

Learning to Receive

The logic of Baptism

At the beginning of this Jubilee Year, we were invited to look to Christ as the sure and steadfast anchor in which our hope is not confounded but “inspires us to keep pressing forward, never losing sight of the grandeur of the heavenly goal to which we have been called” (*Spes Non Confundit*, 25). It is an image full of hope that the Holy Father has given to the Church, reminding us that through baptism we are anchored in Christ who has introduced our humanity into the sanctuary of heaven, in the presence of the Father (cf. *Hebrews* 6:19), where He is always alive to intercede on our behalf (cf. *Hebrews* 7:25).

Although this perspective is very reassuring, we are aware that in order to remain intimately united with Him, not only in words, but in deeds and in truth, we must welcome the dynamism of conversion to the Gospel and allow the Holy Spirit to redefine the contours and boundaries of our humanity. This grounding in Christ, in which docile surrender to the movements of the Spirit takes place, is a process with a far from foregone conclusion. In the New Testament we find numerous reminders not to lose this ability to stand firm in the one hope of the Gospel.

[Christ] has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, provided that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which has been preached to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister (Colossians 1:22–23).

Let each man take care how he builds upon it. For no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:10b–11).

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel (Galatians 1:6).

Within the Church, it is a constant temptation to seek easier and more immediate words than the Gospel, thus moving away from the only foundation, which is Christ. Yet, His life is the most extraordinary

manifestation of what our humanity can become when it allows itself to be guided by God's logic. This implies a continuous conversion of our way of thinking, both with respect to what we are and to what grace calls us to become. For this reason, in the meditations for this Lent, we will try to place ourselves as disciples of Jesus, eager to learn from His way of life what attitudes are essential for us to journey together towards a new and eternal life. The first moment of Christ's life on which we want to dwell is His baptism, an event that marks the beginning of His mission and reveals its profound meaning.

1. Giving precedence

The long years of Jesus' hidden life in Nazareth, which preceded and prepared the day of His baptism, remain one of the most fascinating and mysterious aspects of His existence. According to tradition, He would have worked as a carpenter alongside Joseph, but some recent hypotheses also suggest a possible involvement with religious circles of the time, perhaps close to John the Baptist. Although there is no certain confirmation, a fundamental question emerges: what significance does this long period of silence have in relation to Jesus' mission?

The Gospels seem to suggest that, before beginning to speak and work in the name of God, Christ chose to let Himself be shaped by the historical reality in which He lived. He did not hasten His time, nor did He seek shortcuts to manifest Himself. His way of acting invites us to rediscover the value of hidden time, that time in which roots are strengthened and identity is formed in the silence of everyday life. Even in our own lives, the most decisive choices often mature in a period of hidden preparation, in which desire is refined and freedom is formed through small daily fidelities.

The great news of the Gospel is precisely this: even before doing extraordinary works, the Son of God began to save the world simply by being with us, sharing our experiences, letting Himself be touched by the events of human history. God's salvation is not imposed by immediately changing things, but is offered as an encounter that generates hope, a patient journey in which love is revealed in the simplest and most concrete gestures of everyday life.

We find a confirmation of this way of presenting Himself, without imposing Himself, in the scene of Jesus' baptism, an event that solemnly and formally inaugurates His public ministry.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan (Mark 1:9).

The baptismal gesture of Jesus is preceded, in all of the Gospels, by John's strong and persuasive preaching. Picking up the heart of the prophetic voices contained in the Jewish tradition, the Baptist announced the imminent coming of Christ as the arrival of a fire capable of purifying the people from their sins through the regenerating power of the Spirit of God. The coming of this fire of purification was often imagined in a way that instilled fear and anguish, as John's voice in the Gospels attests: "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (*Matthew 3:12*; cf. *Luke 3:17*).

