

“This Is My Beloved Son”

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (Mt. 3:13–17)¹

It is often thought that the baptism of Jesus held no real significance for His mission and life. Instead it is suggested that He submitted to baptism simply out of humility, and to associate Himself with a rite that would later be important for Christian initiation. However, if we look at its context, we see there is much more to Jesus’ baptism than a ritual washing. Israel was being summoned by the Prophet John to come for baptism at the Jordan River, to

¹ See also Mk. 1:9–11; Lk. 3:21–22.

confess their sins and repent. Of course, Jesus, being sinless, had nothing to confess. John himself recognized this immediately, for Matthew tells us that when Jesus submitted to John and his washing, “John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’” (Mt. 3:14).

Why, then, did Jesus journey to the Jordan in order to appear before the prophet, especially when He did not need to confess and wash? The problem is acute for us—for if Jesus’ journey to the Jordan holds little meaning, then why should we bother to join Jesus at the Jordan through the journey of meditation? In short, was Jesus only going through the motions of a prophetic rite in order to give us a pious model, or is there a rich mystery for meditation in Jesus’ baptism?

The answer, of course, is that there is more in this event than a demonstration of humility and a model for piety—the baptism of Jesus profoundly impacted the cosmos, and Jesus’ own mission, in many ways. Indeed, Jesus’ baptism is so rich a mystery that a lifetime of meditation could never exhaust its meaning.

“Then Jesus Came from Galilee to the Jordan”

We must begin with the Jordan River, since Providence chose this place as the setting for Jesus’ baptism. The Jordan River begins north of the Promised Land, near the heights of Mount Hermon in eastern Lebanon. Descending from these heights, the river flows into the northern portion of the Sea of Galilee. From the southern part of the sea, it continues its descent through the Jordan valley until it reaches its terminus at the lowest place in all the earth, the Dead Sea. The river’s two hun-

dred-mile winding descent to the Dead Sea is the basis of its name in Hebrew, *yar-dane*, which means “descender.” It is here, at the river named “Descender,” that a drop more dramatic than the 2,380 foot descent of the Jordan River will occur, for it is here that the heavens will be opened and the Holy Spirit will descend upon Jesus. The River Jordan is bound to the mystery of descent—the descent of waters that will refresh and give life to God’s children.

Israel first encountered the Jordan when Joshua led the people out of the wilderness. The day the people of Israel came to the eastern side of the Jordan, Joshua declared: “Sanctify yourselves; for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you” (Josh. 3:5). The next day, Joshua instructed the priests to lead the people across the river, carrying the ark of the covenant. When the priests brought the ark into the river, the waters stopped flowing, allowing the people to cross, dry-shod, into the Promised Land. With this, the Jordan River came to symbolize for Israel the end of the desert wanderings and the entry into the long-awaited Promised Land.

Later in Israel’s history, God called the Prophet Elijah to the Jordan River. Elijah and his assistant, Elisha, came down from the north, traveling through Gilgal, Bethel, and finally Jericho, to approximately the same area where Joshua led Israel into the Promised Land (2 Kings 2:1–5). They then crossed out of the Promised Land to the eastern side of the Jordan by the miraculous action of Elijah, who parted the waters in a manner reminiscent of Joshua’s crossing (2 Kings 2:8). The difference, however, was the direction in which they crossed. Elijah crossed out of the

land, eastward, whereas Joshua crossed westward, entering into the Promised Land. Joshua's mission was one of entering; Elijah's one of exiting.

Elijah knew that he had been led to the Jordan because his time had come to leave the land and the people of Israel. As he stood on the banks of the river with Elisha, a fiery chariot swung down to earth, taking Elijah in a whirlwind up to heaven. But Elisha was not left behind empty-handed. He inherited the mantle of Elijah and a double portion of his spirit (2 Kings 2:6–14). Elijah had been the mightiest of the prophets, but now his successor, Elisha, would wield even more power in the Spirit of the Lord—healing lepers, multiplying bread to feed a multitude, and even raising the dead. Once again, the Jordan is a place of transition. This time, it marks the end of one prophet's mission and the beginning of another—a transition marked by the bestowal of the Spirit and the opening of heaven.

“To the Jordan to John”

Why did John summon all of Israel to come out of their villages and cities in order to walk through the wilderness of Judea to the Jordan River? Certainly John could have held his ritual washing in Jerusalem. There were plenty of cisterns and pools for ritual washing near the Temple. Indeed, what better place for ritual washing and repentance than the city that held Mount Zion and the Temple? Where better than the Temple, for that matter, to confess sins and seek forgiveness?

