

BAPTISM OF THE LORD. 2026

With the Baptism of the Lord Jesus Christ, a new thing begins in the world, the Christian Religion.

The Path to Salvation, to forgiveness of sins and to eternal Life, laid out by the Christian Religion is unique. Because Christianity, being deeply human, has quite a bit in common with all of the higher and nobler forms of paganism, particularly the paganism of ancient Greece and Rome, highly superficial observers imagine that Christianity is merely a new skin for the old pagan wine, but they would be absurdly mistaken. Moderately superficial observers, seeing how much continuity there is between Christianity and Judaism, imagine that together they form only one "Judaean-Christian" Religion in the world. But that also is wrong. Something altogether new began in the world with Jesus Christ.

Dealing as they do with human beings, all religions are going to have some common features. Sharing the same start of Salvation History as Christianity does, Judaism, in particular, is going to have a great deal in common with Christianity. Insofar as all religions serve a common human nature implanted in all of humanity by the Creator, it can be said that all religions come ultimately from God. Insofar as the same God who gave Israel the Prophets is also the God of Jesus Christ, Judaism and Christianity have a common origin and a quite strong family resemblance.

And yet the Christian Religion does have something altogether different from every other religion. The Christian religion has Jesus Christ. The Christian Religion is all about Jesus Christ.

All humanly decent forms of paganism encouraged people to do good deeds, as do Judaism and Christianity. Judaism urges believers to be obedient to the holy Law given by God, as does Christianity. Christianity, however, uniquely asserts that forgiveness of sins and eternal Life do not come fundamentally from good deeds and obedience to God's holy Law, but from Faith in the Person of Jesus Christ, the Beloved Son of Whom the Father says, "I am well Pleased"

Regarding the exact relationship between good works and Faith, there is a genuine difference of teaching among Christians. Yet, it seems clear to me, at least, that no sincere Catholic denies the absolute importance of Faith in the Person of Jesus Christ, and that no sincere Protestant denies the importance of doing works of charity and obeying God's commandments. Both parties agree that Christians must have Faith and ought to be doing good deeds. The exact relationship between Faith and good deeds is somewhat beside the point of this particular homily. The point of this homily is that Christianity agrees with all decent paganism that good deeds are important, and with Judaism that obedience to God's holy Law is important, but adds something entirely new, the Person of Jesus Christ. Salvation is through that one Person, the Eternal Son of God who truly assumed a human Nature, such that no good works have saving power apart from Faith in Him. For us Catholics, indeed, Faith in Jesus Christ infuses works of charity and religion with saving power; yet that saving power, we must know, comes not from the works themselves, but from Faith in Jesus Christ, sacrificed and risen for human salvation, Who Himself commands us to do good works ("whatsoever you do for the least of My brethren, that you do for Me") Christianity includes good works, but is really about Jesus Christ.

Christianity, like all religions, has words of prayer and ceremonies of worship. Dealing with human beings, it cannot be otherwise. We are creatures of words and ceremonies. The difference is that all Christianity's words of prayer and ceremonies of worship point us to the Person of Jesus Christ, the Lord of all in Whom the Father is well pleased.

Christianity, like all religions, has assemblies in which believers come together for common prayer. Nothing dealing with human beings can remain solitary, for Man is a social animal. The difference is that Christians assemble to be in the Presence of Jesus Christ, Who said, "Wherever two or three are gathered in My Name, there am I in their midst."

Christianity, like all religions, has certain officials and ministers. Dealing with human beings, it cannot be otherwise. Man is a political animal, whose activities require organization and leadership. What is different is that three essential grades of Christian Ministry, Servant (Deacon), Elder (Priest), and Overseer (Bishop), are all rooted in the commission and spiritual power that Jesus Christ personally gave to His chosen Apostles. To different degrees, each essential grade of Christian Ministry shares in the personal mission of Jesus Christ to proclaim Salvation and to make present His living and effective pledge of Salvation.

Christianity, like all religions, has certain doctrines that require some thought and assent of the mind. Dealing with human beings, it cannot be otherwise. Man is a thinking being. The difference is that all Christian doctrines, most clearly the essential Christian doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation of God, and Salvation, center on the Person of Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Eternal Trinity Who truly assumed a human Nature, and Who died and rose in human Nature in order to save all of human Nature from sin and from death.

Christianity, like all religions, has special days, set apart particularly for worship and either supplication or celebration. Dealing with human beings, it cannot be otherwise, man being a creature of time. Like Judaism, Christianity has one day in seven set aside for rest and holiness, but for us that day is about Jesus Christ. For us that day is Sunday, the first day of the week, known to us as the Lord's Day, because it was on the first Day of the week that Jesus Christ, rising from the dead, broke the power of death to hold humans forever and showed forth His Passion as a victory and not a defeat, the sacrifice that takes away the sins of the world. Like the weekly Sunday, the yearly round of feasts centered around Christmas and Easter, the Great Sunday, are all ultimately about Jesus Christ, the One who redeems time itself by entering into it.

Christianity, like all religions, has special places, spaces set aside for worship. Dealing with human beings, it cannot be otherwise, man being a creature of space. The Christian space of worship, however, centers on two points, the Sacred Table, the Altar at which the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ and His Risen Life are mystically but truly made present through the visible forms of Bread and Wine, and the Pulpit, the location from which the saving word of Jesus Christ is proclaimed. The Christian temple is a visible proclamation of the living Presence and constant saving activity of Jesus Christ.

To sum up, the entirely new and utterly unique thing about the Christian Religion is Jesus Christ, alive and at work in the People who, by Faith and Good Works, belong to Him.

As that People, may we rejoice to hear the Father say "This is My Beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased," and may we recognize and love Him spiritually present in the gathering of His People and even physically present, in a mystical but real way, in the Breaking of the Bread.

