

Like last Sunday, today's Feast of the Baptism of Jesus, is another "epiphany," another "manifestation" of Jesus as the Christ! When John baptized Jesus in the Jordan, God the Father proclaimed who Jesus really was by saying, "You are my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." Nothing like a proud Father!

Last Sunday the 3 Magi found out who Jesus was - the longed-for Messiah/ King. But today's feast pushes it one step further— today, Jesus fully understands who he really is – the Son of God.

But what is this moment of Jesus being baptized by John in the Jordan River all about? One of the features of modern life with which we are all familiar is "standing in line." We stand in line at the super market, at the movie theater, at the Department of Motor Vehicles, at the voting booth, at the airplane ticket counter, and yes, even the communion line.

Standing in line is one of the places where we are all equal. We all know the response to those who try to cut into line or jump ahead of the line. "Back off buddy and wait your turn with the rest of us!" Whatever our educational or income level, "standing in line" makes us all equal. Jesus stood in line at his baptism and was baptized last.

The baptism of Jesus is part of his epiphany when he comes out of obscurity into the spotlight. Before his baptism, Jesus was largely unknown. Then he came one day to the banks of the Jordan River to be baptized by John. And John announced him as the Messiah. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. Jesus had no need of that, of course. But the people did.

The water of the Jordan River that day was filled with sins of all kinds as hundreds, maybe thousands, of people came to repent. It was filled with every imaginable evil, with all kinds of human immorality. The leaders of that time refused to step into such water. They didn't want to be seen with sinners. They had no felt need for repentance and washing.

But Jesus was not ashamed to step into the water. There he stood in line, shoulder to shoulder with the sinners, here, Jesus' public ministry begins with an act of compassion and solidarity, as he takes upon himself all of our burdens and sins. It is a symbol of what his work on earth was all about.

Jesus showed solidarity with all of us who are in need of healing. He became like us so we could become like him. Jesus' baptism was the beginning of his public ministry as he identified himself with all human beings. Here he begins to gather his lambs as Isaiah describes the chosen servant of God in today's first reading.

+Readers Digest once included this with unholy church announcements: "With the large number of baptisms scheduled for next Sunday there will be two baptismal stations: one in the front of

church for adults and one in the back of church for children. Babies will be baptized on both ends.”

Well, there are two ends to baptism, but not in the physical sense, but in the sense of purpose and meaning. We are baptized for ourselves and we are baptized for others.

The baptism of Christ was an anointing of Christ by the Father and the Holy Spirit to bring salvation to the world. That is the essence of the baptism of Christ. It is also one of the dimensions of our own baptism. Just as the Father called Jesus His Son, so he did so at our baptism, as we are counted as His sons and daughters.

Yes, the primary purpose of Christian baptism is personal salvation from sin. But there is also the aspect of being part of the salvation of others, as with Christ. Through our baptism we are sacramentally identified with Christ, with the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. We are commissioned to be part of his work through the Church.

We are baptized not only to receive grace but also to be part of dispensing it. We are baptized not only for ourselves but also for others. “As Christ was anointed priest, prophet, and king, so may you live always as a member of his body sharing everlasting life.” The baptized are anointed into the priesthood of Christ, the common priesthood of all the faithful.

An ordained priest has a further and distinct share in the priesthood of Christ. I am often told that I should be honored and honorable because I have been ordained a priest. Priestly ordination is a distinct grace, but it is very secondary to baptism.

It is much more important that I have been baptized a Christian than that I have been ordained a priest. Baptism is my hope of salvation and eternal life. Baptism enables me to be part of the work of the Church because my priestly ordination derives from my baptism.

That is the other end of baptism, an end not sufficiently reflected upon, which the baptism of Christ forces one to think about. Focusing on baptism only as personal salvation fosters an attitude that I come to church simply to receive something from other special people. No, we are also here to give ourselves for the other. It is not all about what we get out of it but what we put into it.

A correct understanding of baptism is that my own gifts are to be a part of the work of the Church. We are participants, not spectators. Everyone has a gift to offer. Through baptism that gift is dedicated to the work of the Church.

This feast of the Baptism of the Lord reminds us that by baptism we are not only freed from personal sin, but we are empowered and obligated to be part of the saving work of the Church.

We are baptized not only for ourselves. We are baptized also for others. We are all baptized, as it were, on both ends.