The Jews were certainly a people with a strong sense of geography. This is illustrated by the fact that their

Scriptures focus so much on one particular piece of real estate—the Promised Land. In that land, no place was more holy than the Temple, so the question is worth raising: why did the Prophet John make the Jordan River the base of his preaching and ministry?

As we have already seen, the Jordan was a place that held certain national memories, the foremost being the entry into the Promised Land and its conquest by Joshua. Since John is eventually arrested by Herod, it is likely that John operated on the eastern side of the Jordan; that is, outside of the strict boundary of the Promised Land. We know this because Herod controlled the land of Galilee in the north and the land east of the Jordan. The land on the west side of the Jordan (and in the Promised Land), in the area of Judea, was controlled directly by the Romans, specifically by Pontius Pilate. Therefore, the fact that Herod had John arrested points to the strong probability that John was based on the east side of the river—the only side over which Herod had jurisdiction.

Thus John had the people of Israel cross the Jordan eastward to hear his preaching and instructions. He called Israel out of the Promised Land to repent and be ritually baptized. Then, after they had been baptized in the river, they would cross westward, back into the Promised Land (as their forefathers had done with Joshua). The point was obvious: Israel needed to repent and be cleansed of her sins, and to start over. John was inviting Israel to begin afresh as the people of God, to go back to their land and homes with a renewed relationship with Him.

In the midst of this prophetic reentry, a man of God named “Joshua” showed up—that is, Jesus (the name

“Jesus” in Hebrew is literally “Joshua”). John himself had said that he was just the precursor to someone greater who was to follow—someone who would baptize not simply with water, but with the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ appearance at the Jordan is quickly recognized by John as the coming, not of some simple pilgrim, but of one “whose sandals I am not worthy to carry” (Mt. 3:11). Jesus instructs John to baptize Him, and as he does so, the Holy Spirit descends from heaven and rests on Jesus.

The presence of two prophets at the Jordan is again reminiscent of the story of Elijah and Elisha. It was at the Jordan that the prophetic “baton” was passed between the two men of God and the successor received a more powerful share of the Spirit. Thus, “those who have ears to hear” can discern the story of Elijah replayed at a new level. John plays Elijah to Jesus’ Elisha—for when John anoints Jesus, “the Spirit of God descend[s] like a dove” (Mt. 3:16). Like Elisha, Jesus will exercise a ministry greater than that of His predecessor. In both stories, the Jordan is the locus of the transition of mission and the giving of the Spirit.

Are we to believe, then, that John is a new Elijah? Certainly Jesus held John to be a type of Elijah, for He said, “[I]f you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come” (Mt. 11:14). This strange reference to Elijah’s return is a reference to the last prophetic oracle given to Israel, which came from the Prophet Malachi. Malachi’s last word to Israel was that Elijah would come to visit the people before the Lord’s own advent (see Mal. 4:5). Thus Jesus, by proclaiming John to be the new Elijah, was suggesting that the day of the Lord was at hand—they should be on the lookout for His appearance.

Undoubtedly, many of the Jews of John’s day did in fact see him as the new Elijah. John certainly dressed the part. His wardrobe of a leather belt and garment of camel’s hair was strikingly similar to how Elijah dressed (2 Kings 1:8). It is also worth observing that Elijah was a prophet who upset the ruling king of Israel, Ahab, and his wicked wife, Jezebel. Similarly, John boldly spoke out against King Herod and incurred the wrath of his wicked queen, Herodias—the new Jezebel. The story of Israel’s past was being replayed in a different but familiar key.

Just as John is reminiscent of Elijah, so too are there parallels between Jesus and Elisha. Elisha’s mission began with the bestowal of God’s Spirit; Jesus also received an outpouring of the Spirit at the Jordan. And this emerging pattern continues. For just as Elisha, anointed in the power of God’s Spirit, went forth and cured a leper, multiplied bread, and even raised the dead, so too will the new “Elisha”—Jesus.

