

Some Christian denominations, such as the Baptists, insist that infants and children cannot be baptized, because one must be old enough to confess faith in Christ, and consciously “accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior.” This is wrong, because the historical evidence shows infant baptism was practiced by the Church since the time of the apostles and first centuries.<sup>1</sup> However, as is usually the case with heresies and errors, there is partial truth. Even when baptizing infants, there must still be *commitment*, the commitment of the parents and household to Christ. Small children should be baptized only when the household is Christian.<sup>2</sup>

With regard to personal commitment to Christ, Catholics are often weak, and Baptists often give a better witness. Today’s Gospel helps us to understand the vital need for personal knowledge and commitment to Christ, as it outlines the various stages of discipleship.

The first disciples of Jesus (later to be named among the twelve apostles) are Andrew and John. They were originally disciples and assistants of St. John the Baptist, and it was St. John the Baptist who indicated for them to follow Jesus when he pointed out the newly anointed Messiah to them: “*Behold the Lamb of God.*” It is a provocative description of the Messiah, heavy-laden with meaning. In his passion and death, taking place in conjunction with the Passover, the full significance of this description (“Lamb of God”) will be revealed.

Andrew and John first become followers of Jesus because of St. John the Baptist. They follow Jesus because he told them to. This is how most of us became followers of Jesus: someone, usually our parents, made us his followers, from the time of our infancy. There is nothing wrong or inappropriate with this approach, and in fact it is the normal way for mankind, created by God in the institution of the family. It is by God’s design that parents make the decisions for their small children, order and direct their lives, show them the way. It is by God’s sacred authority they do this, sanctioned in the fourth commandment.

Thus it is that the first, early stage of discipleship is one of obedience and reliance upon the wisdom of elders and prophets: people with prior faith and

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<sup>1</sup> Among many ancient and early references, the practice of infant baptism is documented by St. Irenaeus of Lyons (*Against Heresies* 2:22:4), who was baptized by St. Polycarp, who was a disciple of the Apostle John.

<sup>2</sup> Canon law states that “for an infant to be baptized licitly there must be a founded hope that the infant will be brought up in the Catholic religion” (CIC 868,2). History gives the famous example of St. Augustine, who could not be baptized as an infant because of the opposition of his father Patricius. Even though his mother St. Monica was fully Christian, the household was not.

knowledge, whose guidance is dependable and trustworthy. It would be wrong to say one is not yet a true disciple of the Lord at this early stage. The faith is first of all *received*.

This stage usually corresponds with childhood. As with young Samuel in the first reading (1Sm 3:3-10), the young disciple initially depends on the instruction of the spiritual father.

But as the Gospel story continues, Jesus turns to those following him and confronts them directly with the question: “*what are you looking for?*” This is the second level of discipleship, which corresponds to “personal commitment” or “personal decision.” The faith which is initially received through another, must be personally *appropriated*.

There is always a danger in the Church which baptizes infants, that this second stage is simply assumed. However, it is not assured. Many Catholics grow into adulthood, yet remain infants in discipleship. This situation is often revealed when they are confronted by Jehovah Witnesses or others: why are you Catholic? It is unfortunate that many Catholics finally face this important question through non-Catholics, and then end up leaving the Church because someone else helped them meet Christ in a personal way. Other Catholics simply drift away as soon as they are old enough, because their discipleship never attained this second step.

If the first stage of discipleship corresponds with early childhood, the second stage typically corresponds with early adulthood, when a youth begins to make decisions for himself and understands who he is. Andrew and John illustrate the manner in which this process should occur. Not knowing how to answer Jesus’ question, they ask him where is staying, and they address him as “Rabbi” (“teacher”). They respectfully ask to spend time with him, for the purpose of learning who he is. Through retreats, classes, and other spiritual activities, the Church should provide her members many such opportunities to spend time with the master, in order that one’s received discipleship can become one’s personal discipleship.

Andrew and John manifest the correct attitude needed for this important step: openness and humility. “Disciple” is another word for “student.” All too often, young adults choose to abandon the Church without ever truly studying, or investing the time meeting the Teacher as he is, in the Gospels. All too often, even though as children they were taught many things *about* the Lord and the Catholic religion, they became imbued with a worldly haughtiness that leads them to resist Christ, and reject what they never really knew to begin with.

When therefore a teenager asserts his independent will by refusing to go to Sunday Mass, parents have to reassert their authority and insist. It’s not just a

question of whether Christ is the Truth (something the youth will have to see for himself), but rather the lesson of humble learning and respect. No teenager has yet attained to independence. No youth is exempt from acquiring the attitude of a humble, honest, and respectful seeker, a student who still has much to learn!

After spending time with Jesus, Andrew and John immediately return to their relatives and proclaim that they have found the Messiah spoken of by the prophets. Andrew immediately brings his brother Simon to meet Jesus. The third stage of discipleship is evangelization, the *sharing* of the faith. This means bringing others to Christ through personal testimony, and providing the invitation for others to know him for themselves.

And thus discipleship comes full circle: the student become the teacher, the disciple becomes the prophet, Andrew and John become John the Baptist to others. Parents who bring their children for baptism realize that they are now in the situation of leading others to Christ. It is imperative then that the parents, both father and mother and especially the father, attain this third stage of discipleship. There are no guarantees that one's children will grow up to keep the faith, even when one does "everything right" (i.e., Sunday Mass, Catholic schooling, marital fidelity). Free will is a mystery and responsibility of each individual before God. But of all the factors that help to ensure that one's children will continue the faith, none is as important as the parents' own conviction and ability to share the faith as Andrew did, to be able to explain why it is they are Catholic, why they follow Jesus.

This is the call of the Gospel today: to deepen our discipleship. And also to realize that the cycle of receiving-appropriating-sharing is not a one-time event, but rather an ongoing process throughout our lives. Baptism, in the end, is bigger than any decision we can make at any given moment of our lives. We must continually follow the Lord, continually spend time rediscovering who he is, continually deepen the conscious personal decision to follow him, and continually manifest him to others. The grace of Baptism must be continually renewed and deepened, including now in this new year of the Lord 2018.