The way in which Jesus chooses to embody these prophecies cannot but be surprising. Having come from Nazareth to the Jordan, where the penitential practice of baptism was taking place, the first act that Jesus performs, in fact, is an action described with a verb in the passive tense: "And He was baptised". Matthew's Gospel highlights the surprise at this strange attitude through John's words: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (*Matthew 3:14*). To us, it seems unseemly and even unnecessary that God should allow Himself to be determined by our action in the first place. Instead, God is convinced that the most beautiful and urgent thing to do is to immerse Himself in our waters, to remind us that our reality, with all its lights and shadows, can become a place of salvation: "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness" (*Matthew 3:15*).

The first image of God that Jesus' baptism brings into focus is disarming. Rather than doing something – or worse yet, doing something to us – God prefers to allow our hands to do something to Him. It is a choice of great trust in us, not without dramatic consequences that will become fully manifest at the moment of passion, when Christ will give Himself up to us in silence, in a complete willingness to suffer for love, even to death on a cross.

And yet, it is precisely in this atrocious event of unjust and innocent pain that the reason why the Son of God wishes to allow Himself to be acted upon by us with a meekness that is as absolute as it is incomprehensible to us is made fully visible. If sin has dragged our humanity into the darkness of individualism, isolating us in fear and depriving us of communion with God and others, then salvation can only come through someone who approaches us without fear. Our first need – which in religious language we call salvation – is not to be changed, but to be reached.

However, in this apparent passivity of Christ in His baptism, it is also necessary to be able to grasp a certain action of God, in which one of the most singular traits of His capacity to love is manifested. We usually think

that to love means to care for the other person, making this feeling explicit through some symbolic gesture. But to love also means – perhaps more profoundly – wanting the good of the other person. In this latter perspective, the actions that are most likely to put the other at ease are not those that highlight our generosity, but those that help him or her no longer feel inadequate and marginalised. We can then understand this attitude of God, whose first instinct is “to let us do it”, as a precise desire to will our good, simply giving precedence to our weakness rather than to His strength.

Jesus Christ’s entire life will be marked by this logic of caring for one’s neighbour, and shaped by a style in which the face of the other comes before any abstract norm or principle, so much so that the price to be paid, in the end, will be very high. At the cost of transgressing the Jewish cult – which, like any religious system, risks subordinating attention to life to the practice of the law – Jesus will always give priority to anyone in weakness, suffering, or sin.

By starting His ministry of healing and salvation from below, in the waters of our fragile humanity, Jesus wanted to set compassion as the cornerstone of a radically new humanity. In one episode, recounted throughout the synoptics, Jesus’ compassion, capable of always putting the focus on the other, appears unmistakably. After having gone to announce the Kingdom two by two, the Twelve gather around the Master to tell Him all that they have done and taught. The Lord sensed that the disciples were not only in need of telling their stories, but also of not identifying themselves too much with the works they had just done.

And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a lonely place by themselves. Now many saw them going, and knew them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns, and got there ahead of them. As he landed he saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things (Mark 6:31-34).

The need to rest, both for the disciples and for Jesus, was necessary, indeed sacrosanct. No one should ever neglect this first and fundamental from of self-care. If we allow ourselves to become too absorbed by responsibilities and roles, we run the risk of burning out our humanity, confusing the need to do things well with the desire to do real good to others. However, this first need can be overshadowed when there is someone in front of us capable of suddenly moving the depths of our compassion. If we discover that we have within us the strength to put ourselves aside, not

from the need to feel useful, but from the spontaneous and free desire to share a little of what we are and have, then we can enjoy great happiness. It is not a matter of feeling good – or even better than others – but of the joy of discovering that God, the Father, can truly provide for everyone when His children choose the path of solidarity and the logic of compassion.

2. Undergoing the trial

In order to discover ourselves capable of giving precedence to the other, we must have a clear and sufficiently assimilated love capable of defining our reality as something beautiful and good. This is what happens to Jesus, as soon as His body allows itself to be immersed by John into the waters of the Jordan.

And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove (Mark 1:10).