The Jordan is a conduit of more than water. It connects back to the stories of Israel’s entry into the Promised Land with Joshua, back to Israel’s spiritual crisis and call for renewal with Elijah and Elisha. By reflecting on the significance of the Jordan in Israel’s history, we can come to appreciate the rich meaning that it holds for John’s baptism of Jesus. Jesus is not simply going through the motions of a Jewish ritual when He allows John to baptize Him. Rather, in Jesus, the New Israel, the story of Israel is repeated at a deeper level and brought to a prophetic climax. Now the real Joshua has come to set His people free. The greater “Elisha,” now anointed, is about to begin a prophetic ministry that will unleash the power of the Spirit like none other.

“And When Jesus Was Baptized”

The arrival of a prophet at the Jordan, after many generations of prophetic drought (remember, the last prophet was Malachi, who ministered several hundred years before Jesus), caused no small stir among the people. The question quickly arose: Could this be the Messiah? With the multitudes streaming out of Jerusalem to be baptized by this new prophet, the leaders in Jerusalem wasted no time in dispatching a team of priests and Levites to investigate. But John confessed to them, “I am not the Christ” (Jn. 1:20).

What did John and the Jewish people mean by the title “Christ”? The word “christ” is the Greek word for the Hebrew “messiah.” In both languages, they literally mean “one who is anointed.” In the ancient kingdom of Israel, kings were anointed with oil, marking their ordination to the royal office.

For example, the Prophet Samuel anointed the first king, Saul: “Then Samuel took a vial of oil and poured it on his head, and kissed him and said, ‘Has not the LORD anointed you to be prince over his people Israel?’” (1 Sam. 10:1). Notice the sacramental nature of the act. The prophet pours the oil on Saul, but it is the Lord who anoints him king. The anointing of Saul is then followed by the Spirit coming mightily upon him and transforming him. Samuel tells the newly anointed king: “[T]he spirit of the LORD will come mightily upon you, and you shall prophesy with them and be turned into another man” (1 Sam. 10:6).

Later, God tells Samuel to anoint a new king from among the sons of Jesse. Samuel, led by God, anoints the

youngest of Jesse’s sons, David: “Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward” (1 Sam. 16:13). The office of king was so important and sacred that it required anointing by a prophet. This anointing not only bestows the office of king, but also the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Thus, when John is asked if he is the “Christ,” the issue at hand is kingship. John demurs, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I” (Mk. 1:7). It is then that Jesus, in order to present Himself to be anointed king over Israel, comes down from Galilee to be baptized by John. The mightier one has come!

“And He Saw the Spirit of God Descending like a Dove”

After Jesus submitted to John’s baptism, He “went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove” (Mt. 3:16). Every Gospel account of Jesus’ baptism focuses on the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus. As the Spirit had come upon Saul and David when the prophet anointed them, so too the power of the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus as He comes to the prophet at the Jordan. From this moment onward, Jesus can be called “Christ.”

After the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus, a voice from heaven declares, “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased” (Lk. 3:22). This declaration from the Father is worded so as to echo an important royal psalm that was used for the enthronement of the Davidic kings.

Psalm 2 begins by observing that the kings and leaders of the nations conspire against the Lord and His “anointed” (Ps. 2:1–2). But the Lord responds to their schemes with laughter and confirms the status of His anointed one, saying, “I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill” (v. 6). Then the anointed one responds, saying, “I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, ‘You are my son, today I have begotten you’” (v. 7). Note that “anointed one,” as we saw earlier, is synonymous with “king.” The king in Israel would have had this psalm read during his enthronement ceremony, at which he was anointed king and, therefore, adopted son to the Lord. Thus the declaration by the Father Himself, with the words of the royal enthronement psalm, strongly suggests that Jesus’ baptism was the occasion at which He was anointed for His royal mission.

The descent of the Holy Spirit, the presentation before the prophet, and the echoes of a royal enthronement psalm all point to the conclusion that there is more to Jesus’ baptism than a ritual washing; rather, it is the occasion of Jesus’ royal anointing. Jesus, in His divine nature, is always and eternally the only begotten Son of the Father. In His human nature, taken from Mary, Jesus was born into the line of David; so, like all the Davidic kings, He too must be anointed at a particular time and place. The Evangelist Luke understands that time and place to be Jesus’ baptism at the Jordan.

Unlike Matthew, who begins the story of Jesus with His genealogy, Luke waits until the end of chapter 3, immediately after the account of Jesus’ baptism, to list His genealogy. Why does Luke put it off until this precise

moment? The answer is simple: Luke holds that the baptism of Jesus is the occasion at which He is anointed the “Christ.” The genealogy reveals that Jesus is of the line of David (Lk. 3:31), which validates the previous baptism account that made Jesus King.

