

Pope Benedict's Homily on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

"Upon your Children Too the Heavens have Opened,"

VATICAN CITY, January 13, 2013 (Zenit.org) - Here is the translation of Pope Benedict XVI's Homily during the Mass celebrating the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord where he baptized 20 babies.

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Dear brothers and sisters!

The joy that flowed from the celebration of Christmas finds its fulfillment today in the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. For us who are gathered together here there is a further reason for this joy. In the sacrament of Baptism that I will soon administer to these newborns there is in fact manifested the living and active presence of the Holy Spirit who, enriching the Church with new children, vivifies her and makes her grow and we cannot help but rejoice over this. I would like to address a special greeting to you, dear parents, godfathers and godmothers, who are witnessing to your faith today, asking for Baptism for these children, so that they might be begotten in the new life in Christ and become a part of the community of believers.

The Gospel account of the baptism of Jesus that we heard today in the reading from St. Luke, displays the path of abasement and humility that the Son of God freely chose in order to follow the Father's plan, to be obedient to his will of love for man in all things, to the point of the sacrifice on the cross. Now an adult, Jesus initiates his public ministry, traveling to the Jordan River to receive a baptism of repentance and conversion from John. There occurs here something that might seem paradoxical in our eyes. Does Jesus need to repent and convert? Certainly not. And yet he who is without sin places himself among sinners to be baptized, to perform this gesture of repentance; the Holy One of God joins with those who recognize their need of forgiveness and ask God for the gift of conversion, that is, the grace to return to him with all their heart, to be completely his. Jesus wishes to place himself among sinners, making himself solidary with them, expressing God's nearness. Jesus shows himself to be solidary with us, with our effort to convert, to leave our egoism behind, to turn from our sins, to tell us that if we accept him in our lives he is able to lift us back up and lead us to the heights of God the Father. And this solidarity of Jesus is not, so to say, a simple exercise of the mind and will. Jesus has truly immersed himself in our human condition, he lived it through and through, except for sin, and is able to understand weakness and frailty. For this reason he has compassion, chooses to "suffer with" men, to make himself a penitent with us. The work of God that Jesus wishes to accomplish is this: the divine mission heal those who are wounded and to care for the sick, to take the sin of the world upon himself.

What happens in the moment that Jesus has himself baptized by John? With this act of humble love on the part of the Son of God the heavens open and the Holy Spirit is visibly manifest as a dove, while a voice from on high expresses the Father's pleasure, who points to his only begotten Son, the Beloved. This is an authentic manifestation of the Most Holy Trinity, which witnesses to Jesus' divinity, his being the promised Messiah, he whom God sent to free his people so that they might be saved (cf. Isaiah 40:2). In this way the prophecy of Isaiah that we heard in the first reading is realized: the Lord God comes with power to destroy the works of sin and his arm exercises dominion to disarm the Evil One; but let us remember that this arm is the arm stretched out upon the cross and that Jesus' power is the power of him who suffers for us: this is the power of God, different from the power of the world; in this way God comes to destroy sin. Jesus truly acts as the Good Shepherd who feeds the flock and gathers it together that it not be scattered (cf. Isaiah 40:10-11), and he offers his life itself so that it have life. It is through Jesus' redemptive death that man is freed from the reign of sin and is reconciled with the Father; it is through his resurrection that man is saved from eternal death and is made victorious over the Evil One.

Dear brothers and sisters, what occurs in the Baptism that in a few moments I will administer to your children? It is this: they will be forever united in a profound way with Jesus, in the mystery of this power of his, that is in the mystery of his death, which is the font of life, to participate in his resurrection, to be reborn in a new life. This is the wonder that today is repeated also for your children: receiving Baptism they are reborn as children of God, participants in the filial relation of Jesus with the Father, able to turn toward God calling him "Abbà, Father" with complete confidence. Upon your children too the heavens have opened, and God says: these are my children, children in whom I am pleased. Inserted in this relation and liberated from original sin, they become members of the one body that is the Church and are now able to live in the fullness of their vocation to sanctity so as to have the possibility of eternal life, obtained for us by Jesus' resurrection.

Dear parents, in asking for Baptism for your children you manifest and witness to your faith, the joy of being Christians and of belonging to the Church. It is the joy that flows from the awareness of having received a great gift from God, precisely the faith, a gift that none of us was able to merit, but that was given to us gratuitously and to which we responded with our "yes." It is the joy of recognizing ourselves as children of God, to find ourselves entrusted into his hands, to feel ourselves welcomed in the embrace of love, in the same way that a mother holds and embraces her child. This joy, which orients the journey of every Christian, is based on a personal relationship with Jesus, a relationship that orients the whole of human existence. He is in fact the meaning of our lives, he upon whom it is good to fix our gaze, to be enlightened by his truth and be able to live his fullness. The journey of faith that today begins for these children is thus founded on a certainty, the experience that there is nothing greater than knowing Christ and communicating friendship with him to others; only in this friendship is there really disclosed the extraordinary possibilities of the human condition and can we experience that which is beautiful and that which frees (cf. Homily for the beginning of the pontificate, April 24, 2005). Those who have had this experience are not willing to give up their faith for anything in the world.

You, dear godfathers and godmothers, have the important task of supporting and helping the parents in the work of education, assisting them in the transmission of the truths of the faith and in witnessing to the values of the Gospel, in making these children grow in an ever deeper friendship with the Lord. Always know how to give them your good example through the exercise of the Christian virtues. It is not easy to manifest openly and without compromises what we believe, especially in the context in which we live, faced with a society that often considers those who live their faith in Jesus unfashionable and out of date. On account of the wave of this mentality, there may also be among Christians the danger of understanding this relationship with Jesus as limiting, as something that is harmful to one's self-realization; "God is seen as the limit on our freedom, a limit that must be eliminated so that man might be completely himself" ("Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives," 101 [Italian edition]). But this is not so! It is clear that such a vision does not understand anything of man's relationship with God because precisely as one progresses in the journey of faith, we grasp how Jesus exercises the liberating love of God upon us, which draws us out of our egoism, from our being closed in on ourselves, to lead us to a full life in communion with God and others. "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 John 4: 16). These words from the First Letter of John express with remarkable clarity the heart of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny" ("Deus caritas est," 1).

The water with which these children will be signed in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, will immerse them in that "font" of life that is God himself and makes them his true children. And the seed of the theological virtues, infused by God, faith, hope, and charity, a seed that today is placed in their hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit, must always be cared for by the Word of God and the Sacraments, so that these Christian virtues might grow and reach maturity to make each of them a true witness to the Lord. As we invoke the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon these little ones, we entrust them to the protection of the Holy Virgin; may she guard them always with her maternal presence and accompany them in every moment of their life. Amen.

[Translation by Joseph Trabbic]