

Baptizing the World, Part One

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

Until the fourth century, the Christian Church continued to celebrate one feast, for the birth of Christ and his baptism together. The feast marked one occasion to celebrate two divine events. However, after the Byzantine emperor, Constantine the Great, converted to Christianity followed by many others, starting in the fourth century, their new religious practices started to become mixed with the pagan customs and ceremonies previously ingrained in their conscience, which conflicted with their new faith. This forced the Church to confront and overcome the new challenge by Christianizing it.

The feast of the sun god was a great feast in the Roman Empire, especially in the East. Feasts are always, unfortunately, occasions to escape morality for many. When new believers continued to celebrate this feast alongside the Christian feasts, the Church, the pillar of truth, decided to separate Christmas from Theophany and assign a special feast for it – independent feasts for the Lord's birth and baptism. The feast of baptism remained on January 6, and Christmas was moved to December 25, the date of the feast of the sun.

Therefore, those who attend the prayers and liturgical services will notice an almost complete similarity in the structure of the two festal services.

The Christmas apolytikion uses the title "Sun of Justice" for Christ: "For they that worshipped the stars learned through a star (the light of the knowledge of Christ) to worship Thee, O Sun of Justice." Thus, in time, the pagan festival became Christianized, and Christians began to celebrate in a manner befitting their faith.

This is what we call the Christianization, or baptism, of the world. It consists of adopting an existing practice and giving it a Christian meaning. Let us take baptism as a second example. Water in ancient civilization was a source of fear and danger. Ancient man did not have the ability to confront floods, torrents, heavy rains and their aftermath, let alone seas and rivers. Water was considered a source of uncontrollable chaos, and was called, in the Old Testament, "chaos." The god of water was a fearsome god. However, water was also considered a sign of purification and cleanliness, and a tangible proof of the inner purity towards which the repentant person turns. Therefore, it was used in most religions as a symbol of purification and inner cleanliness.

St. John the Baptist called for the baptism of repentance, which was a sign of a change in the baptized person's behavior and taking a new path, well pleasing to God and in accordance with the divine commandments. Would the Baptist have called for this water baptism if this practice was unknown and unfamiliar to his contemporaries? Christ came and accepted John's baptism, to teach us "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). He also asked his disciples to baptize those to whom they preached in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19).

Baptism by water was no longer a mere sign, but became, in Christ, a spiritual rebirth, divine sonship for the baptized, forgiveness of sins, a garment of incorruption, etc. It was no longer a symbol or image of a deeper meaning, but a real act bearing divine grace. In other words, Christianity adopted a familiar practice, gave it a completely new meaning, and arranged a special ritual for its completion, commensurate with the faith.

The same is true for many other things.

Some people try to ridicule Christianity on the grounds that it adopted rituals and practices that existed long before it, and therefore are not of its own invention. Their argument is that the rituals were taken from what came before Christianity – as if the authenticity of a subject lies only in its invention!

Baptizing the World, Part Two

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The principle of Christianizing life, society, and traditions is natural in Christianity and all religions. Since religion encompasses all aspects of life, it is natural for it to imbue them with its spiritual hue on the one hand, and to adopt some of them and make them its own, on the other hand. This does not detract from Christianity; on the contrary, it gains a higher value. When Christianity absorbed practices of older religions, it proved that it could give them new meaning, and showed it could fulfill people's spiritual aspirations, satisfy their hunger for true life, and give meaning to their existence.

By baptizing the good things that came before it, Christianity proved its ability to grant people their aspirations for spirituality, as well as moral and societal values. Directed towards humanity, Christianity has completed the good things and made them a means of salvation.

This leads us to reflect a little on our spiritual and pastoral reality. The rhythm of life in today's societies is no longer limited to the religious aspect because they have become irreligious, or simply satisfied with superficial religion. Materialism has become predominant, par excellence, in all aspects of life. Man has been deprived of one of his most important dimensions, and he no longer finds the spring capable of quenching his thirst. The rush to possess material things is not a sign of a healthy lifestyle, but rather a confirmation of an inner void seeking fulfillment in the ephemeral things of this world.

As pastors and believers, we should reflect on how to baptize and Christianize today's world, addressing it and reaching it in a language that is faithful to the faith. This requires, on the one hand, a deep understanding of humanity in general, and contemporary humanity in particular; and on the other hand, a deep, rooted understanding of the Christian faith, with a pure conscience filled with and inspired by the Holy Spirit.

A quick look at some of the new methods of care in our ecclesiastical reality reveals a frightening superficiality regarding interactions of faith and humanity, in many cases. For example, holding a New Year's Eve party in a church building does not mean that it has become a Christian party. If it is organized like other parties in public places, it will not bring about anything new. It would mark a secularization of

Christianity, a confirmation of the licentious worldliness that characterizes other parties, and an illusion of protection in the minds of believers. Traditions cannot be easily and lightly baptized, replacing one with another, especially if they have similar forms!

The goal of the Church, the body of Christ, is to open man to the love of Christ and His living presence, not to replace worldly activities with similar ones within a purported “Christian” framework!

Baptizing the world means converting it to Christ, not coloring secular things with an external Christian hue. The challenge today before believers is great in this regard. Current pastoral practices, behaviors and conducts need serious scrutiny and examination to uncover hidden errors. This requires that the Church pays much more attention to pastoral care, and that believers help to establish a true Christian climate, not to pressure pastors to secularize pastoral care.

May we, in the spirit of prayer and in the presence of the Holy Spirit, discern what is necessary for our preaching to be upright and our witness to be faithful, so that we may contribute to the salvation of mankind for whom God came.