

Catholic

LIGUORI
PUBLICATIONS
ONE LIGUORI DRIVE
LIGUORI, MO
63057-9999

800-325-9521

C0607A

Liguori Publications

UPDATE

www.Liguori.org

BAPTISM



CNS FILE PHOTO/MIKE CRUPI, CATHOLIC COURIER

Our Lifelong Call

By Nicholas Lohkamp, OFM

Do you know the date of your baptism? It was the most important day of your life! In this *Update*, we'll take a closer look at the mystery of our baptismal calling. We'll look first at being loved into existence (creation). Then we'll explore what it means to be loved into being-in-Christ (through water and the Spirit). Finally, we'll consider in greater detail how we are called through our baptism to live the life God wants for us.

A mystery of love

Over my long life, little by little, by grace and experience, through teaching and study, I have come to believe in the depth and wonder of the mystery of my baptismal calling. It is a mystery that defines me, marks me, purges me, penetrates me, and transforms me to the depth of my being. My baptism shapes who I am and the way I try to live. For me, and for everyone, it all starts with God.

Through faith, I know I am loved by God. Everything flows from this. I don't understand it, and I surely don't deserve it! But that's why I am a Catholic: to become more and more caught up in the love of God, the Holy Trinity.

Did you ever get on your knees before a little child? God—Father, Son, and Spirit—abides in and continually loves each little child. How precious and sacred that child! Through baptism, I, too, have become a child of God.

Like everyone else, I take God's love for granted. We forget the gentle and creative power of the Father's love. We presume Jesus will continue to be merciful and compassionate to us. Sadly, we easily take for granted the abiding presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Yet we are loved by God, in every moment, in every way! We don't earn the love of God. Through grace, it is freely given! Everything good in our lives, in the world, is a gift of God. Without God's love, we are nothing, and I am nothing. We can do nothing good. We cannot live, we cannot love.

That's why gratitude is at the heart of being a Catholic. Once we realize how little we can be without God, we can only be thankful.

Baptism means I am *Christened*. I am plunged into the mystery of Jesus. I can't fully imagine what that means. Paul puts it clearly: "I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

Christening is not just some nice social event. It is God's work. It defines who I am: a Christian. Christening describes how I live: following Jesus. Christening challenges me to be true to my calling. It challenges me to follow Jesus daily with the help of the Spirit, to live every day to the glory of the Father, to live every day as a member of the Church, thus, to be a Catholic.

Jesus: fully human, fully divine

Our baptism puts us in touch with Jesus, the Word made flesh, the incarnate expression of God's love. The Father so loved the world that he gave us his Son that we might have life through him.

Jesus became human, and he is our God. Jesus is, precisely as human, the way, the truth, the life. Jesus is my way to live and find God. Jesus is the truth of who I am, and who I am called to become. Jesus is my very life. He shows me how to live as a son of God. Put simply, Jesus is my all.

I paid little attention to the humanness of Jesus before the Second Vatican Council. I was striving to lead a "spiritual" life. I wanted to cultivate and save my "soul" by performing

"spiritual exercises." To be human was a bother; it always got in the way. I thought to be pleasing to God I had to renounce my humanness.

Now I know how false that is. Jesus is fully human. My humanness is modeled on his. I was created "in him...through him, and for him" (Colossians 1:16). When I fail to appreciate my humanness, I fail to grow and become more human. I fail to follow Jesus. I fail in my ability to love as he does. No wonder I can't find my way to the Father! In denying my humanness, I hinder my spiritual growth as a Catholic.

To be a Catholic is to seek to become fully human. As St. Irenaeus said in the early Church, "The glory of God is the human person fully alive." It is Jesus, as human, who helps me become ever more human, and therein to discover the mystery of my calling to share divine life.

Jesus, as human, is the primary sacrament. In becoming human, Jesus is God-with-us. Jesus as human, as son of Mary, reveals outwardly the inward mystery: he is also Son of God. His humanness is the outward sign of inward grace: his divinity. That is the nature of a sacrament. It is an outward (creaturely, human) sign of inward grace.

The very life of the Church, the mystical body of Christ, shares in this sacramental mystery. The Church is the outward sign of Jesus dwelling in our hearts and midst, enlivening us and drawing us into ever greater unity as people of God.