Luke also stresses that Jesus was anointed in the Spirit. Although the term “anointed” is not used in the baptism narrative, the fact that the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus suffices, as anointing bestows the Spirit for the sake of faithfully living out the holy office to which one is ordained. Indeed, in the very next chapter, Luke tells us that Jesus went forth “full of the Holy Spirit” (Lk. 4:1), much like David after his anointing, when “the Spirit of the Lord came mightily” upon him (1 Sam. 16:13).

Also in the same chapter, following the baptism, Jesus begins His first public proclamation with the words of Isaiah, declaring: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor” (Lk. 4:18; cf. Is. 61:1–2). Note that Jesus claims the Spirit is upon Him because He has been “anointed.” Thus, Luke clearly shows us that Jesus interprets His baptism as an anointing in the Spirit—an anointing that sends Jesus forth on His royal messianic mission.

Who anointed Jesus, John or God? In one sense, the answer is both. Recall the story of Samuel anointing Saul (see 1 Sam. 10:1). The narrator tells us that Samuel anointed him with oil, but then Samuel tells Saul that *God* has anointed him king. The prophet acts on God’s behalf. But in the baptism of Jesus there is no oil; instead of this sign, there is the reality to which it points—the Holy Spirit—seen in the form of a dove. The Father declares

His love for the Son, and so, here too God's involvement is uniquely evident.

Luke subtly but carefully shows us that Jesus' baptism is the profound event wherein God the Father anoints Jesus for His royal messianic mission. Luke makes this clear in Acts 10, where he records Peter preaching a homily at the first baptism of Gentiles. In the homily, Peter explains how everything started with John's preaching a baptism and "how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power" (Acts 10:38). Jesus did not come to the Jordan and to John to be washed of sin; rather, He came to Israel's last prophet to be anointed the final and everlasting King.

"And Behold, the Heavens Were Opened"

Amidst the oracles of hope and prophecies of restoration that dominate the second half of Isaiah, a rare complaint arises against God. The prophet laments over the absence of God among His people and expresses this with deep longing for the Lord to reveal Himself once again. "Where is he who put in the midst of them his holy Spirit?" (Is. 63:11). As fire brings water to boil, so too these cries to God, who seems absent, kindle a complaint that becomes a lament. At the climax of the lament, he cries out, "O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at thy presence" (Is. 64:1). The imagery of quaking mountains evokes the most memorable manifestation of God, the theophany of Sinai.

The plight of Israel during the several hundred years of exile and domination under pagan rule only sharpened

the desire for God’s presence and intervention in the life of Israel: how long until the Lord rends the heavens and comes down? The Evangelist Mark gives Israel the answer.

Both Matthew and Luke describe the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus as beginning with the opening up of the heavens. However, Mark’s description, although consonant with these accounts, is more graphic. Instead of narrating that the heavens simply “opened up,” Mark tells us that they were “rent open” (Mk. 1:10)—that is, they were violently torn. The Greek word employed by Mark is *schidzo*, from which we get the word “schism,” which means “tearing apart.” Thus, for Mark, the baptism of Jesus impacted the cosmos in such a powerful way that the heavens were torn open.

Jesus’ baptism changed the world by rending open the heavens, allowing the Holy Spirit to descend in a powerful way. God finally heeded the lament lodged at the end of Isaiah: He rent the heavens and came down. The descent of the Spirit on Jesus—the advent of a new theophany like Sinai—marks the fulfillment of this desire for God’s return. On Sinai, God revealed His Law to Moses; now, His New Law is not given on stony tablets, but is the Holy Spirit Himself, given through Jesus.

The Torah, or Law, was the light of Israel, as illustrated in the words of Psalm 119, which famously celebrates the Torah, saying, “Thy word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path” (Ps. 119:105). But now there is a new revelation—God manifests Himself no longer through stone, but through His Son. Jesus, with the anointing presence of the Holy Spirit, represents the New Law of the New Covenant.

Thus He can say, “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12). Before, Israel had to walk by the light of the written Torah, but now they are called to walk in the light of Christ. The baptism of Jesus is the time that the light begins to dawn, as the clouds of heaven are rent for the descent of the Holy Spirit, who shines down upon the Son.

