



DIOCESE OF FAIRBANKS

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OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I have many vivid memories of Easter from my childhood, but the one that stands out most vividly is holding a candle and renewing my baptismal promises at the Easter Vigil. I didn't completely understand why we renewed our vows, renounced sin, and professed faith in Our Risen Lord. But I was proud to hold my little lit candle in the dark and reconfirm my faith in Jesus Christ, whom I loved very much with the simple devotion of a child.

In the past year, I have begun to reflect more on Easter's profound connection to our baptism. Unfortunately, the Resurrection of the Son of God too often seems overshadowed by the commercial focus on stuffed rabbits and chocolates. But St. Paul succinctly reminds us of the "reason for the season": "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into his death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:3-4).

We can gain insight into our own baptism by studying the baptism of Jesus. John prepared people for Christ's coming by baptizing them in the Jordan River. Like many mighty rivers, the Jordan was powerful and even violent at times, yet it was also a source of life for God's people. I am reminded of this duality whenever I visit villages along the Yukon River, which runs through most of our diocese. The mighty Yukon's floods have destroyed entire villages over the centuries, and its frigid, turbulent waters have claimed the lives of many good people. And yet, the Yukon sustains life, too, providing salmon year after year, and creating a watery (or icy) road villagers can use en route to hunting moose and gathering berries to feed their families.

God clearly has used the powerful symbol of water throughout salvation history to represent cleansing and freedom from bondage: Noah and the flood, Jonah in the belly of a whale, Moses parting the Red Sea to deliver Israel from slavery. At the Jordan, Jesus mixed with sinners who had approached John for baptism. John humbly acknowledges that it ought to be Jesus who should baptize him, but Jesus responds, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt. 3:15). In Jesus of Nazareth, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI explains that Jesus's response is "an unrestricted Yes to God's will, as an obedient acceptance of his will" (p. 17). As Jesus plunged into the Jordan, he publicly accepts God's will to incur humanity's sin and guilt; his rising from the river points to the cleansing power of the Crucifixion and Resurrection. He made the waters of baptism holy for us, so that we might be cleansed of the guilt of original sin and its effects, which we can see are alive and well in our broken world today.

Then the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove and God reveals himself as a relationship of persons. Those present heard one of the most profound statements in the Gospels: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt. 3:17). This and the Transfiguration are the only two times in Scripture that God the Father speaks openly and he does so both times to affirm Christ as his Son and our Savior. God's declaration of Christ's sonship draws us to share in that life-giving communion of the Holy Trinity. In effect, "I want my children to be part of our family and I will do whatever it takes to make that possible--even if it means being nailed to a Cross."

We experience this again every Easter, when we are either baptized into God's family or renew our baptismal promises. The waters of baptism and the movement of divine grace "make an end of sin and a new beginning of goodness" (*Roman Missal*, Blessing of the Water). This relationship is joyfully declared when the priest or deacon pronounces that the newly baptized is "a child of God, for so indeed you are." In the sonship of Jesus, God declares that we, too, are his adopted sons and daughters. The reality of our baptism, as announced in the baptism of Jesus, is a familial relationship indelibly etched onto our soul, never be taken away, which is why we are only baptized once.

In a few days, we would normally gather at our parishes to celebrate the Resurrection at the Easter Vigil or Easter Sunday. We would hold our lighted candle to represent our baptismal candle and reaffirm that we are God's sons and daughters. We would acknowledge the reality of Satan, who still prowls about the world seeking the ruin of souls and admit we face temptation and cannot become holy on our own. Finally, we would profess our faith in Christ, whose grace supports us in this earthly journey and promises us the hope of eternal life through his Resurrection after death.

Unfortunately, with the coronavirus pandemic, it will not be possible to gather together in our parishes this Easter. I know this is painful for many of you, but we must remember that while the sacraments are God's normal way of transmitting grace to us, they are not the only way. God is not bound by his sacraments. We can be confident that Our Risen Lord is with us even in our private Holy Week and Easter celebrations at home, just as he has been with all believers throughout history who have been separated from the Mass and sacraments due to war, plagues, or political oppression. I am reminded of the early Japanese converts, who for centuries, endured brutal persecution, yet maintained a strong underground faith that they passed on for generations until Christianity could be practiced freely again. We may not have access to the Mass this Easter, but we still have the freedom to practice our faith openly and we have so many spiritual resources at our disposal to help us do so, such as livestream Masses, the rosary, the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, and Sacred Scripture. Like priests, lay people also have access to the Divine Office, which is actually a form of liturgy, the prayer of Christ in and through his Church for us.

I would encourage all families to make a renewal of their baptismal promises this Easter from their homes. Light candles, profess our faith, and renounce Satan. And above all, rejoice in the Risen Christ, whose victory over death transcends all suffering. Let us focus not on our isolation and separation, but on the deeper reality: that we are God's sons and daughters and brothers and sisters to one another, redeemed by the Resurrected Lord no matter where we are on Easter morning. We are never truly alone because we are a *family*, united by the Holy Spirit in baptism. A family whose love can bring healing and renewal to our wounded world.

May God bless you and your families with a most joyful Easter! What an honor and joy it is to announce God's desire for us all to join his family, brothers and sisters through the power of the Risen Christ. Alleluia!

Sincerely in Christ,



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