

February 18, 2007

Cheesefare Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Those few years called "the public life" of Christ our Lord began with the ministry of John the Baptist, during the course of which Jesus too was baptized. This is the reason why the narrative of the primitive apostolic preaching tended to begin with John's ministry (Acts 1:21-22; 10:34-37; 13:23-25). The earliest of the Gospels, Mark's, also begins there.

John's baptism of Jesus has been the subject of some strange interpretations in modern times. Whereas the Church Fathers and the ancient Christian liturgical texts treat that event as the instance in which "the worship of the Trinity was made manifest" (Troparion of Theophany), some recent interpreters see in it the occasion on which Jesus of Nazareth became conscious of His special vocation. Others go further, regarding the Lord's baptism as the instance in which he became aware of His identity as God's Son.

The latter view I think to be absurd. While the doctrine of the Incarnation certainly implies that God's Son, as man, "increased in wisdom" (Luke 2:52), there is nothing in the biblical text to suggest that His increase was so egregiously delayed that Jesus was unaware of His true identity until He was "about thirty years of age" (3:23). Human growth in self-identity is rarely so sluggish. The mystery of the Incarnation means that God's Son became a human being, not an moron.

What about the other view, however, the opinion of those who regard His baptism as the event in which Jesus became conscious of His special vocation? This notion likewise strikes me as difficult to sustain. It appears, rather, that the Gospel writers themselves regarded the event of the Lord's baptism very much as it was regarded by the Church Fathers and the traditional liturgical texts, namely, as a revelation, not to Jesus, but to those who were present . . . and to the Church.

This interpretation is perhaps clearest in Matthew, where the Father's voice speaks of Jesus in the third person, "*This* is My beloved Son." In Luke the Holy Spirit's descent on Jesus was visible-He came down "in bodily form (*somatiko eidei*) like a dove." Finally, in the Fourth Gospel John the Baptist confesses, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'" In short, the true revelation at the Lord's baptism was addressed to others, not to the Lord.

Is there no sense, then, in which His reception of John's baptism meant nothing *new* to Jesus? Yes, I think there is, but I believe it has to do chiefly with a

determined resolve on the part of Jesus Himself. This idea, though it suggests an initial problem, points to a solution that touches on the very mystery of Redemption.

The supposed problem is this: Jesus came voluntarily to be baptized by John, even though John's was a baptism of repentance (Acts 19:4). Why would Jesus do this? After all, the entire witness of the New Testament declares that He was the "lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:19), "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners" (Hebrews 7:26), "the Holy One and the Just" (Acts 3:14), who "knew no sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Moreover, Jesus was conscious of being sinless, for He challenged His enemies, "Which of you convicts Me of sin?" (John 8:46) Why, then, did the unoffending Jesus seek a baptism of repentance?

The answer to this question has to do with the very motive of the Incarnation. God's Son, in the assumption of our humanity, took upon Himself a radical solidarity with fallen mankind. Even before His saving Passion, in which "He poured out His soul unto death," we already find Him "numbered with the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12). The voice from heaven signified God's acceptance of that redemptive resolve.

And this, I believe, is why Jesus approached John, seeking his baptism in order "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). It was not as a private citizen, so to speak, that Jesus came to the waters of the Jordan, but in order to present Himself to the Father as the representative of the human race in this great symbolic act of repentance. Jesus thereby expressed His resolve "to be made like His brethren" (Hebrews 2:17).

Jesus declared in the baptism of repentance His determination that no distance should separate Him from us.

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