

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord
Isaiah 42: 1-4, 6-7
Psalm 29: 1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10
Acts 10: 34-38
Matthew 3: 13-17
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Rev. Charles B. Gordon, C.S.C.
The Garaventa Center
The University of Portland

My first memory as a seminarian at Notre Dame is of entering my room for the first time, tossing my suitcase on the bed, and walking over to the window. From the window I could look across the lawn and into the gymnasium. And there in the gym, I could see the Rector of the seminary, all alone in the gloom, pushing a big dust mop back and forth across the basketball courts.

This made a big impression on me. I suppose I came to the seminary expecting that the Rector would be an august figure, high above us mere seminarians. But there he was pitching in with the chores just like anyone else. And it was the same all year long. The rector washed floors, made beds and scrubbed pots and pans with the rest of us. He made it clear that he was one of us, and whatever we were doing; we were all in it together.

My second year as a seminarian, the novitiate year at Cascade, Colorado, began with a weeklong silent retreat. Then, on the eighth day, we were given a lecture about the “spiritual benefits of the mindless rhythms of manual labor,” and sent up the hill to chop wood.

When we reached the woodpile, we found the novice master already at work with an axe -- wood chips flying everywhere. He worked right along side us for the entire three-hour work period. As it turned out,

though, that was the only time we ever saw him enjoying the many spiritual benefits of manual labor. After that, whenever work period rolled round, he was always occupied with other important duties.

Nevertheless, it was a nice gesture.

It seems to me that something similar is happening in our Gospel today. Jesus, to mark the beginning of his public ministry, is being baptized by John. Now, John's baptism is a baptism of repentance, and Jesus is without sin. He has nothing to repent. John says to him, "I should be baptized by you, not you by me." But Jesus insists, and John gives in.

Why does our Lord insist upon being baptized? I think he is showing us, right from the start, that he is human. Though he is without sin, he is associating himself with the human need for redemption. He is one of us, and we are all in this together. We accept that Christ is divine, but it is equally essential that he be human. Jesus lived, died and was resurrected from the dead so that we could be saved. If he were not divine he couldn't save us. If he were not human, it would not be us whom he saved. Because he is a human being, what happens in Christ happens to and for us.

And it isn't just a gesture on our Lord's part. Throughout his life he experiences, grief, fear, loss, hunger and thirst -- all the tragedies, frustrations, petty humiliations and inconveniences that are characteristic of human existence. All of this is a wonderful gift to us. For I wonder if we would ultimately be able to worship a God who didn't know what it was like to be one of us. Motivated by boundless, immeasurable love, our Savior became like us, so that we might become like him.