

The Baptism of the Lord
January 12, 2025
Year of the Holy Spirit

“The Lord was baptized by His servant, and He, although destined to grant the remission of sins, did not disdain to have His body cleansed with the water of regeneration.” (Saint Cyprian, The Good of Patience 6).

In Saint Luke’s Gospel, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form. The form He chose would be that of a dove. The Fathers of the Church pondered why the Holy Spirit would choose to manifest His Presence in this manner. Their question—why a dove? Let us take this time to explore the answer they proposed along with its connection to the Old Testament (Covenant).

Saint Ambrose of Milan (340-397) was one of the first to offer an answer to this question of the dove. He likened the descent of the Holy Spirit to the dove featured in the story of Noah (Genesis 8:10-11). In verse 11, the dove returns to Noah carrying in her mouth a twig from an olive tree. The twig possessed green leaves which Noah understood as a sign the flood waters had begun to recede. Saint Ambrose, along with others, would conclude the Baptism of Jesus recalls this event from the Old Testament.

Allow me to explain, very briefly, how the connection between these two events was understood. In the days of Noah, the sinfulness of mankind had reached a critical junction. God chose to wash away this blight upon His creation through the use of a great flood. He would not destroy humanity completely. He found Noah, a righteous man, who would save a fraction of His creation through the construction of an ark. This wooden ark would ride above the turbulent water providing shelter and security for all those present within. The story of the dove, verse 11, carrying the olive twig foretells the peace of God which occurs only after the waters have receded.

Returning to the Baptism of Jesus, we see this story of Noah provided a deeper meaning. Noah must now be viewed as an image of Jesus. Both are tasked with saving creation steeped in sin. Both will use wood to construct a means to this salvation. Noah, through his ark of wood. Jesus, through His Cross and His Church born that day of His sacrifice. The ark and the Church provide to those found within a means toward this salvation. In both accounts, water plays an important role in washing away sin. Yet unlike the waters of the flood, Jesus blesses all water through His Baptism. Water becomes a symbol for death and life. The Holy Spirit, in the form of the dove, comes to bring peace. He reminds all that present within the Church of Christ is the means for a peace which saves despite the raging waters of sin found engulfing the world.

My family, this same idea still holds true today. Jesus has established His Church to seek sinful man, wherever he may be found, and offer him an opportunity to be saved through Baptism. It is our baptism in water which, through His Passion, washes away our sins. The Church remains the ark lifting us above the surrounding destruction threatening to drown us all. May we seek to remain within its sheltered boughs.