

VI Sunday after Pentecost - Baptism

In the name of the Father ...

In the epistle for today's Mass, St Paul writes of Baptism. Like Confirmation, we receive Baptism but once and then give it little further consideration. By contrast we celebrate birthdays every year.

Without the aid of revelation, by nature man is constituted to come to a knowledge of God. Endowed with intellect and will, man's highest, most defining natural instinct - distinguishing him from brute animals which live only according to sense appetites - is to seek the truth. Here is where man's natural happiness lies, in contemplation of the God of creation whose existence is testified to by that creation although that creation cannot reveal him as he is in himself so that man's happiness remains imperfect. Nothing need be added to human nature to attain this end: man naturally is proportionate to it.

God, however, in his gratuity, has established an order in which man is made proportionate to attaining the perfect fulfilment of his highest desire, the face-to-face vision of God, the beatific vision, eternal life. This is the order of grace, entered by Baptism, a rebirth. Our Lord told Nicodemus: *[U]nless a man is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*” Nicodemus said to him, *“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?”* Jesus answered, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”*¹

Our Lord is clear: without that rebirth, a man may neither see nor even enter. Whatever desire a man may have - elicited on account of that natural desire to seek the truth, the desire to understand, to know the ultimate explanation for all things, the very first cause - despite whatever elicited inefficacious desire, man in his natural state is neither capable of attaining, nor even ordered to, the face-to-face vision of the God of revelation. It is only by God's gratuity, by the sacrament of Baptism, by a rebirth bestowing an elevated nature, that we enter that order and become proportionate to attaining that end.

God, then, has constituted man in his own image and likeness, i.e., a contemplative, both in the natural order - prompted by wonder to know indirectly and love the author of creation - as also in the supernatural order, ordered to and capable of attaining the direct vision of the God of revelation as described by Our Lord: *[T]his is eternal life, that they know you the one true God,*

¹ [Jn 3:3-5](#)

*and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*² On account of our Baptism, we participate in that life even now - even if as yet in a veiled way - for the two principal articles of the Creed relate to the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation – *the one true God and Jesus Christ* - so that beyond the natural order there is no true contemplative life aside from the Creed.

Someone constituted in a state of grace can leave the supernatural order only by mortal sin. Moreover, such a sin also would be contrary to nature, for grace works with nature, perfecting it. Thus, those once constituted in the supernatural order can never return to a purely natural order: the end of a purely natural happiness – the indirect contemplation of God through his creation – no longer is attainable. Rather, on account of mortal sin they become like the psalmist who – in the Introit for today’s Mass - complains to God: *if you be silent to me, I will become like those who go down to the pit.*³

Adam and Eve committed such a sin. On account of their Fall in Eden, they lost the state of grace in which God had constituted them and simultaneously damaged the human nature which they passed on to all their progeny by generation, propagated from a common but compromised origin.

And unless the guilt of Original Sin be removed,⁴ we are excluded from eternal life. Baptism therefore has the additional dimension of washing away – removing – the guilt of Original Sin to restore us to friendship with God, to restore us to that supernatural order which terminates in the direct vision of God. Thus, St Paul writes in today’s epistle of our being buried with Christ and rising to new life.

St Paul writes further, however, of an enduring need, that... *the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.*⁵ Baptism washes away the guilt of Original Sin and infuses the life of grace. However, the disorder which results from Original Sin – described by St John as... *the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life,*⁶ and manifested in the capital vices of vainglory, sloth, envy, anger, avarice, lust and gluttony – this disorder remains. And this disorder must be rooted out, enjoining on us a life of mortification. For after exhorting us to be dead to sin and alive to God, St Paul writes: *Let not sin therefore*

² [Jn 17:3](#)

³ [Ps 27\[8\]:1](#)

⁴ [ST IIIa 69, 7, c](#)

⁵ [Rom 6:6](#)

⁶ [1 Jn 2:16](#)

*reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life.*⁷ To the degree that we are dead to sin, we live for God. To the degree that we fail to root out disorder, we impair our relationship with God, perhaps even to the point of destruction.

It is an unfortunate fact that most men live by sense appetites, like brute animals: they pursue sense pleasures to the detriment if not exclusion of those higher goods where man's true happiness lies. Indeed, in denial of Original Sin exacerbated by actual sin, they *obey their passions* and *yield their members to sin*, give free reign to the disorder in them and call themselves free, whereas they are enslaved to sin and will become like those who go down into the pit.

Quite naturally we celebrate birthdays, the day when a child comes forth from its mother's womb into the light of day. As Our Lord observes: *when a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her hour has come; but when she is delivered of the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world.*⁸ And yet with only three exceptions – Our Lord, His Immaculate Mother, and St John the Baptist whose cleansing from Original Sin while still in the womb we commemorated recently on the feast of the Visitation – the Church does not celebrate birthdays - a reminder of the reality of Original Sin and damaged human nature.

Rather the Church celebrates the day when her children were freed definitively from sin and entered eternal life, the face-to-face contemplation of God, and this not as something which happened in a vacuum but as the culmination of a life lived now even if in a veiled way. For us sojourners still looking forward in *hope* to that day, we can commemorate our day of Baptism and thank God with St Paul that we can *consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus Our Lord.*⁹

In the name of the Father ...

⁷ [Rom 6:12-13](#)

⁸ [Jn 16:21](#)

⁹ [Rom 6:11](#)