Before coming to the Monastery, I served for a number of years as a parish priest in a little parish on the west coast of Canada. I’d been in the parish for about six months when a woman named Alice came out of church one Sunday and told me she had only ever heard me preach one sermon. I knew that that wasn’t true. Alice and her husband had been in church nearly every Sunday since I had come to the parish and on the rare occasion they missed a Sunday they called the rectory ahead of time to explain why they were going to be absent! I obviously looked confused because she went on to say: “What I mean is that it doesn’t matter where you start, you always end up back in the same place: at baptism.” I began to apologize, but she cut in, “Oh no, no. No need to apologize. I wasn’t complaining. I was agreeing with you, because baptism is so important for the life of a Christian.” Alice of course was right. Baptism is important because baptism is about nothing less than sharing in the divine life of God.

“O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature,” we pray in the Collect for the Second Sunday after Christmas, “Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity...”1

In the Incarnation, we believe that as Christ shared in our human life, so we share in his divine life through baptism. As the Prayer Book Catechism reminds us, “Holy Baptism is the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ’s Body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God.”2 Thus we share in the divine life of God by being made children of God, by being made members of Christ’s body, and by becoming heirs of the kingdom of God. If we truly believe what we say, all of this happens at the font where we die to sin and rise to newness of life through the waters of baptism, just as the First Letter of Peter reminds us: “And baptism . . . now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.”3 In this way, even now and not at some future date, because of our baptism, we begin to share the reality of that divine life we speak of in the Collect, and which Christ promises to all who believe in him: “to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.”4

Sharing the Life of the Trinity

3 1 Peter 3:21-22
4 John 1:12-13
When we begin to understand that baptism does something to us now, and that that something is nothing short of incorporation into the divine life of God, then we can begin to experience the Trinity, not as some kind of mathematical puzzle – or a scientific experiment using water, ice, and steam showing that each of them is the same chemical but simply in a different form. Rather, we will know the doctrine of the Trinity as a lived reality. By our baptism we are invited not merely to understand, but to experience the Trinity. Our founder, Father Benson, speaks about how problematic is our neglect of the doctrine of the Trinity, and his comments are perhaps truer today than they were when he first said them. Father Benson goes so far as to say:

I quite feel that the practical neglect of the doctrine of the Trinity has been the great cause of the decay of Christendom. The Church – the Sacraments – Hagiology, I had almost said Mythology – have filled the minds of devout people, partly for good partly for evil. Thyself unmoved, all motion’s source, this mystery of the circulating life of the eternal Godhead, has been almost lost to sight, spoken of as a mystery, and not felt as a power or loved as a reality.5

Imagine anyone claiming today that the decline of the Church is related to a decline in teaching about the doctrine of the Trinity! But think how rich our preaching about the Trinity could be if we connected it to our understanding of baptism. To turn again to Father Benson: “If we would know the Trinity, we must know ourselves taken into the Trinity.”6

What does it mean to say that we are “taken into the Trinity?” It actually is not as complicated as it might at first sound. Chapter Four in the Rule of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist on “The Witness of Life in Community,” explains how every form of human community takes its cue from the Holy Trinity: “In community we bear witness to the social nature of human life as willed by our Creator. Human beings bear the image of the triune God and are not meant to be separate and isolated. All of us are called by God to belong to communities.”7 Such a lived reality of communion and community with God and one another, rooted in baptism, brings a far different understanding to the doctrine of the Trinity than any number of mathematical conundrums by which we try to convince people that $3 = 1$. As communities have broken down and families fragmented, is it any wonder that the notion of community has such appeal today? As Christians, our understanding of community is, as Father Benson would say, rooted in the very heart of God who is Community.

The famous icon of the Holy Trinity by Saint Andrei Rublev offers a powerful glimpse at what the communal life of God the Trinity looks like. Our Rule calls this life one of “reciprocal self-giving and love.”8 And the icon by Rublev illustrates this, depicting three near-identical figures seated at a table. They’re involved in communication. Their heads appear to be inclined towards one another, they seem to make eye contact, and their

---

6 Cowley Evangelist, 1919: 147.
7 Rule of Life of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, 8.
8 Ibid, 9.
hands are captured in a series of delicate gestures, almost as if one points to another in a circle. It is as if we have caught them mid-conversation. Look again: There are four sides to this table, but only three seats are filled. The spot closest to the viewer is left open because Rublev wants to show us that there is a place at the table for us. God is inviting us into the circle of divine communion and community.

