

THEOPHANY - CHRIST'S BAPTISM - FEAST OF LIGHTS



The Baptism of our Lord, Jesus Christ

Jesus came as a "great light" to those who languished in darkness. No other word describes Christ as accurately as the word light. He comes as a light to those who sit in the darkness of despair. He lights candles of love, joy, forgiveness, peace, and meaning in the lives of people today.

In the early Church, Theophany - the day of Christ's baptism - became the day on which the converts to Christianity were received into the Church through baptism. Each newly baptized person held the baptismal candle during the liturgy. Christians who had already been baptized brought their baptismal candles to church on this day to renew their baptismal vows; to renew the commitment to Christ which they had made at baptism.

As a result, everyone in the congregation held a lighted candle on the feast of Theophany. The churches became the sea of lights. For this reason, this day came to be called the Feast of Lights.

The baptismal candle, in the early Church, was a symbol that the one who was baptized had received Christ who is the Light of the world. The candle would be kept by the one baptized and then brought to Church on the anniversary of one's baptism, the feast of Theophany and for the Easter Vigil liturgy. If the person was married, the same candle was used at the wedding. If he was ordained, he would light the candle at his ordination. When the final hour of life approached, it was lit again as the soul went forth to meet the Lord. The baptismal candle was a constant reminder for the Christian to live and die by the light of Christ.

The baptismal candle may be compared to the lamps used in the story of the maidens who awaited the arrival of Christ the Bridegroom in the darkness of the night. When the newly baptized person was given the lighted candle, she was urged to keep it to meet Christ at his return, like the wise maidens who kept their lamps burning for the coming of the Bridegroom. Thus the candle becomes a symbol of the perseverance of the baptized soul until Christ's return. Among the ancient Greeks the runner who had won the race was not the one who crossed the line in the shortest time, but the one who crossed it in the least time with his candle still burning. Our goal as Christians is that we may cross the line into eternity with the light of our baptismal faith still shining brightly.

Christ Himself is the light. His light shines today proclaiming to all of us: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). The light that God gives us for our present darkness was expressed so well by Louise Haskins:

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:

"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."

And he replied: "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God.

That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."

Resources: "A Byzantine Rite. Liturgical Year." Julian J. Katrij, OSBM. Basilian Fathers Publication. Detroit, 1983.
<http://lit.royaldoors.net/2013/12/09/january-6-2014-the-holy-theophany-of-our-lord-god-and-saviour-jesus-christ/>

Christ is Baptized! In the River Jordan!
Fr. Julian Bilyj

District Chaplain