

The Life Aquatic – Underwater Ministry

January 6, 2021 by Fr. Stephen Freeman

<https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/glory2godforallthings/2021/01/06/the-life-aquatic-underwater-ministry/>



The Baptism of Jesus is an event that, in many Churches, is passed over in relative silence. At most, they treat it as an act of obedience or humility. Christ is clearly not in need of repentance (He has no sin), and yet He insists that John should baptize Him. The Holy Spirit is seen to descend and rest upon Him at the completion of this act. That, in sum, is almost everything said about His Baptism throughout much of the Christian world.

Not so, in Orthodoxy. The feast of Christ’s Baptism (known as Theophany), is one of the three greatest feasts of the year: Christmas, Theophany, Pascha. The three feasts are similar. Their iconography has intentional “rhyming” elements, and the liturgical pattern is similar. Pascha is, of course, the truly Great Feast, the other two being lesser, or little “Paschas.” Christmas is sometimes called the “Winter Pascha.”

In the cultures where Orthodoxy dominates, Theophany sees large public gatherings. In Greece, young men dive into the waters to retrieve a Cross that is thrown as part of the

Blessing of the Waters. In Russia, people plunge themselves into the icy waters of her frozen rivers. Everywhere in the Orthodox world, the Feast centers around water. It also initiates the season in which priests visit the homes of the faithful in order to bless them (with water). That such festivities are absent in Western Christian traditions is of note. It signals that some fundamental understanding that permeates the Orthodox world is largely absent elsewhere. Something essential is seen as peripheral.

For lack of a better phrase, I will describe this difference as rooted in the “culture of Atonement.” The most fundamental aspect of Christian belief is found in how we understand the actions and ministry of Christ. St. Paul offers the simple creedal formula: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.”(1 Cor. 15:3) To that simple statement, every Christian group would (or should) say, “Amen.” But the agreement seems to vanish beyond that point. To say more than “Christ died for our sins” immediately requires some notion of how “atonement” occurs. At its root, the question is, “How does Christ’s death reconcile us with God (make for at-one-ment)?” To answer that question, it is also necessary to say what it is that separates us from God. What is the nature of sin such that it is a problem?

It is around these questions that the “cultures of Atonement” begin to differentiate. As a matter of historical fact, the answer to these questions was never singular. The New Testament presents something of a “spectrum,” drawing on any number of metaphors when the subject is addressed. What can be said, for sure, is that, over time, and for a variety of reasons, those metaphors tended to separate themselves. East and West, particularly as they became estranged, developed different “cultures” as they spoke on these matters. Using broad strokes, we can say that the East tended to describe the Atonement in *ontological* terms, terms that described sin as death, a movement from being towards non-being, as the problem, and Christ’s death-as-a-union with us in our death, and our union-with-His-life, as the solution. He becomes what we are that we might become what He is. The West tended to describe the atonement in *juridical* terms, terms that described sin as a legal debt that required a payment. Sin was seen as a legal problem and Christ’s atonement was explained as a legal solution. Christ’s death paid for our sins.

It is little wonder that the West could see very little importance in the Baptism of Christ. There was no “problem” being solved. He had no sin, and Baptism was understood only in that sin-as-legal-problem mode. Thus, His Baptism is reduced to an example of His meekness. On the other hand, in the East, where sin is an ontological question, a movement towards death, Christ’s Baptism is seen as an act of His uniting Himself to us in our sin.

“For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” (2 Corinthians 5:21)

The “rhyming” of Nativity, Theophany, and Pascha, are founded in this Eastern culture of Atonement. In each case, there is Christ uniting Himself to us in our sin that we might be united to Him in His righteousness. In the Nativity, Christ’s birth is a birth into a broken and dark world, an entrance into our ontological hell. Icons of the Nativity typically portray the cave where the Child was born in a manner that is reminiscent of the depiction of Hades in the Paschal icon. Similarly, the icons of Christ’s Baptism, portray the place where Christ is Baptized in a manner that also shows it to be a descent into Hades, an entrance into our ontological darkness.

The hymnography associated with Christ’s Baptism draws all of this in fine focus. From the sixth of the Royal Hours:

“O Prophet,” the Lord now says to John,
“come and baptize Me, thy Creator,
for I cleanse and enlighten all with grace!
Touch My divine head and do not hesitate!
O Prophet, let it be so now;
for I have come to fulfill all righteousness!
Make haste; for I hasten to destroy the Enemy,
the prince of darkness, hidden in the waters,
that I might deliver the world from his snares,
and in My love grant eternal life!”

In this “culture of the Atonement,” we see the solidarity of our life in Christ as well as our solidarity with those who are “lost.” Apart from Christ, we are drowning beneath the waters of the Flood, a life that is less than life and, instead, something that is marked only as destruction. We are the people of Noah’s world, and sinful Egyptians pursuing and persecuting the truth, even as the waters are crashing down on us. Our death is not simply a drowning, but a drowning under waters of chaos.

The floods have lifted up, O LORD,
The floods have lifted up their voice;
The floods lift up their waves.

Christ comes to us under the waters, beneath the waves of chaos. His ministry is an underwater ministry.

It is there, beneath the waves, that we find Him. It is to be noted that all who come to Him are immediately plunged beneath the waters. It is our union with Him. Baptized into His death, just as He was Baptized into our death, so we are Baptized into His resurrection, for He has overcome the waters. We, too, now have an underwater ministry as we seek to save those who are lost. There are moments of sheer resurrection in which we also become water walkers, as winds and seas obey Him. And He rescues us yet again as our unsteady feet, guided by an unsteady faith, begin to slip back under the waves. Buried with Him in the waters of Baptism, we are raised in the likeness of His resurrection. As He is, so are we in this world. Our ministry is beneath the waves. We daily enter into the aquatic life that we might save some who are drowning. Here, we hasten to destroy the Enemy, hidden in the waters, trampling Him underfoot in the name of Christ.

Christ is Baptized! Glorify Him!