



Christian Education

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From the clergy and members
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Comment:
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From Luke's Gospel, the second chapter and fortieth verse: *"The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him."*

On my recent trip to Cebu after Christmas I got to visit again the famous basilica of the Santo Niño. There, the object of devotion is the small statue of the 'Holy Infant of Prague'- portraying the Child Jesus holding a royal scepter and orb- supposedly given by Magellan to the wife of datu Humabon and discovered years later virtually undamaged in the charred remains of a native village. Very interesting to me is the museum in the basilica complex that displays not only the various vestments and crowns used over the centuries to adorn the little statue, but also the gifts people have brought from all over the world. Perhaps the most novel gifts were the *toys*, an obvious choice for any "*niño*", but somewhat disturbing as gifts to *Jesus*. One wonders just Whom it was that these gifts were intended for: Jesus Christ our Lord, or a small child who, like Peter Pan, just never grew up!

Local sociologists of religion have often observed how the Santo Niño somehow answers a need in the Filipino psyche to have a God that one can not only love and cherish, but also dominate. It is, after all, easier to demand miracles of a child than of an adult. It is even reported that in Aklan on Panay, worshipers praying for rain will *threaten the Christ Child with drowning* if He does not perform on demand! So all of those little "Santo Niños" that we see in homes and shops throughout the land are both piously cute and at the same time dangerously symbolic of a god that one can keep forever as a child- lovable, approachable, sometimes a "holy terror", but most often safely under control.

So it is not only appropriate, but even vitally important for us to celebrate the theme of this day: Christ's Baptism. Even more than the familiar, but difficult story of Jesus going to the Temple when He is twelve years old, the Gospel today reminds us that the Baby in the Manger didn't stay that way any longer than babies do today. Indeed, today he is shown as a grown man, taking the responsibilities for a life that would be anything but childish.

Baptisms in church are still usually of infants or small children. Few, if any of those who participate in such services are thinking about the future life of the child or the adult faith that he or she must one day assume on himself. For most the rite is one of the celebration of babyhood and of each adorable *niño* or *niña*. The response to the liturgy is more often "Awwww..." rather than "Amen."

But adult baptisms are coming back into fashion. As the "do your own thing" decades have passed, those whose parents did not bring them to church as children are discovering the need for a personal faith, and one involving an historical faith community to give it foundation and authenticity. Adult baptisms are quite a different animal than those of infants. Although the same words are used, everyone present feels the importance of an adult decision being made, and adult consequences being risked. It is moving, and it is inspirational to all who are present in a very different way than the cuteness and natural innocence of babies. In adults, one can really see baptism as "rebirth."

Christ's Baptism, as we hear about it in Scripture, is a deeply symbolic episode. There are significant meanings to everything in the story: from the location in the Jordan River; to the prophetic voice of the Isaiah-like John the Baptist; to the suggestion of the Trinity in the person of the baptized Christ, the presence of the spiritual dove and the affirming voice of the Father- all of this, and forty days in the wilderness to boot- a theme worthy in its own right of an extended bible study! But beyond, or at least beside the symbols is the act: the act of a grown man affirming what God had planned for His life in the great adventure of Salvation. There had to be a beginning; there had to be a start for the proclamation of the Good News of God

being personified in Jesus and this event was it. Jesus accepts His destiny at this moment and puts His human life in the hands of a God who wouldn't spare Him the agony, but would also share with Him the glory, and whose life would give meaning to real-life human existence with all its adult problems and concerns. Christ trusted in and proclaimed a grown-up God for grown-up people. And the Christian faith continues to share with the world that challenging belief.

In the election year that is upon us, we will hear religion and piety used a great deal both in this country and others where Christianity is still claimed to have power in men's lives. The Philippines, with its long history of devotion and loyalty to the Church, will also be tempted to enlist God's help in this or that campaign and will try to make Him seem to be a powerful sponsor of this or that candidate. Like the Santo Niño again, God will be seen as a helpless child, able to perform miracles on command, but too naïve to figure out what's really going on in the hearts and minds of either the *políticos*, or the *masa*. And God will not be pleased with such condescension. If there is any time that the Santo Niño needs to grow up, it is now.

The vows that are taken in a baptism, although so often surrounding a tiny baby, commit a person to a life of challenge: and by that I mean not only *being* challenged because of one's Christian faith, but also being willing *to challenge* the status quo in a fallen world.

The Christian must experience the growing pains that Christ did: the discovery of what one's destiny is and what God's real role in one's life will be. These are things that we most often hide from children with the fond assurance that "You'll understand some day." But these are things that demand our understanding now as the world grows more compromised, the faith grows weaker, and the darkness of evil becomes so much more clever at disguising itself as the light.

May Our Lord's Baptism remind us that the Christ Child grew up and became an adult, and that we are called to do the same- and to do so now. As St. Paul famously writes, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways." May we, as adults, see the rite of Christian Baptism with new eyes: not as the celebration

of childhood, but as the affirmation of a mature faith, and as the challenge to take that faith seriously.