Immediately, as soon as one decides to take a step of true sharing in the land where our brothers and sisters in humanity walk, one also takes a step towards God's heaven. Indeed, as the Gospel story attests, one can even make the extraordinary discovery that the heavens – those that guard the origin and destiny of our humanity – are not above, but below. Jesus' baptismal gesture reveals that only a downward movement into the weakness and frailty of the human condition opens up the way for us to access the voice and greatness of God.

In the face of Christ's choice, which in baptism expresses His willingness to "allow himself to be acted upon" by us, giving precedence to our humanity, the heavens, literally, tear open, like a cloth unable to remain intact next to a vivid flame. The tearing of the heavens – this place that in biblical parlance represents the seat of God – attests to the fact that when our humanity discovers it is capable of compassion, the heavens cannot but make a movement towards a similarity with us that is deeply desired and finally found.

The spectacle is reserved for Jesus alone, not for those present, because this is not a public commendation, but an intimate and unforgettable experience, reserved for those who allow themselves to be moulded by love. The descent of the Spirit in a visible and tangible way, like a dove, means that after His baptism Jesus perceived Himself capable of hosting and generating a life greater than Himself, that of the Father and His infinite love for humanity. Feeling loved is not just an emotion, but the awareness of being truly important to someone, of being fruitful. This

emotional maturity, which we all need, we do not achieve by isolating ourselves on a pedestal, but by accepting interacting with the lives of others.

And a voice came from heaven: "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11).

The voice from heaven unveils the secret of our human life: every time we live as *fratelli tutti* (brothers and sisters all), our identity as beloved children of the Father cannot but emerge. The whole mystery of God is present in this scene: the Father who sends His love down to earth, the Spirit who places His tent in our humanity and, of course, the Son who chose to share our mortal flesh in all things – except sin.

After accomplishing His baptism, Jesus in no way lingers in the consolation He has just experienced. Having emerged from the waters, Jesus allows Himself to be led with great docility into another, unpredictable experience.

The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan (Mark 1:12–13a).

While Luke and Matthew take care to elaborate an articulate account of the time of trial in the desert, Mark gives the reader a dry and essential summary of Jesus' temptations. What Mark instead emphasises, with a certain originality, is the almost violent way in which the Spirit immerses Jesus in this space of testing His will. The Greek verb used (*ekballō*), which can be translated as 'to cast out' or 'to drive away,' is the same one that the evangelist will use to describe the expulsion of demons and unclean spirits by Jesus (cf. *Mark* 1:34-39; 6:13; 7:26; 9:18) or by the disciples (cf. *Mark* 3:15; 6:13; 9:18-28).

Since the Spirit is an invisible force that orients our choices and actions from the depths, we could say that, after His baptism, Christ feels the need to put Himself to the test, in order to assimilate the gift received, making the choice of baptism a deep-rooted mentality and not just the impulse of a moment. He accepts, in other words, the hard – but necessary – law of initiation, without which every impulse of our freedom risks being just an illusion. We, unfortunately, tend to avoid this testing that every real decision demands. We think we can venture into the great paths of life with the strength of good feelings, trusting in the ability to know how to adapt and organise ourselves. We skip the laborious experience of apprenticeship, where our sensibilities are laid bare and we learn to purify ourselves from the illusion of easy results and the deception of cheap shortcuts. Our world is rich in tutorials, to learn how to accomplish all kinds of feats, but very

poor in people willing to let themselves be put to the test, to verify the authenticity of their desires.

Matthew and Luke recount three types of temptation that Jesus goes through in the desert. In their diversity, the trials are all united by a certain absolutization of one's needs and feelings: food, wealth, power. In his Gospel, Mark does not specify which temptations Jesus faced, except halfway through the story, when it is Peter who is apostrophised as 'Satan', at the moment when he tries to spare the Master the suffering of the cross. Connecting the data, we could say that, after His baptism, Jesus entered a space of trial, which lasted the whole of His existence, in order to assume a humanity willing to never withdraw from the criterion of compassion and precedence in favour of the other.