The striking image of tearing, *schidzo*, is found only one other time in Mark’s Gospel. When Jesus utters a loud cry from the Cross and breathes His last, the curtain of the Temple is torn in two, from top to bottom (Mk. 15:38). The tearing of the heavens at the outset of Jesus’ ministry is matched at its end with the tearing of the curtain that veiled the Holy of Holies in the Temple. This curtain stood as a barrier between the people and the Spirit of God, who resided in the Holy of Holies—where the ark of the covenant had been in Solomon’s temple. Only the high priest, once a year, could go beyond the curtain into the inner sanctum of the Temple. With Jesus’ death, the curtain is torn—signifying that access to the Holy Spirit is now open to all.

Why does Mark juxtapose the tearing of the heavens at Jesus’ baptism with the tearing of the Temple curtain at Jesus’ death? Is there a relationship between the baptism and death of Jesus? What is Mark suggesting by paralleling the heavens with the curtain that veils the Holy of Holies?

Certainly, the tearing open of the heavens at the baptism and the tearing of the Temple veil at the Cross signify the tearing down of the walls or barriers that had separated heaven and earth, God and His people. The parallel

between the baptism of Jesus and the Paschal Mystery of His death is a suggestive and rich one, and one that Mark certainly intends. In the middle of his Gospel, Mark tells us of the time that James and John requested to sit at the right and left of Jesus when He comes into His glory. Jesus responds by asking if they can drink the cup He must drink, or be “baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized” (Mk. 10:38). Jesus’ words are cryptic and strange. What is the baptism with which He will be baptized? These ominous words surely imply suffering. But has not Jesus already been baptized by John? Why then speak of another baptism? The answer, as Mark subtly shows us, is that Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan already anticipated the ultimate baptism in His own blood on the Cross. Likewise, the Cross completes what was begun at the baptism. For Mark, the meaning of Jesus’ baptism, and ours as well, can never be separated from the Paschal Mystery that is manifest on the Cross.

Few have penetrated the mystery of this relationship between Jesus’ baptism and death as deeply as the Apostle Paul. He reminds the Christians in Rome how the Paschal Mystery defines Baptism: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3–4). Baptism, through the physical immersion under water, signifies death. The water of Baptism enters us into the death of Jesus, and we are “buried” with Him. But if going down into the water signifies death, then coming up out of the waters signifies rising with Christ, through a

rebirth in the Spirit. Thus, the waters that symbolize death by drowning also signify rebirth and a new life.

Christian Baptism, therefore, is a ritual death and rebirth. It is, in other words, a sacramental entering into the Paschal Mystery—the death and Resurrection of Christ. We die to our old, fallen nature and sin, and rise to new life in Christ. Paul is adamant that the difference between the old and the new life is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that begins at our baptism (cf. Rom. 8). With the bestowal of the Holy Spirit (remember, that is the focus of Jesus' baptism), we are not only endowed with the Spirit, but, even more, we are adopted as sons or daughters of our Heavenly Father. “[A]ll who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God,” and thus, at Baptism, one receives the “spirit of sonship” (Rom. 8:14–15).

When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit manifestly descended upon Him, and the Father recognized Jesus' eternal sonship by declaring, “[T]hou art my beloved Son.” The gift of the Spirit did not bestow sonship on Jesus, for He was already the eternal Son of the Father. Instead, the descent of the Spirit manifests what was already true of Jesus' relationship with the Father. And as we have already seen, the anointing in the Spirit gave to Jesus in His humanity the royal anointing of the Davidic kings of Israel, of whom He was heir. The beauty in receiving the Spirit at our baptism is that now we too become heirs. “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom. 8:15–17).

The bestowal of sonship through our baptism is an awesome mystery. The gift of the Holy Spirit, which Paul refers to as the Spirit of sonship, brings about a new creation in us at baptism. No wonder the heavens were torn asunder, and the Temple veil rent. For by His life and death, Jesus “has broken down the dividing wall . . . for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2:14, 18). The mystery of Jesus’ sonship, manifest at His baptism, points to the mystery of our adopted sonship through the same Spirit. Thus, to reflect on the mystery and identity of Jesus at His baptism is to reflect on our own identity as well.

At Jesus’ baptism, as we have seen, He is anointed the Christ—the Lord’s Anointed One. At our baptism, we also are anointed with the Holy Spirit, and this too marks our identity. We are not called Christians simply because we try to follow Christ, but rather we are called Christians because we are anointed ones. We are anointed with God’s Holy Spirit at baptism so that we can be empowered by the grace of the Spirit to follow Jesus. The mystery of Jesus’ baptism contains profound light—not just to find our way, but moreover, to find our identity in Christ—so that we too can cry out daily, “Abba! Father!”

