

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE**  
**APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES**  
**FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD**  
**BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION**  
**WASHINGTON, DC, JANUARY 10, 2021**

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of Pope Francis to this country, I greet you in his name, assuring all gathered here in this basilica, along with those joining through radio, television, and live streaming, of the spiritual closeness and paternal affection of the Holy Father at the dawn of this new year and at the conclusion of the Christmas season.

Today we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord, recalling when Jesus, at the beginning of his public ministry, came to John the Baptist and asked to be baptized. This feast only entered the Roman calendar quite recently in 1955, but it is an ancient feast because the baptism of Jesus was the original theme of the Epiphany, while the Epiphany scene with the Magi was a more ancient celebration than even Christmas.

This may upset our settled way of thinking. Everyone thinks of Christmas as the birth of our Lord. Some are fairly well-acquainted with the Epiphany, when the three Kings arrived, but very few can be bothered with the baptism of Jesus by John.

The word *epiphany* means a sudden appearance. At the Christmas liturgies, we heard from the letter to Titus: *"The grace of God has appeared"*. (Titus 2:11) In the original observance of the Epiphany, early Christians celebrated God made man, His manifestation in our midst under several aspects. Over and above recalling God made man at Bethlehem, they celebrated God's manifestation to all the peoples of the world represented by the kings from afar. Furthermore, they celebrated the divine manifestation of the voice from heaven after His baptism, announcing *"This is my Son, the Beloved, my favor rests on him."*

All these aspects of the divine appearance in our world were packed into the celebration of the original, single feast called the Epiphany. Eventually, these were made into separate celebrations: Christmas recalling the birth; Epiphany recalling the homage paid by kings; and today's feast celebrating the Baptism of the Lord. They belong to the Christmas season, which concludes today.

Just as Christmas is ending, we hear of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. After His baptism, Jesus begins, as our reading from Acts relates, by healing the sick and casting out demons. He comes to defeat the enemy and to establish His Kingdom. He defeats Him not by power but by humility. God's glory is revealed to us in the weakness of a child; in submission to another in the River Jordan; in the scandal of the Cross; in the descent among the dead. The Heavenly Father rewards His Beloved Son. He raises Him to glory, giving Him a place at His right hand, where He shall reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

But will we reign with Him? Jesus went forth from the Father's side on His mission. We have been baptized and emerged from the baptismal font as a new creation, anointed as priest, prophet and king. But how do we live our faith? Do we live it with the seriousness that our mission demands? Often, we are caught up in ourselves, not only as individuals, but even as a Church. Pope Francis laments a "self-referential" Church, desiring a missionary Church, a Church that goes forth with the compassion of the Good Samaritan.

There is a famous myth about a handsome young man named Narcissus. He was out hunting, but grew tired and overheated from his labors, so he paused near an alluring pool of water to quench his thirst. As he drank from the water, he saw his own reflection and became enraptured with the reflection that peered back at him. Spellbound, he fell in love with himself, mistaking a shadow for a real body. Time and again, he tried to embrace the vision he beheld; time and again he failed. He refused to give up and kept grasping after the image. Little by little, he was completely worn down by his labors. Exhausted he died by that pool of water.

Narcissus had to go beyond himself to truly love and to truly live – to truly be himself. He could gaze at himself, but he could never truly lay hold of himself. He was wasting away but could not tear himself from the spot. He watched himself, instead of living. He was searching for his essence but finding nothing but an image. To possess himself, he had to go forth from himself. Narcissus thought he could find happiness and the secret of the world in himself, and that is why he failed to find himself.

As a result of the effects of original sin, we are often caught up in self-worship. We cannot tear ourselves away from our “beautiful” image. We too are paralyzed by our pride, unable to go beyond ourselves – unlike the One who is truly beautiful – the Beloved Son of the Father, the blessed fruit of Mary’s womb.

Unlike Narcissus, in the mystery of the Incarnation and in His Baptism, the Divine went forth to be united with humanity. God’s love-in-the-flesh begins His mission of Redemption. The Eternal Word goes forth from the Father; he goes forth from Mary’s womb and the home at Nazareth to be baptized by John – to identify with our sinful condition to redeem and heal.

For the Christian, to accept the invitation to be baptized is to go to the place of Jesus’ baptism; to go where He identifies Himself with us and to receive our identification with Him. To go to those waters means to descend into them and to “drown” our pride. Then, we can truly ascend from our baseness and rise with Him.

Saint Leo the Great specifically spoke of Jesus’ descent into the waters as a foreshadowing of His descent among the dead, where He goes forth to do combat with “the strong man”, who is the devil. Jesus binds “the strong man” who holds men and women captive and He frees them. Throughout history, humanity has been powerless to defeat the strong man, but now through the sending of the Beloved Son into the world, through the sending of the One who is not only true God but also true man, the strong man is overcome. We are no longer bound. We are free – able to live in the freedom of the sons and daughters of God.

This Feast of the Baptism of the Lord reveals to us, not only what Jesus does and will do, but who He is. He is the Beloved Son of the Father. He is true God and true man. He is the Redeemer. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He reveals Himself as one of us. He is our brother, and we all have the same heavenly Father.

Let us ask the Lord to help us to live the grace of our baptism, so that through our union with Him, we may truly live as “beloved” sons and daughters in the one family of the Eternal God.