We often find ourselves making decisions for which we do not know how to pay the price, we try to take positions that we are then unable to maintain. The reason is very simple: we think we can compete without training, we want to taste the fruit by avoiding the slow process of maturation. We are not ready to accept the cross as a moment of authentication of our desire to embrace a great love. In the 'Our Father', Jesus teaches the disciples of all times to end every authentic prayer with the courage to ask God not to spare us from the moments of trial, which are necessary to make us capable of fidelity and depth ('do not let us fall into temptation'), but to preserve only the possibility of not losing ourselves ('deliver us from evil'). For we are lost not when we suffer, but when we give up accepting the consequences of the choices we have made.

3. Remaining in trust

What happens to Jesus after the forty days in the desert? What is the fruit of this time of purification and consolidation of His will for the salvation of the world? The evangelist Mark's narrative on this point is particularly terse, yet very intriguing.

He was with the wild beasts... (Mark 1:13b).

At the end of the forty days of temptation, we see Jesus with a heightened ability to remain in reality, even when it is inhabited by threatening and disturbing presences. The wild beasts with which Jesus seems to be able to remain in a fearless relationship – almost in the frame of a rediscovered cosmic harmony – are an equivocal image. On the one hand, they can be understood simply as the animals, that part of nature towards which we feel superior, but of which we have a certain fear. On the other,

they could also be understood as a symbol of all the forces by which, in reality, we feel potentially attacked: tensions, enemies, evil.

Whichever way we want to understand the text, we find that the trial in the wilderness helps Jesus to develop the necessary inner strength to be able to embrace His mission without the fear of death. The Gospel indicates that the position gained by Jesus must be understood as the assumption of a style, not as the permanent exemption from a difficulty. The – obviously – symbolic time of forty days is a way of saying that Jesus had to train His heart to choose good and reject evil all the days of His life. The Gospels recount how Jesus used to leave home early in the morning to immerse Himself in secluded and silent prayer, despite the needs and urgings of the crowds who sought Him out. The habit of cultivating and guarding an ‘inner desert’ made Jesus a man capable of being in any situation with great peace, never frightened of anything and never embarrassed by anything or anyone.

When Jesus sent His disciples to announce the Kingdom, He offered them directions to embody this sober and confident way of being in the world.

[Jesus] charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. And he said to them, “Where you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. And if any place will not receive you and they refuse to hear you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet for a testimony against them (Mark 6:8-11).

The apostolic instructions given by Jesus are intended to help the disciples not to slip too easily into the traps of paternalism or welfarism. In the desert, Jesus resisted all temptations of autonomy and self-assertion, to embrace a life in which salvation can only be proclaimed and experienced as the fruit of a freely chosen communion of love. Disciples are not to go out into the world with the superiority of one who only (and always) has something to teach others, but with the humility of one who also has much to listen to and receive. The purpose of the proclamation is to offer others the opportunity to manifest what treasure is hidden in our humanity: compassion, generosity and acceptance.

And the angels ministered to him (Mark 1:13b).

Before embracing the ministry of healing and salvation on our behalf, Jesus learns in the desert not to procure the things He needs by taking advantage of His divine nature. Faithful to the logic of baptism, He prefers to

listen to the needs of our humanity, to learn how to meet them without trickery or deception. The Word of God became flesh also for this reason: to show us how much dignity there can be in receiving the things we need, renouncing the titanic illusion of having to conquer or produce them by our own efforts.

Having accepted the challenge of a life in which the element of trial is not accidental but constitutive, Jesus is ready to release all the hope with which His heart is overflowing. He does so by putting into words how He interprets the time and space of human life.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:14-15).

In all the Gospels, Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom begins at the very moment when John is arrested because of his prophetic ministry. Jesus takes the baton from the hands – now bound – of the greatest prophet ever to appear in Israel. Marked by this suffering, but trained in the desert to trust in the providence of the Father, the Son of God begins to make explicit His view of us, of history, and of the world.

