

## Grace Notes in Miniature

Friday, January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Dear friends,

This weekend we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord, an observance which in the contemporary Roman Catholic calendar ends the Christmas season. Initially celebrated on January 13, it was moved by Pope Paul VI to the first Sunday after the Epiphany of Our Lord – originally celebrated on January 6<sup>th</sup> and now observed on the first Sunday after January 1<sup>st</sup>. We may find it a bit confusing that we jump from the manifestation of Jesus to the wise men from the east into his baptism and then backtrack about three weeks later to his Presentation in the Temple as an infant. And the story from Luke 2:41-52 of the boy Jesus being found in the Temple by his anxious parents occurs in Cycle C of the Lectionary on the first Sunday after Christmas. The apparent lack of concern for the sequence of the events reflects consideration of the importance of the events in the life of Jesus and the flow of his call to follow his divine purpose; however, observances such as the Octave of Christmas and the Presentation of the Lord do pay homage to the Jewish tradition into which Jesus was born, circumcision occurring on the eighth day after birth and the presentation in the Temple happening after forty days. More about that in three weeks.

The baptism which John was offering would be recognised as being similar to the Jewish purification rite known as “*tvilah*”, performed in a Mikvah or place of naturally sourced water. Immersion in the mikvah represented purification, restoration, and qualification for full religious participation in the life of the community for someone considered ritually unclean or for a convert to Judaism. This was seen to ensure that the person would not contaminate people or property with their uncleanness. John, thought by some scholars to be an Essene (a group which lived in community, practised ascetism, poverty and priestly celibacy), was offering a baptism of repentance; for Christians, baptism became the rite of initiation as a disciple of Jesus. John himself says that he is baptizing with water but that the one who comes after him will baptize with the Holy Spirit.



Illustration from myocn.net



An ancient [Mikveh](#) (bath used for ritual immersion in Judaism) on the [Temple Mount](#) in Jerusalem



Today is the Memorial of St Raymond of Penyafort<sup>1</sup>, a Spanish Dominican priest who lived from 1175 to 1275 and is the patron saint of canon lawyers. He was responsible for organizing the papal documents which became the foundation of the first formal collection of Canon Law; known as the Decretals of Gregory IX, these were edited, annotated and modified until replaced by the Code of Canon Law

promulgated by Benedict XV in 1917. Most Catholics give little thought to Canon Law unless studying theology or seeking an annulment; however, it is very important to the functioning of the Church, being the system of laws and legal principles which guide its governance and define its sacraments. It is considered the oldest continuously functioning legal system in the Western world. The word "canon" comes from the Greek *kanon*, which originally meant a straight rod and eventually came to mean a rule or norm. The term was adopted at the Council of Nicaea in 325 to identify a law proclaimed by a synod or ecumenical council. The 1917 Code underwent a number of modifications until it was completely revised to reflect decisions of the Second Vatican Council and was issued in 1983 under Pope St John Paul II. Although seen as a forerunner of much western civil law, canon law has no authority in most secular courts today. Because it defines a legal system, it is supported by canon lawyers and judges trained in its interpretation and applied through Church courts, which include Tribunals, the Apostolic Penitentiary, and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (infamously known in a previous age as the Inquisition).

Marriage Tribunals are perhaps the best known of the Church courts, existing in dioceses and ordinariates for those who have obtained a civil divorce to examine the status of the marriage in the eyes of the Church. This is a forum to determine if the conditions for a sacramental relationship in marriage were present from the time of the wedding; if it is decided that they were not, a declaration of nullity may be granted, indicating that sacramentally the marriage did not exist. A judicial vicar examines the plea to determine if there are grounds to pursue the proceedings and a defender of the bond will make any arguments about the validity of the marriage. A declaration of nullity (annulment) has no bearing on the legitimacy of children. The intensity of this process underscores the value which the Church puts on marriage and the family and validates the Church's requirement for marriage preparation and a longer engagement period than is required elsewhere.

Many blessings until next time,

Gillian



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<sup>1</sup> Painting by Tommaso Dolabella, 1627 – Public Domain