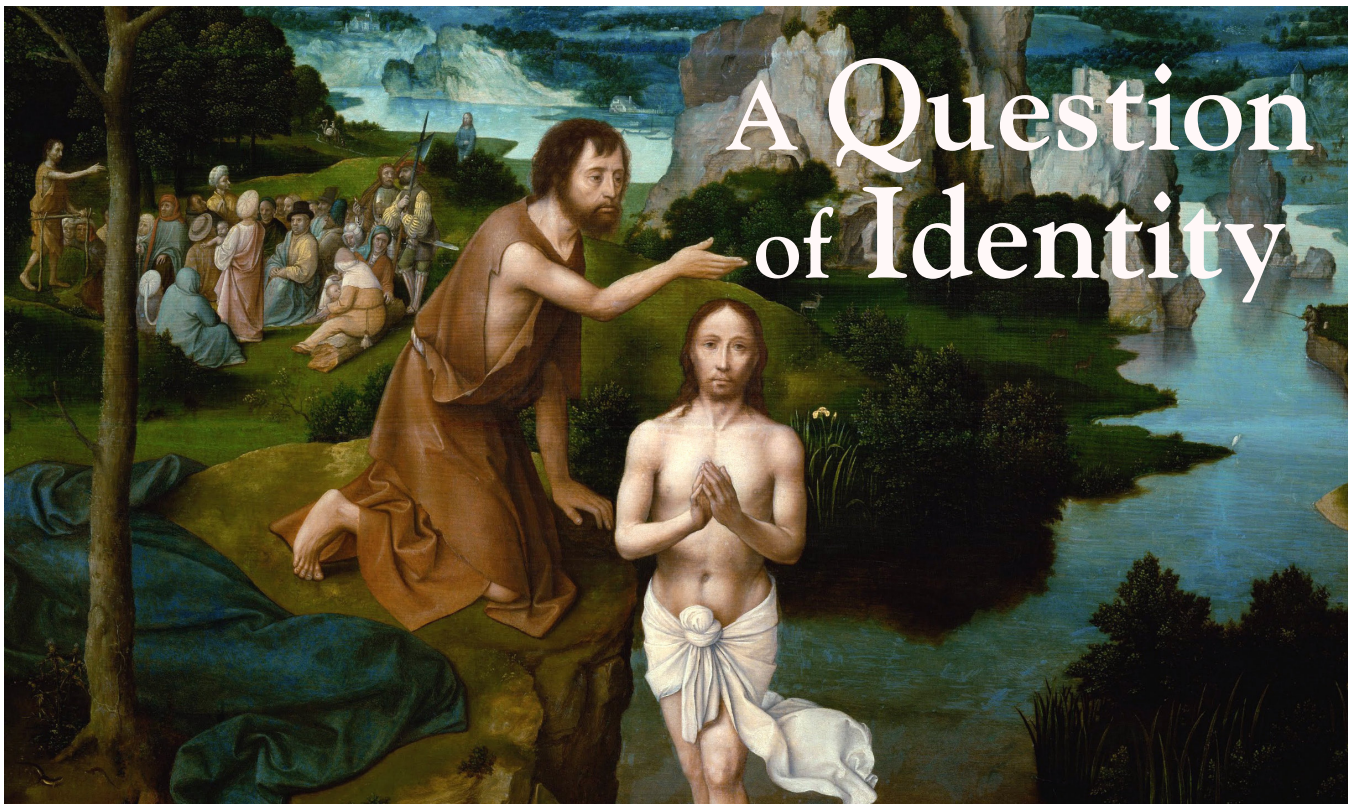
A Question of Identity



Joachim Patinir. *The Baptism of Christ.* 1510–1520.

Everyone, at some point in his or her life, asks the fundamental question: Who am I? In answering it, we may find ourselves turning to our family history and achievements: "I am of such and such a family," "I am the son of so and so," or "the descendant of so and so." Or we may respond to the question with some of our personal traits and accomplishments: "I am good at this or that" or "such and such is my thing." Or, perhaps, we may look to our occupation or personal talents to define ourselves: "I do such and such a job; that's who I am."