A sacramental life

The Church, the body of Christ, bears new children of God through water and the Spirit. This sign of baptism has been a key part of the Church from the beginning. Baptized and confirmed in the Spirit, I am led to the altar to celebrate the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Thus, to be a Catholic is to be eucharistic in who I am and in the way I live. Baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist initiate me ever more deeply into this mystery of sharing in the life and mission of Jesus.

In baptism, I became holy, but not completely so. I am still a sinner. I am gradually healed and reconciled with God and God's people. I grow in holiness through the sacrament of reconciliation. I am comforted and strengthened in sickness and old age through the sacrament of anointing. Through marriage, the Church lives as a sign of unity that bears life. Through ordination, the Church calls forth deacons, priests, and bishops to help order our life and worship. To be Catholic means that life, in its entirety, is sacramental.

Our sacramental life includes not only the Church and the seven sacraments, but all the sacramentals, such as crucifixes, statues, sign of the cross, candles, and lots of other Catholic practices. Each of them helps us to make the connection between our incarnate lives and the life of God.

In a wider sense, I am beginning to see every creature in the universe as a "sacrament," as a little brother and sister revealing to me in wondrous ways something of the mystery of God, something of the glory, beauty, and power of God.

Living our baptism

In a special way, to be Catholic is to be eucharistic. The Eucharist is the very heart and center of Catholic life and activity. In the Eucharist, the grace of my baptismal calling deepens and grows. In the Eucharist, we hear the Good News of God's saving love, we try to take it to heart, and we seek to live it out.

I then join—as one of God's people—with Jesus and all others to share in the death and resurrection of Jesus; I join with all people and all of creation to offer the eucharistic sacrifice. In union with Jesus, the whole Church, the whole world, I want to say yes to the Father. I want to deliver my whole self, my whole life, and all my activity into the hands of the Father. I dare to believe that, in this way, I will share more fully the resurrection of Jesus. Thus, raised to new life, I come to new and holy communion.

Flowing from the Eucharist, our mission is clear and urgent: to live the gospel in daily life, to leaven our world with loving and just deeds, to become instruments of peace in our world of conflict and division. My calling, my mission, is to promote unity, to become an instrument of peace.

Jesus gave us the command to love everyone, without exception, even our enemies. He called us to love one another as he loves us. Love is the only power that binds people together in unity. The night before he died, Jesus prayed “that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us” (John 17:21).

It is love, only love, that binds us together as one. Of course, this love is not just a make-believe word. This love treats every person with respect and condemns all racism and inequality. This love treats every person in a pure and holy manner and condemns all sexual abuse. This love demands justice for everyone and condemns all injustice and oppression. This love is expressed in deed and in truth and condemns all deceit and dishonesty. This is the love of Jesus. This is our baptismal and eucharistic mission.

Our unity, which we pray for and express at each Eucharist as God's people, is the will of God. Everything in our moral and spiritual life is measured by this. All grace moves us to greater unity; all sin tears us apart and divides us.

Relationships of love

Person, relationships, unity: these are my life. And this is how I am called to live. I am to become a unique and mature person. I learn to relate to other persons in a real, loving, constructive way. Thus, I am to build community. In brief, this is how I am to live as a Catholic. This is the way I grow in my moral, spiritual life.

This calling can, in one sense, be thought of as three callings:

Call to freedom. As Catholics, we are children of God. We are initiated into the Passover mystery of Jesus. We pass over from darkness into the light, from death to life, from slavery to freedom.

In Jesus, we are called to freedom. St. Paul writes: “For you were called for freedom.... But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; rather, serve one another through love. For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Galatians 5:13–14).

It is not easy to grow in freedom, especially in these United States. Here, freedom is often viewed as license to do whatever we feel like. As a Catholic, I am called to become free so I can love, so I can give myself in loving service to others, so I can love unselfishly.

I am not “born free”; I am born with the capacity to *become* free. It takes grace and a lot of hard work to become free, to become a mature person, so that I can love as Jesus does.





Call to conversion. If I am to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, if I am to live out my baptismal calling, I must continually change for the better. I must grow. I must daily change my mind and heart and believe the Good News (see Mark 1:15). I must continually seek

to change my evil ways; I must change my good ways to better ways. I must live a life of gospel penance (conversion).

Daily conversion means, first of all, believing more and more in God's love, trusting in this love, living in this love. I am not there yet. I'm on the way. Daily I need to grow.

