

Baptism with Fire

On January 6th the Church celebrates the great feast of the Epiphany. There are three events in the life of Christ that the liturgy looks to on this feast, three events in which He manifested himself to the world: the adoration of the magi, His baptism in the Jordan River and the wedding feast of Cana. The Latin Church emphasizes the coming of the three wise men, whereas the Maronite Church, together with the other Eastern Churches looks especially to Christ's manifestation in His baptism.

In this newsletter I would like to offer a little reflection on a passage from the Gospel that is read for this feast: the word of St. John the Baptist where he says: "I baptize you with water; but He who is mightier than I is coming... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Lk. 3:16). So what does John the Baptist mean by baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire?

The Fathers of the Church explain the phrase "baptism with the Holy Spirit" by pointing out that John the Baptist used this expression because he wanted to distinguish the baptism that Christ was going to bring from the baptism he was giving. If he had said: "He will baptize you with water" no one would have been able to distinguish the two baptisms. So He calls the baptism that Christ will bring baptism by the Holy Spirit since it is a baptism that works by the power of the Holy Spirit and confers the Holy Spirit and His gifts on those who receive it.

But what does John the Baptist mean by baptism by fire? What is this fire? The Fathers and St.

Thomas give various interpretations to this passage, but one of the common interpretations given is that by fire is meant the fire of trials and temptations. At first I was a little surprised by this interpretation.

I had always assumed that the fire referred to the Holy Spirit (who is represented by fire); that it was just another way of saying baptism by the Holy Spirit. And this is also one of the interpretations that the Fathers give.

But if you stop and think about it, this interpretation of "fire" as referring to the fire of trial and temptation has much in its favor. It is supported by many other passages of Scripture. There are many prefigurements of the sacrament of baptism in the Old Testament, what are called types of baptism. For example, the spirit hovering over the waters at creation is a type or prefiguring of baptism; and Noah and the flood is another one; the story of Naaman the Syrian is another. But of all the prefigurements the greatest and most important one is the miraculous passage of the Israelites through the Red Sea. St. Paul alludes to this prefigurement in First Corinthians: "all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1Cor. 10:2). Now after the Israelites were baptized in the Red Sea where did they go? Into the promised land? No, not yet. They went into the desert where they were tested by God for forty years. So baptism is

followed by a period of trial.

All three synoptic Gospels speak to us about the baptism of Christ. And all three relate the same thing: after Christ is baptized in the Jordan what

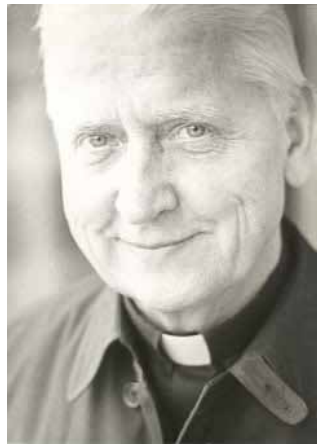


happens next? He is led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by Satan. Once again we see baptism followed by trial.

And finally, we have the explicit teaching of the Apostles in the New Testament who teach that after Baptism it's not all smooth paths and sunshine: For example, St. Peter writes to the new Christians: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Pet. 4:12). I think St. Peter tells the faithful not to be surprised at the fiery ordeal that comes upon them, because they (and we) often *are* surprised. We do have a tendency to make false judgments about God and how He works in our lives. When everything is going fine (more or less) and there is sunshine and smooth sailing we assume that God is looking favorably upon us and all is well between us and God. But then along come some serious temptations or trials, whatever form they take, (and they can take all different forms, interior or exterior), and we think that God has abandoned us. We have a hard time believing and accepting that these troubles also come from the hand of God. But if we don't see our trials as also coming from God we may fail to recognize how He is trying to work in our lives, the *means* He is using to try to get through to us, to try to help us to grow in grace. But if we are honest with ourselves I think a little reflection shows that our trials can serve many purposes:

➤ Who of us isn't in danger of settling down into a mediocre life of self-complacency? Of falling away from the high ideal of our calling? It's quite easy to become accustomed to a life of little infidelities to grace, little infidelities to our way of life, to a life of comfortable compromise, unless there is some stimulus to arouse us.

➤ And then there is the whole matter of self-deception: thinking that we are someone who we are not. Self-deception is much easier for the man who



Servant of God
Fr. Walter Ciszek

has no trials or serious temptations. We assume that we have certain virtues, and then along comes some trouble or temptation and we find that we don't really possess those virtues after all. A person who is truly humble will welcome that kind of self-knowledge; it won't upset his peace of soul.

➤ And then there is our terrible inclination to pride and self-righteousness; this is always a danger, especially for those who are striving to live a good Christian life. A good exterior or interior trial is a big help in letting us come to see that we need some outside assistance, we can't do this on our own, as much as we would like to. Times of trial can be a help in saving us from these dangers if we accept them. But this presupposes of course that we see the troubles as coming from God's hands for our benefit.

There is a wonderful example of this in the life of Fr. Walter Ciszek. Fr. Ciszek was an American Jesuit who went into Russia during World War II in order to serve the Christians there under the Communist regime. He went in secretly and was ministering to the faithful for a time, but it wasn't long before he was caught and sent to the infamous Lubyanka prison. The Soviets put him in solitary confinement and they spent a year brutally interrogating him. They wanted to get him to confess that he was a Vatican spy.

Fr. Ciszek had a strong character and a strong will and he resisted for a long time, all the while continuing with his spiritual exercises and asking God for help. But finally, after months of interrogation and torture, he was overcome and in a moment of fear and exhaustion he signed a document stating that he was a spy from the Vatican.

Afterwards, back in his cell, Fr. Ciszek reproached God for not supporting him and coming to his aid when he needed Him. How could God let Him down, allow him to fail, allow him to betray his

calling and do something which could harm the reputation of the priesthood and the Church?

And then God gave him the light to see that, in fact, all along, he had been relying on his own resources and strength of will, and that he had never really fully placed his hope and trust in God alone. Many years later Fr. Cizek wrote of the experience, he said: "It was not the Church that was on trial in Lubianka. It was not the Soviet Government or the KGB versus Walter Cizek. It was God versus Walter Cizek. God was testing me by this experience, like gold in the furnace, to see *how much of self* remained after all my prayers and professions of faith in his will. In that one year of interrogations, after these last terrible few hours, *the primacy of self that had manifested itself and been reinforcing itself even in my methods of prayer and*

spiritual exercises underwent a purging, through purgatory, that left me cleansed to the bone".

I think that is an amazing act of faith and a very powerful testimony. He could recognize that God was using the KGB for His own purposes. And Fr. Cizek was a good and holy priest before he went into Russia. But still there was this need for a deeper purification.

It is helpful to look at it from God's perspective. How is He going to purify us? How is He going to break through all the barriers that we put in His way? He needs to use strong medicine. Baptism by fire is the only way. We may not be interrogated by the KGB, but God can send us trials in order to purify us. We just need the faith to recognize that the baptism by fire is from Him and to accept it. ✠