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Easter and Baptism

Bishop John T. Folda

At the Easter Vigil and at most celebrations of Easter Sunday, one ritual is of special note: the renewal of our baptismal promises. As we celebrate our Lord's resurrection again this year, we renew the promises that we made or that our parents and godparents made at our baptisms. In fact, many if not most of us were baptized at a very early age, perhaps before we were personally aware of what was happening around us. So, it is more than fitting that on this most solemn and joyful celebration of the Church year, we should renew the commitment of our own baptism once again, with full awareness and reflection on the profound meaning of baptism itself.

But, why do we do this on Easter Sunday? Why, on the day of our Lord's rising from the tomb, do we renew those promises that were first made on the day of our baptism? The answer is simply this: Easter and baptism are inherently connected. Baptism is the Easter sacrament, the sacrament of new life in Christ, the sharing in his dying and rising. From the earliest days of the Church, the celebration of Easter was also the celebration of baptism. After a lengthy period of preparation and an extended Easter vigil that lasted through the night, the catechumens were led to the baptismal font to be bathed in the waters of regeneration. And, that same custom endures in the Easter liturgy to this day.

When we were baptized, no matter what age we were at the time, we went down with Christ into the waters and died to our old lives, but then rose up with him to a new life as adopted sons and daughters of God. And, this is not just a legal adoption but a true change, a true sharing in the very life and nature of God himself. We are transformed, recreated as his children who dare to call God, "Father." At the Easter Vigil, after the reading of the resurrection account of the Gospel, we witness the beautiful blessing of Easter water, which is then used to baptize the catechumens who have been preparing for many months to enter the Church. Like their forebears of the ancient Church, these men and women are led with great joy to the baptismal font where they are cleansed of sin and filled with the new life of our risen Savior. It is a vivid sign of what Easter is all about: Jesus Christ, who triumphed over death, now shares his own risen life with his people.

And so, in that same celebration of our Lord's resurrection, all the faithful join with the newly baptized in professing once again our Christian faith. With sober determination, we reject sin and all of its attractions, and we also reject Satan himself, who seeks to separate us from God. Then, with joyful confidence, we profess our faith in God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We also profess our faith in Christ's Church, his own mystical body. And, after that profession of faith, we are sprinkled with the newly blessed Easter water which links us mystically to those who are newly baptized and to our own baptism.

It is not merely an act of nostalgia that moves us to recall our own baptism at Easter. It is a true and deliberate affirmation of our faith in Christ, who died for us and is now risen. In this profession of Easter faith, we hearken back to that moment when Jesus forever changed us and made us heirs of his kingdom. We bear the indelible mark of baptism on our souls forever; for by baptism, we belong to Christ and can rise with him to eternal life. So, when we repeat those baptismal promises at Easter, it is not just a routine repetition of "I do's" to a series of questions.

It should be a profession, a declaration that we are changed, that we no longer live earthbound lives. We are citizens of heaven.

For the 40 days of Lent before Easter, we lived more penitentially through prayer, fasting and works of charity. We entered deeply into the mystery of Lent in order to live more fully in Christ. So, when we finally arrive at Easter, the transformation we experience is not meant to cease but to become even more vibrant and definitive. Our penance may be transformed into celebration, but the change worked upon us by our penance should endure. On Easter Sunday, we launch even more fervently into the risen life of Christ, the baptismal life of grace and holiness. The Resurrection of Christ changes us. Baptism changes us. Far from going back to business as usual, we declare in our baptismal promises on Easter that we intend to live our baptism more fully than ever as a foretaste of the eternal life to come.

In this Easter renewal of our baptismal faith, we also remember that by baptism we become part of the Catholic Church, which is the mystical Body of Christ, the People of God. Through baptism, we are incorporated into the risen Christ, and by that fact, we are incorporated into his Church. In other words, we are not only baptized into Christ, but we are baptized into his own family. Through our adoption as sons and daughters of God, we also become brothers and sisters to all those in the communion of faith that we call the Church. We are not baptized as isolated individuals but as members of a communion of faith and charity, the charity of Jesus himself. And, it is this faith and charity that should mark our lives on earth even to the moment that we enter into eternity.

I pray that this year's celebration of Easter will be a true celebration of new life for all of us. May we live our baptism into the Risen Christ with ever greater fervor, and may we share with others the joy that is ours. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! Alleluia!