



Pastor's Pen

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BAPTISM AND DISCIPLESHIP

The question of what makes a person a Christian can be a conversation stopper. Many of us have been confronted by the street evangelist asking, “Are you a Christian?” Surprised or even stunned, we may have stumbled, “I am Catholic,” response with the potential to elicit a diatribe against the Catholic Church and an image of an easy poach for the street minister. For the record, Catholics are Christians and we recognize anyone as a fellow Christian who is baptized with the biblical baptismal formula from Matthew 28 “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

The challenging question of our Christianity can be unnerving, if we are not confident in our faith or do not have strong assurance that we are living it out. Our lack of knowledge or a conscious decision to practice the faith makes us “low hanging fruit” for street ministers trying to increase numbers of people “saved.” Unnerving as it is, the question is honest and real. What makes a Christian? Accepting that baptism makes us Christian, it is easy for us to see baptized people not living very Christian lives and creating confusion about what then makes a Christian. It presents the question about whether or not we are Christians.

As I meet more and more faithful Christians who are not Catholic and engage in honest dialogue, it becomes clear to me that what (especially) evangelical Christians are talking about when they say “Christian” is what we would term “Disciple.” The question is at least in part a terminology issue. We believe our baptism makes us Christian, but our baptism, filled with grace and a call to holiness, does not assure that we will be faithful disciples. In the evangelical mind, a decision to turn one’s life over to Christ is what makes them Christian. In simple terms, our baptism makes us Christian but does not guarantee that we will be *good* Christians or disciples of Jesus Christ.

When we baptize, Catholic clergy “make” Christians. We do not make disciples, however. Baptism brings the grace to be Christian and be part of God’s family, but our personal choice makes us disciples of Jesus Christ. The personal decision to be a disciple is affected by many factors. The most significant factor is family. If parents live and model discipleship, children are likely to do so as well. Our baptismal ritual calls on parents, family, parish, and Church to be supporters and witnesses for a child to live in Christ. Many of us can easily point to our faith development rooted in doing what our parents did before we owned it for ourselves, but eventually, it has to be a conscious decision to be a disciple. The greater the challenges we face in living the faith, the more important and more difficult that conscious discipleship decision becomes.

In times not that long ago, simply being Christian was not a challenge. It helped us fit in and most people understood “going to church” no matter where it was. That is no more. Christianity without discipleship is slipping away in our culture. That is scary, but it also brings great opportunities to get to the foundation of our faith, know it, and share Jesus Christ with great joy. The question about whether we are Christian or not can be irritating and maybe even insulting, but it need not be. It can refocus us on living for Jesus Christ and not be Christians in name only, but also in living our lives.

The Baptism of the Lord gives us the chance to reflect on the gift of becoming part of God’s family. That is essential, but so too is the call that comes with it. The call to holiness is the call to discipleship. Our baptism begins our life of discipleship, but only our conscious decision to live it out continues it. That living out of our baptismal call requires us to participate in the mission of making others disciples of Jesus Christ. The glory of the Lord has shone on us in a dark world, and with that glory and the gift of baptism comes great responsibility. As a parish family, it is our task to prepare people for discipleship and mission.

Our baptism makes us Christians. It does not make us disciples. Our decision to follow him, pick up our Cross, live for him and participate in His mission makes us disciples. We are Christians. Let’s live like Christians.