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Let us pray for the fruit of a deeper filial identity.

As we contemplate the mystery of Jesus’ divine sonship in the mystery of His baptism, we pray for a deeper awareness of the adoption we received at our own baptism, when we became sons or daughters of our Father in Heaven. May the fruit of this mystery aid us in dying to sin and in living to holiness and the life of grace. Amen.

Points for Reflection

1. Just as the Jews saw that the Word of God (the Torah)

was a light to their path (see Ps. 119:105), so now the path for the journey of our lives is to be illuminated by Christ. What does this mean for you practically in your life? How can you allow the light of Christ to shine on your life and help you to see the way that you should go? How can you share this light of Christ with others that you meet on your path?

2. Imagine the scene of Jesus' baptism: the heavens are

rent open, the Spirit descends upon Jesus, and a voice calls out from heaven. It must have been a pretty amazing sight! Reflect upon your own baptism. Even though you probably didn't see the Holy Spirit come down as a dove, you now have the gift of the Spirit. How does this affect your relationship with God? How does this affect the way that you live? Are you connected to the Holy Spirit? How can the Holy Spirit play a greater role in your life?

3. Even though you did not physically hear the voice of

the Father at your baptism, He really did say to you: "This is my beloved son," or, "This is my beloved daughter." Do you believe that you are a son or daughter of our loving Father in heaven? Do you have confidence in the fact that you are a son/daughter of God? Or are you insecure in this love, doubting that you truly are a beloved child? Imagine God the Father saying to you: "You are my beloved daughter," or, "You

are my beloved son."

4. In our baptism, we are anointed as Christians. This

means that we are followers of Christ. Just as Christ faced the Cross and embraced it, we too will have suffering and crosses in our lives. What are some of the crosses in your life? What is your first reaction to these sufferings and crosses? Do you often struggle to see where God is in the midst of suffering? Pray for the grace to see Jesus in the crosses in your life, and ask Him to be with you through them.

5. How did Jesus handle His suffering? What can you

learn from Jesus' example, so that you can better deal with the crosses in your own life?

6. In Romans 6, Saint Paul says that we die to our fallen, sinful nature and rise to new life in Christ. Romans 6:11 says: "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." How are we to continue to bury sin in our lives? Make a specific resolution to die to sin in your life (for example, go to Confession, pray for God's grace in a certain area of sin, ask someone to hold you accountable for a specific sin, make an examination of conscience, etc.)

Reflections from the Fathers

Saint Hippolytus

All the works of our God and Savior are good—all of them that eye sees and mind perceives, all that reason interprets and hand touches, all that intellect comprehends and human nature understands. For what richer beauty can there be than that of the vast expanse of the sky? And what is fairer than the earth in bloom? And what more comforting than the seasonal winds? And what work more magnificent than the mosaic of the stars? And what brighter vision than the light of day? And what creature more excellent than man? Very good, indeed, are all the works of our God and Savior.

And what gift is more essential to life than water? For with water, all things are washed and nourished; all things are cleansed and bedewed. Water brings fruit to the earth. Water quickens the growing vine; it ripens the grape

“Reflections from the Fathers: Saint Hippolytus” is an adaptation of selections from “The Discourse on the Holy Theophany,” in “The Extant Works and Fragments of Hippolytus: Part II, Dogmatical and Historical,” *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5; available from www.ccel.org. Adapted from the 1888 edition, Christian Literature Publishing.

cluster, softens the olive, and sweetens the palm-date. Water reddens the rose and decks the violet; it makes the lily bloom with its brilliant cups. Without the element of water, the present order of things cannot subsist.

