

Vatican II and the Year of Faith: Baptism and Christian Unity

During the Year of Faith, Catholics can receive a plenary indulgence by making a pilgrimage to the place of their baptism to renew their baptismal promises. For some of us, this means traveling to a non-Catholic Church. Does this seem odd? Renewing one's commitment to the Catholic Faith in a non-Catholic Church? In fact, this act points to something very important: that the Catholic faith exists "to reconcile. . . all things." (Colossians 1:20) Through the sacraments, Christ draws all men to himself. (John 12:32) Baptism is not a source of division. It is the foundation of our unity.

When a minister baptizes, it is really Christ himself who baptizes. And baptism draws us into communion with Christ, into His Body the Church. This means that every valid baptism brings the recipient, if only incipiently, into the Catholic Church. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council taught this doctrine with particular clarity:

Men who believe in Christ and have been truly baptized are in communion with the Catholic Church even though this communion is imperfect. The differences that exist in varying degrees between them and the Catholic Church-whether in doctrine and sometimes in discipline, or concerning the structure of the Church-do indeed create many obstacles, sometimes serious ones, to full ecclesiastical communion. The ecumenical movement is striving to overcome these obstacles. But even in spite of them it remains true that all who have been justified by faith in Baptism are members of Christ's body, and have a right to be called Christian, and so are correctly accepted as brothers by the children of the Catholic Church. (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3)

This doctrine has number of positive implications. First, it means that when a baptized Christian fully embraces the Catholic Faith, he is returning to the Church of his baptism. It is literally a homecoming. I know I experienced this sense of homecoming when I became Catholic. For years before I was Catholic, I had studied Christian history in frustration. I felt cut off from 1500 years of the Church's heritage, even from the roots of Western society. When I finally became Catholic, it was with a palpable sense of relief. Finally! To be connected fully to that source of grace that had been drawing me from the day of my baptism!

The council's teaching also means that a non-Catholic does not have to reject the good things in his upbringing, those "elements of sanctification and of truth" that God put in his path to lead him home. Jesus once compared the Kingdom of God to a fishing net. (Matthew 13:47) It is as if these elements of sanctification are so many threads drawn through the world to take hold of us, and draw us more fully to Christ.

I once attended a baptism in a Baptist Church that brought this home to me. In the typical Baptist Church, the pulpit is at the front and center of the Church, where Catholics would have an altar. Behind this you find the baptistery, where Catholics would place the tabernacle. Those two elements that we share in common with the Baptists- the Scriptures and baptism - were prominently placed. However, the main sacrament we do not share, Holy Communion, was missing from the Church's architecture. The building's very structure testified to the only

imperfect union of these baptized believers with the Catholic Church. And yet, there was still a union. There were "elements of sanctification and of truth" uniting them, however, imperfectly, with the Catholic Church.

I'm planning this year on traveling to the Church of my baptism to gain this indulgence for the Year of Faith. Standing in front of the pulpit where I first heard the Word of God, I shall renounce the works of the Devil and reaffirm my belief in the articles of faith. I'm looking forward to the indulgence, but I'm also looking forward to the symbolic gesture. I'm grateful for my upbringing. Parents, pastors, and teachers taught me to reverence the Bible, to believe in God, and to trust in Christ for my salvation. They also brought me to the Church for baptism. I didn't know it at the time, but this started my journey into the heart of the Catholic Faith. I'm looking forward to saying, "Thank you."