism means that some people who confess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior also play fast and loose with baptism itself. They may change the form by saying only the name of Jesus, or they may say Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer instead of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Some people even change the matter: there was a trend in the Methodist Church at the turn of the last century where ministers of baptism used rose petals instead of water.

If there is any confusion, therefore, the people whom we are helping to reconcile to Holy Mother Church must be baptized again. If the symbolic understanding of baptism has compromised the sacramental nature of baptism, we baptize the person absolutely. If there is doubt, then a person may be conditionally baptized, using the formula, "If you are not already baptized, I baptize you . . . ." The Church must be certain that all the graces associated with the sacrament have been conferred, because baptism is, after all, the entryway to all the other sacraments, most importantly the sacrament of Holy Communion.

So why all this fuss about the validity and efficacy of the Sacrament of Baptism? We understand this to be a matter of life and death. And here we are not talking merely about our eternal destiny, as important as getting to heaven certainly is. We have in mind the graces we need here and now to live a holy life, the graces we need to cooperate with the will of God to fulfill His purposes on earth. The Sacraments are the sure means to receive the graces Jesus desires for us, and baptism is the doorway to receive these gifts. If we desire for others the salvation we desire for ourselves, we must ensure our neighbors have started off on the right foot.