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Reflecting on our Lord's baptism in the Jordan and, by way of extension, our own baptism, we find that the subject of identity comes up again and again in the Gospel narratives. First, we hear of the Pharisees sending priests and Levites to John the Baptist to inquire who he is. He responds with words taken from the prophet Isaiah: "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" (Jn 1:23). Then, when Jesus is baptized by John, we hear the Father's voice declare: "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." (Mt 3:17). Later, as Jesus passes by, John the Baptist points Him out and declares: "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." (Jn 1:29) Soon after, when two of John's disciples follow Jesus and bring Andrew's brother, Simon, to Him, we hear Jesus declare: "So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas (which means Peter.)" (Jn 1:41) In all of these passages, we find the answer to the question, "Who am I" in a God-given identity. It is here where we should begin our own identity search.

As baptized Christians, we have a God-given identity. First and foremost, it is the identity of sons and daughters of God. United to Christ through

Baptism, we also partake of His Sonship. Hence, we can pray the words, "Our Father" with the confidence of sons and daughters. Furthermore, as Jesus, being a Divine Person, is holy so we also participate in His holiness. Recall that to be "holy" means, at the most basic level, to be "different" or "separate." In Christ, we are called to be *different*. Not in a "holier than thou" attitude, but in a life that conforms to God's Will; to the new life we received from God at baptism. This is worth reflecting on at a time when so many Catholics and Christians live lives that are indistinguishable from those who have no faith. We are called to evangelize the world by bearing witness to the joy that comes from a Christ-like life.

Connected to that is the identity we receive in Christ to also be "lambs of God" that participate in Christ's saving Passion. As St. Paul points out, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church" (Col 1:24). Our sufferings have meaning in Christ and, in Him, we have the great privilege of being conduits of grace for the salvation of souls. Here, too, we find depth in our identity as Christians.

When we were baptized, we also received a new name. Traditionally, a Christian name—usually one shared by a patron saint—is bestowed on the day of baptism. Like Simon Peter, our name should remind us of God's plan for us. We are all called to be saints by the grace received in baptism, but not all are called to be saints in the same way or to the same degree. As St. Paul points out, "star differs from star in glory." (1 Cor 15:41) Our God-given identity has an air of mystery about it that only becomes clearer as we follow God's Will in His promptings throughout our lives. We are all called to glorify God by our lives, but only God knows how this is to be accomplished by each one of us. In this lies our God-given mission, so closely connected to our identity.

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Like St. John the Baptist at the Jordan river, our mission is to witness to Christ. He did not cease to point Him out to all who were willing to listen. Indeed, he even went so far as to say that this was the reason he went out to the Jordan to baptize: "[F]or this I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." (Jn 1:31). There are as many ways to witness to Christ as there are Christians, but the essence of witness begins with our own encounter with Him. By John the Baptist's witness, a quarter of the Twelve Apostles ended up encountering Christ. The Lord alone knows who will be led to know Jesus through our pointing Him out.

However, the Enemy of our souls is also very much interested in our identity and how to deflect us from it as it was given to us by God for His glory and our happiness. Here we encounter the temptation to define ourselves according to the lies and half-truths that the demons are all too happy to suggest. These cause great harm, redirecting much of our time and energy to a life of frustration and futility.

Here we may find ourselves tempted to define our identity by turning to our family's failures and disasters in its history. Or we may see ourselves in light of our own personal failures and deficiencies. Or, finally, we may call to mind our poor occupations and lack of talent that have brought us to an unhappy state in life. In all these, the demon seeks to warp our sense of identity, replacing our God-given identity and mission with an "anti-identity" and mission. Our response should be immediate and forceful. Renounce the lie ("That's NOT who I am!"), remind yourself of the truth ("I am a beloved son/daughter of God, my Father!") and renew your desire to live your Christian identity ("Lord, help me to do Your will in Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit.").

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May we call to mind our identity as Christians, sons and daughters of the Father in Christ Jesus our Lord. Although we are weak, carrying the treasure of God's grace in "earthen vessels" (cf. 2 Cor. 4:7), we can be confident that He will support us and lead us ever deeper in our identity. It is for us to trust in Him, through good times and bad, hopeful that, one day, we shall see ourselves resplendent in glory in our Father's home, where the mystery of our life will finally be revealed to us in all its fullness. It will be the happy conclusion of a life and identity that began with our baptism.

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