

Baptized to Serve and Minister as Priest, Prophet, and King

Kathy Kuczka

Images of water naturally surface when one thinks of baptism. The central sacramental act by which a person is immersed in baptismal waters or has those waters poured over them is powerful. The image of the baptismal water bath is so awe-inspiring that one can easily miss what follows. Equally significant to the water bath is the act of anointing that takes place immediately after the baptism.

This act begins when the minister says:

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
has freed you from sin,
given you new birth by water and the Holy Spirit,
and joined you to be his people.
He now anoints you with the Chrism of salvation,
so that you may remain members of Christ, Priest,
Prophet, and King,
unto eternal life. (*Order of Baptism of Children*, 62)

Anointing persons with oil is rooted in ancient Israel. Individuals who were called to the divine offices of priest, prophet, or king were anointed with oil poured on their head. Olive oil was used because it was known to heal, to protect, and to rejuvenate.

It is no surprise then that from the earliest centuries the Church has used oil, particularly olive oil, to symbolize transformation and renewal in its sacramental rites, primarily in baptism. The sacred chrism used to anoint the newly baptized is made of olive oil mixed with a fragrant liquid, usually balsam. Chrism is one of three holy oils, along with the oil of catechumens and the oil of the sick, that are blessed by the bishop each year at the Chrism Mass. In the prayer of blessing, the bishop calls on the Holy Spirit to sanctify the chrism oil and prays that those who are anointed with it are strengthened to share with Christ the ministry of priest, prophet, and king.

The Spirit that sanctifies the chrism oil and anoints the baptized is the same Spirit that descended upon Jesus at his baptism. As the synoptic Gospels note, Jesus' baptism culminates when the Spirit descends upon or after his coming out of the water, designating him the messiah, or the anointed one. The Spirit inaugurates Jesus' public ministry, empowering him to carry out the mission for which he was sent.



Anointed with the Chrism of salvation, the baptized remain in Christ, priest, prophet, and king.

Likewise, the Spirit empowers all the baptized to share Christ's ministry as priests, prophets, and kings. It may be a challenge for many people to envision themselves as a priest, a prophet, or a king. After all, the baptized don't wear priestly robes or royal crowns, but then again, neither did Jesus.

Jesus did ordinary things with extraordinary faith. He fulfilled his calling with simple means, with words, with human touch, with water, with saliva, even with dirt and whatever else may have been at his disposal.

We who are baptized, like Jesus, are called to do ordinary things with extraordinary faith. When we pray for the needs of the world, when we sacrifice our time and our talents for others, we exercise the ministry of priest. When we preach the Gospel, when we speak on behalf of the vulnerable, when we speak out against injustice, we exercise our ministry as prophet. When we serve those unable to provide for themselves, when we respect the dignity of all human beings and care for God's creation, we exercise our ministry as king.

As awe-inspiring as the water bath in a baptism may be, it is the words, gestures, and symbols in the anointing that follows that helps unfold the meaning of this foundational sacrament. Ultimately, it is living out the roles of priest, prophet, and king that witness to God's love long after baptism.

Text by Kathy Kuczka, author of *Connecting the Liturgy with Our Lives: Print and Digital Resources for Faith Formation* (LTP, 2019).

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