In Matthew's Gospel, we see Jesus proclaiming the Beatitudes, that is, the most luminous and liberating interpretation of our humanity, reconnected to divinity through the Incarnation: we are blessed to the extent that we accept what we are and what we find ourselves to be. In the Lucan narrative, the good news is made explicit in the synagogue in Nazareth, where Christ announces the beginning of a 'today' in which all the hopes contained in the Scriptures are realised: if we accept our radical poverty, we can already feel rich in the Kingdom of God and free from all bondage. In John's Gospel, the good news is announced instead through a fact, the giving of wine to a jeopardized wedding feast, confirming what the prophets were already whispering: our land will no longer be 'forsaken', but forever 'married' (cf. *Isaiah* 62:4).

In Mark's Gospel, the announcement of the good news is dense and minuscule. In two words, Jesus succeeds in shining a light so intense and bright that it can put any darkness to flight: the time is complete, there is no need to wait for a more favourable one, the Kingdom of God is at hand. This is the first and radical interpretation of reality that Jesus Christ arrives at through baptism and the trial in the desert. Nothing is missing from the history of the world, otherwise God could not be recognised as Father. Whereas, on the contrary, He is and wants to be so for everyone. The first

words of the Word of God in this world have the claim to be the annulment of the right to be perplexed or disappointed in the face of reality.

It is not a question of devaluing or trivialising everything in history that is missing, crumbling, or blatantly belied by evil and injustice. Jesus sees the glass of reality overflowing with life because He knows how much God has decided to involve Himself with human history. The Son knows the immensity of the Father's love and declares time fulfilled – without being concluded – so that henceforth no one will ever be so orphaned that he cannot receive adoption as a child of God.

However, we must be converted, that is, we must move beyond a certain way of thinking and evaluating things, which is still too focused on our senses, our expectations, and our habits. It is necessary to move away from sadness and resignation, to realise that while we are still suffering, weeping, and groping in the dark, God has done something we could not imagine: He has come to dwell among us. The news is wonderful, but hard to believe. It is like a vast and welcoming sea, in which one must calmly immerse oneself and remain, trustingly learning to cross it.

Conclusion

In this Lent of the Holy Year of the Jubilee, we are called to remain anchored in Christ, certain of finding in Him a firm and secure reference point for our lives. The concrete sign of our adherence to this hope is the crossing of the Holy Door, a gesture that invites us to enter ever more deeply into the mystery of Christ's life. Christ's baptism is not just an event in His life, but a sign that illuminates the journey of every believer, showing certain existential movements that we too are called to make.

The first movement is the capacity to decentralise, that is, to come out of the centre of ourselves to leave space for the other. Jesus, entering the waters of the Jordan, immerses Himself in the human condition, fully sharing the fragility and history of every man. This gesture teaches us that true communion with others is built not only when their choices are pleasing or understandable to us, but also when they test and challenge us.

The second movement is conversion, understood as a continuous exercise of inner verification. Baptism marks a passage: for Jesus it is the beginning of His public mission, for us it is the invitation to question whether our hearts have truly assimilated the logic of the Gospel. Conversion is not just a moral change, but a profound transformation of our way of seeing, judging and loving.

Finally, the third movement is perhaps the most difficult and decisive: to remain within reality without fleeing from it or sublimating it. Christ's baptism immerses Him in the river of life, without sparing Him the tensions, trials, and contradictions of the world. We too are called to remain steadfast in our time, with its complexities and challenges, without escaping or seeking artificial refuge. Only in this way can we recognise, even amidst the difficulties, that our path is inhabited by a certain presence: that of God, who does not abandon us but remains with us always.

Holy Father, Who in the baptism of Your beloved Son have manifested Your goodness to mankind, grant that those who have been regenerated in water and the Spirit may live with piety and justice in this world to receive as an inheritance eternal life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ.

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