This is not the only thing that proves the dignity of water. There is also that which is most honorable of all—the fact that Christ, the Maker of all, came down as the rain (Hos. 6:3), was known as a spring (Jn. 4:14), diffused Himself as a river (Jn. 7:38), and was baptized in the Jordan (Mt. 3:13). For you have heard how Jesus came to John and was baptized by him in the Jordan. Is it not strange, and wonderful beyond compare, that the boundless River (cf. Ps. 46:4), Jesus, who makes glad the city of God, should have been dipped in a little water? The illimitable Spring that bears life to all men, and has no end, was covered by poor and temporary waters! He who is present everywhere and absent nowhere—who is incomprehensible to angels and invisible to men—comes to the baptism of His own free will. When you hear these things, beloved, take them not only as spoken literally, but also accept them figuratively. Even the water took note of the kindness of the Lord's condescension to man. For, "when the waters saw thee, they were afraid" (Ps. 77:16). The waters of the river nearly overflowed their banks. Hence the prophet, having this in his view many generations ago, put the question, "What ails you, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back?" (Ps. 114:5). And the water said in reply, "We have seen the Creator of all things in the 'form of a servant' (cf. Phil 2:7), and being ignorant of the meaning of this mystery, we trembled with fear."

But we who know the meaning adore His mercy because He came to save and not to judge the world. John, the forerunner of the Lord, who did not know of this mystery beforehand, on learning that Jesus is truly Lord, cried out to those who came to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (Mt. 3:7). John told them, “I am not the Christ” (Jn. 1:20). “I am the servant, and not the lord; I am the subject, and not the king; I am the sheep, and not the shepherd; I am a man, and not God. By my birth I loosed the barrenness of my mother. I am a mere man; I did not come down from above. I bound the tongue of my father (cf. Lk. 1:20); I did not unfold divine grace. I am worthless, and the least; but ‘among you stands one whom you do not know, even he who comes after me’ (Jn. 1:27)—after me, indeed, in time, but before me by reason of the inaccessible and unutterable light of divinity. ‘[H]e who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire’ (Mt. 3:11). I am subject to authority, but He has authority in Himself. I am bound by sins, but He is the Remover of sins. I apply the law, but He brings grace to light. I teach as a slave, but He judges as the Master. I have the earth as my dwelling, but He possesses heaven. I baptize with the baptism of repentance, but He confers the gift of adoption: ‘He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.’ So why do you give attention to me? I am not the Christ.”

As John says these things to the multitude, and as the people watch, hoping to see some strange spectacle, behold,

the Lord appears—plain, solitary, and without escort. And not only did Jesus, as Lord without royal retinue, approach John, but like a mere man and one involved in sin, He bent His head to be baptized by the prophet. Upon seeing Jesus humble Himself so greatly, John was struck with astonishment at His action and tried to prevent Him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Mt. 3:14). “What are you doing, Lord? I have preached one thing (regarding You), and You perform another; the devil has heard one thing, and now perceives another. Baptize me with the fire of Your divinity; why do You wait upon water? Enlighten me with the Spirit; why do You submit to me, a creature? Baptize me, the Baptist, that Your preeminence may be known. I, Lord, baptize with the baptism of repentance, and I cannot baptize those who come to me unless they first confess fully their sins. How could it be, then, that I would baptize You? What do You have to confess? You are the Remover of sins; will You then be baptized with the baptism of repentance? Even if I should venture to baptize You, the Jordan River dares not come near You. ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’”

And what does the Lord say to John? “‘Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness’ (Mt. 3:15). ‘Let it be so now,’ John; you are not wiser than I. You see as man; I foreknow as God. It is fitting for Me to do this first, and thus to teach. I engage in nothing unbecoming, for I am invested with honor. Do you marvel, John, that I have not come displaying my dignity? The purple robe of kings does not suit one in private station. Military splendor suits a king; am I coming to a

prince, or to a friend? 'Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' I am the Fulfiller of the Law; I seek to fulfill it in its entirety, that after Me, Paul may exclaim, 'For Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified' (Rom. 10:4). Baptize Me, John, in order that no one may despise baptism. I am baptized by you, the servant, so that no one among kings or dignitaries may scorn to be baptized by the hand of a poor priest. Let Me go down into the Jordan, so that they may hear My Father's testimony and recognize the power of the Son. 'Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.'"

And at length, John bows to His will. "And when Jesus was baptized, he went immediately up from the water, and behold the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt. 3:16–17).

