

Mass in the Sistine Chapel and Baptisms - January 8, 2006

Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI

Dear Parents and Godparents,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

What happens in baptism? What do we hope for from baptism? You have given a response on the threshold of this chapel: We hope for eternal life for our children. This is the purpose of baptism. But how can it be obtained? How can baptism offer eternal life? What is eternal life?

In simpler words, we might say: We hope for a good life, the true life, for these children of ours; and also for happiness in a future that is still unknown. We are unable to guarantee this gift for the entire span of the unknown future, so we turn to the Lord to obtain this gift from him. We can give two replies to the question, "How will these happen?" This is the first one: Through baptism each child is inserted into a gathering of friends who never abandon him in life or in death because these companions are God's family, which in itself bears the promise of eternity.

This group of friends, this family of God, into which the child is now admitted, will always accompany him, even on days of suffering and in life's dark nights; it will give him consolation, comfort and light. This companionship, this family, will give him words of eternal life, words of light in response to the great challenges of life, and will point out to him the right path to take. This group will also offer the child consolation and comfort, and God's love when death is at hand, in the dark valley of death. It will give him friendship, it will give him life. And these totally trustworthy companions will never disappear.

No one of us knows what will happen on our planet, on our European continent, in the next 50, 60 or 70 years. But we can be sure of one thing: God's family will always be present and those who belong to this family will never be alone. They will always be able to fall back on the steadfast friendship of the One who is life. And, thus, we have arrived at the second answer. This family of God, this gathering of friends is eternal, because it is communion with the One who conquered death and holds in his hand the keys of life. Belonging to this circle, to God's family, means being in communion with Christ, who is life and gives eternal love beyond death. And if we can say that love and truth are sources of life, are life itself -- and a life without love is not life -- we can say that this companionship with the One who is truly life, with the One who is the Sacrament of life, will respond to your expectation, to your hope.

Yes, baptism inserts us into communion with Christ and therefore gives life, life itself. We have thus interpreted the first dialogue we had with him here at the entrance to the Sistine Chapel.

Now, after the blessing of the water, a second dialogue of great importance will follow. This is its content: Baptism, as we have seen, is a gift; the gift of life. But a gift must be accepted, it must be lived. A gift of friendship implies a "yes" to the friend and a "no" to all that is incompatible with this friendship, to all that is incompatible with the life of God's family, with true life in Christ.

Consequently, in this second dialogue, three "noes" and three "yeses" are spoken. We say "no" and renounce temptation, sin and the devil. We know these things well but perhaps, precisely because we have heard them too often, the words may not mean much to us. If this is the case, we must think a little more deeply about the content of these "noes." What are we saying "no" to? This is the only way to understand what we want to say "yes" to.

In the ancient Church these "noes" were summed up in a phrase that was easy to understand for the people of that time: They renounced, they said, the "pompa diabuli," that is, the promise of life in abundance, of that apparent life that seemed to come from the pagan world, from its permissiveness, from its way of living as one pleased. It was therefore "no" to a culture of what seemed to be an abundance of life, to what in fact was an "anti-culture" of death. It was "no" to those spectacles in which death, cruelty and violence had become an entertainment. Let us remember what was organized at the Colosseum or here, in Nero's gardens, where people were set on fire like living torches. Cruelty and violence had become a form of

amusement, a true perversion of joy, of the true meaning of life.

This "*pompa diabuli*," this "anti-culture" of death was a corruption of joy; it was love of deceit and fraud and the abuse of the body as a commodity and a trade. And if we think about it now, we can say that also in our time we need to say "no" to the widely prevalent culture of death.

It is an "anti-culture" manifested, for example, in drugs, in the flight from reality to what is illusory, to a false happiness expressed in deceit, fraud, injustice and contempt for others, for solidarity, and for responsibility for the poor and the suffering; it is expressed in a sexuality that becomes sheer irresponsible enjoyment, that makes the human person into a "thing," so to speak, no longer considered a person who deserves personal love which requires fidelity, but who becomes a commodity, a mere object.

Let us say "no" to this promise of apparent happiness, to this "pompa" of what may seem to be life but is in fact merely an instrument of death, and to this "anti-culture," in order to cultivate instead the culture of life. For this reason, the Christian "yes," from ancient times to our day, is a great "yes" to life. It is our "yes" to Christ, our "yes" to the Conqueror of death and the "yes" to life in time and in eternity.

Just as in this baptismal dialogue the "no" is expressed in three renunciations, so too the "yes" is expressed in three expressions of loyalty: "yes" to the living God, that is, a God Creator and a creating reason who gives meaning to the cosmos and to our lives; "yes" to Christ, that is, to a God who did not stay hidden but has a name, words, a body and blood; to a concrete God who gives us life and shows us the path of life; "yes" to the communion of the Church, in which Christ is the living God who enters our time, enters our profession, enters daily life.

We might also say that the Face of God, the content of this culture of life, the content of our great "yes," is expressed in the Ten Commandments, which are not a pack of prohibitions, of "noes," but actually present a great vision of life. They are a "yes" to a God who gives meaning to life (the first three Commandments); a "yes" to the family (Fourth Commandment); a "yes" to life (Fifth Commandment); a "yes" to responsible love (Sixth Commandment); a "yes" to solidarity, to social responsibility, to justice (Seventh Commandment); a "yes" to the truth (Eighth Commandment); a "yes" to respect for others and for their belongings (Ninth and Tenth Commandments).

This is the philosophy of life, the culture of life that becomes concrete and practical and beautiful in communion with Christ, the living God, who walks with us in the companionship of his friends, in the great family of the Church. Baptism is a gift of life. It is a "yes" to the challenge of really living life, of saying "no" to the attack of death that presents itself under the guise of life; and it is a "yes" to the great gift of true life that became present on the Face of Christ, who gives himself to us in baptism and subsequently in the Eucharist.

I said this as a brief comment on the words in the baptismal dialogue that interpret what happens in this sacrament. In addition to the words, we have gestures and symbols, but I will just point them out very briefly. We have already made the first gesture: It is the Sign of the Cross, which is given to us as a shield that must protect this child in his life; and as an "indicator" that points out the way of life, for the Cross sums up Jesus' life.

Then, there are the elements: water, the anointing with oil, the white garment and the flame of the candle. Water is the symbol of life: Baptism is new life in Christ. The oil is the symbol of strength, health and beauty, for it truly is beautiful to live in communion with Christ. Then, there is the white garment, as an expression of the culture of beauty, of the culture of life. And lastly, the flame of the candle is an expression of the truth that shines out in the darkness of history and points out to us who we are, where we come from and where we must go.

Dear godparents, dear parents, dear brothers and sisters, let us thank the Lord today, for God does not hide behind clouds of impenetrable mystery but, as today's Gospel said, has opened the heavens, he has shown himself, he talks to us and is with us; he lives with us and guides us in our lives. Let us thank the Lord for this gift and pray for our children, so that they may truly have life: authentic, eternal life. Amen.