In baptism, I am washed clean. But I live in a world marked by evil; I experience all sorts of inclinations to evil; I do evil; I commit sin. So I must struggle to follow Jesus. I need the grace of the Spirit to overcome evil and make good choices.

I am called to enter daily into the dying of Jesus so as to share ever more in his risen life. Little by little, I become holy, more and more alive in Jesus. I grow in responding to the grace of the Holy Spirit. I grow in making good choices, seeking the Father's will in my daily life.

My conversion takes on flesh and blood in my daily life, in my daily choices. When I am thoughtful and considerate to my brother or sister, I am responding to God's love. When I visit someone in the hospital, I am responding to God's love. When I pay my bills or respect my neighbor, I am responding to God's love. Jesus put it simply: "What you do to one another, you do to me" (see Matthew 25:31-46).

Call to suffer. There is suffering in my life, in everyone's life. Paul says we are "always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being given up to death for the sake of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh" (2 Corinthians 4:10-11).

As a Catholic, I must come to grips with the mystery of suffering. Pain, sickness, suffering, and death are in my life—the result of sin and the limitations of creaturely existence.

I am confused and uncertain as to the meaning of suffering or how I can deal with it. But, as a Catholic, I believe I can deal with the mystery of suffering in union with Jesus. As Paul says, "For to you has been granted, for the sake of Christ, not only to believe in him but also to suffer for him" (Philippians 1:29).

I was baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus. This mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus is caught up in the sacrifice of the Mass. I come to believe that, in Jesus, my sufferings, the sufferings of all people, the sufferings of all creation are caught up in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In Jesus, my sufferings become redemptive. In union with Jesus, my sufferings have a meaning and contribute

to the mission of Jesus: the salvation of the world, the coming of God's kingdom.

A new vision

As a person who was an adult through Vatican II, my life is split in two! In my first half of life, I was a person of "law and order." I tried to be good; I tried to obey the law. I was oblivious of my baptism and its consequences. To be a Catholic meant Mass, confession, and no meat on Fridays and during Lent. I didn't really know who I was.

In the second half of my life, I have tried to take to heart the message and vision of Vatican II. Our understanding of morality and Christian living must be renewed. This demands a return to Scripture. There we will discover the nobility of our baptismal vocation in Christ and our obligation to live in love for the life of the world (see *Decree on the Education of Priests*, 16).

We as Catholics have a wholly renewed sense of who we are as people and how we should live as Catholics. It's a breath of fresh air, but it's also quite a challenge!

Jesus is the heart of life. Jesus is at the heart of every person, every thing. Jesus is at the heart of every relationship, every experience of community. Jesus is at the heart of every event, every experience.

Only through the "eyes of faith," as St. Thomas Aquinas said, are we able to see this, to experience Jesus in every human experience. He is ever there loving and calling us into deeper union and greater love of neighbor. The way we choose to respond to the call of every situation is the way we respond to Jesus. Paul says we must "live in a manner worthy of the call you have received" (Ephesians 4:1). To live "in Christ Jesus" every day, through the grace of our baptism, is, in every way, to be a Catholic. ■

Nicholas Lohkamp, OFM, earned a doctorate in sacred theology from the Catholic University of America. Having taught theology at colleges and graduate schools, he completed his years of ministry as chaplain for the Poor Clare Sisters in Canton, Ohio.

UPDATE

Question Box

- 1) When was your baptism?
- 2) Why did St. Irenaeus say, "The glory of God is the human person fully alive"?
- 3) How are baptism and Eucharist connected?

EXTRA COPIES OF CATHOLIC UPDATE

1,000 or more: 19¢ ea. • 500-999: 23¢ ea.
400-499: 25¢ ea. • 300-399: 28¢ ea.
200-299: 33¢ ea. • 100-199: 39¢ ea.
10-99: 49¢ ea. • 1-9: 75¢ ea.

GET A 12-MONTH SUBSCRIPTION

Single: \$18.00 • 2-9: \$12.00 ea.
10-49: \$6.00 ea. • 50-99: \$5.40 ea.
100-199: \$4.20 ea. • 200-299: \$3.60 ea.
300-499: \$2.76 ea. • 500-999: \$2.40 ea.
1,000 or more: \$1.80 ea.

For bulk rates, all copies must be mailed to same address.

For more information, call 800-325-9521 or visit us at Liguori.org. Prices are subject to change.

Visit our Web site at
www.Liguori.org