Do you see, beloved, how many and how great the blessings we would have lost, if the Lord had yielded to the exhortation of John and declined baptism? For before this, the heavens were shut and inaccessible to us. Before this baptism, we would have had to descend to the lower regions, instead of ascending to the heavenly. But not only was the Lord baptized; He also renewed the "old man," giving to him again the status of adoption. For straightaway, "the heavens were opened." A reconciliation of the visible with the invisible took place, the angels were filled with joy, the diseases of earth were healed, secret things were made known, those at enmity were restored to amity. For you have heard the word of the Evangelist

Matthew, who tells us that “the heavens were opened” in three wondrous ways. When Christ the Bridegroom was baptized, the bridal chamber of heaven opened its brilliant gates. The heavens opened in like manner when the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove. Finally, the Father’s voice spread everywhere, calling for the gates of heaven to be lifted up (cf. Ps. 24:7). “[A]nd lo, a voice from heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

The beloved generates love, and the light immaterial begets the light inaccessible. “This is my beloved Son.” While on earth He is yet united to the Father’s bosom, the Son was manifested in visible form, although not appearing in His fullness. He was far more than He appeared to the onlookers at the Jordan—for in appearance John, the baptizer, seems to be superior to the One baptized. For this reason, the Father sent the Holy Spirit down from heaven upon Jesus. Just as at the time of Noah the love of God toward man was signified by the dove, so also now the Spirit, descending in the form of a dove, bearing as it were the fruit of the olive branch, rested on Jesus to give testimony concerning Him. This was so that the faithfulness of the Father’s voice might be made known, and so that the prophecy of a long time past might be ratified: “The voice of the LORD is upon the waters; the glory of God thunders, the LORD, upon many waters” (Ps. 29:3). And the voice of the Lord speaks from the heavens, over the waters of the Jordan: “‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’ This is He who is called the son of Joseph, and who, according to the divine essence, is My Only-begotten. This is my beloved Son—He who is hungry and yet

feeds the multitudes, who is weary and yet gives rest to the weary, who has nowhere to lay His head (Lk. 9:5) and yet carries all things in His hand, who suffers and yet heals sufferings, who is smitten and yet confers liberty on the world (Heb. 1:3), who is pierced in the side (Mt. 26:67) and yet repairs the side of Adam.”

I ask you to give me now your full attention, for I wish to return to the fountain of life and to consider this fountain, which gushes with healing. The Father of Immortality sent the Immortal Son and Word into the world, in order to wash man with water and the Spirit. He, giving us a new birth to incorruption of soul and body, breathed into us the breath (spirit) of life, and endowed us with incorruptibility. If, therefore, man has acquired an imperishable inheritance by water and the Holy Spirit, he will also be found co-heir with Christ (Rom. 8:17) after the resurrection from the dead.

Therefore I preach: Come, peoples of all nations, to the immortality of Baptism. I bring good tidings of life to you who linger in the darkness of ignorance. Come into liberty from slavery, into a kingdom from tyranny, into incorruption from corruption. And how, you ask, shall we come? How? By water and the Holy Spirit. This is the water joined with the Spirit, by which paradise is watered, by which the earth is enriched, by which plants grow, by which animals multiply, and—to sum up the whole in a single phrase—by which we are born again and endowed with life. In this manner, Christ was also baptized, and the Spirit descended in the form of a dove.

This is the same Spirit that at the beginning “was moving over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:2), by

whom the world moves, through whom creation exists, and by whom all things have life. This is the Spirit who also worked mightily in the prophets (Acts 28:25) and descended upon Christ (Mt. 3:16). This is the Spirit who was given to the apostles in the form of fiery tongues (Acts 2:3). This is the Spirit whom David sought when he said, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (Ps. 51:10). Of this Spirit, Gabriel also spoke to the Virgin: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Lk. 1:35). By this Spirit, Peter spoke that blessed word: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt. 16:16). By this Spirit, the rock of the Church was established (Mt. 16:18). This is the Spirit, the Comforter, who is sent upon Jesus (Jn. 16:26), that He might show Him to be the Son of God.

Come, then, and be born again into the adoption of God. No longer practice adultery, do not commit murder, and serve no idols. Do not be mastered by pleasure, do not allow pride to rule you, cleanse yourself of the filthiness of impurity, and put off the burden of sin. Cast off the armor of the devil and put on the breastplate of faith. As Isaiah says, "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land" (Is. 1:16–19). Do you see, beloved, how the prophet spoke

of the purifying power of Baptism? For he who comes in faith to the water of regeneration and renounces the devil, joining himself to Christ; he who denies the enemy and makes the confession that Christ is God; he who puts off slavery and puts on the adoption—this is he who comes up from baptism brilliant as the sun, flashing forth the beams of righteousness, and, most importantly, returns a son of God and co-heir with Christ.

To God be the glory and the power, together with His most holy, good, and life-giving Spirit, now and forever, to all the ends of the ages. Amen.