We’re invited to participate in the Trinity not as a mathematical puzzle, an intellectual quandary to be solved, but as an experience of community to be had. As our Rule explains, “Our human vocation to live in communion and mutuality is rooted in our creation in God’s image and likeness. The very being of God is community; the Father, Son and Spirit are One in reciprocal self-giving and love. The mystery of God as Trinity is one that only those living in personal communion can understand by experience.” God the Trinity is a mystery, solvable only by the experience of life in community. Whether we look to the divine community of the Trinity or the human communities in which we take part on earth, we come to know the Trinity only when we experience it as a relationship of self-giving and love. And we begin to do this in baptism. So the formula for Holy Baptism proclaims that we are brought into this relationship: “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Members of Christ

Sharing in the divine life of the Trinity through baptism has deep ramifications for the way we understand not just the stories in the gospels or their promises about Christ. Sharing the divine life of God has huge ramifications for how we understand ourselves as well.

To take one example, consider the Ascension of Christ. Father Benson loved the Ascension and was constantly inviting his audience to “Look to the glory of the ascended Christ.” He points repeatedly throughout his writings to Christ’s Ascension because he wants to remind us that the Ascension is not something that happened a long time ago to someone else – although it did indeed happen to Jesus. But the Ascension is not an isolated incident. If we really do believe what we say about baptism – that we are made members of Christ – then, the Ascension is about us as well. If Christ has ascended into heaven and has taken his place at the right hand of the Father in glory, then as members of Christ’s body, so too have we. The Ascension is not simply about Christ, it is about us as well.

Now, upon his Ascension, His body in them is glorified instantaneously with the glorifying of His body at the right hand of God. Like an electric flash the
glory of the Spirit shines out in the fires of Pentecost. The body of Christ, however veiled in our flesh . . . nevertheless cannot but have the glory of the Spirit of holy fire burning and resting upon it. We do not, I think, dwell as we ought to dwell upon the present glorification of our nature in our own persons, as members of the glorified body of Christ.10

In the Collect for the Feast of the Ascension, we proclaim that Christ has “ascended into the heavens; so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with him continually dwell.”11 Christ ascends so that we might also “thither ascend.” This is not just about Christ. It is about us as well.

Baptized into the Trinity, ascended with Christ, we share in the divine life of God. “Do you not know,” Saint Paul asks in the Letter to the Romans, “that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his life. Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”12 That glory is not something that will happen to us someday in the future. We are already glorified with Christ because we have been baptized into his life, death, and resurrection. In the same letter, Saint Paul goes on to urge, “if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”13

**Union and Communion**

Baptism then is about union and communion. “We will certainly be united with him,” says Saint Paul. And we experience baptism as both a sign and a seal of that hope. First, we experience it as a sign of what God desires for us: namely, life and union with God. Second, we know that it is a seal of that promised life and union with God. God is reaching out to us with this gift of baptism, both as a sign and seal of God’s love. And, when we accept baptism, we reach forward to God claiming the promise and sharing the life. In baptism, we glimpse that mutuality and reciprocity that is at the heart of community, what the Rule calls, “reciprocal self-giving and love,” just as the figures in Rublev’s icon of the Trinity reach out to one another and to us.

In this way, baptism is very much like the moment of the Eucharist when God reaches out to us as we reach out to God to receive that Sacrament in our outstretched hands. We reach out to meet the One who first reaches out to us. There is a similar kind of reciprocity and mutuality in baptism. “Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Saviour?” the celebrant asks the person about to be baptized. We say “Yes” and we turn to God, even as we acknowledge that it is God who has first called us.

We have the opportunity to experience and to renew our baptism Sunday by Sunday in

12 Romans 6:4.
13 Romans 6:5.

---

*The Society of Saint John the Evangelist*
Baptism

Tradition frequently calls the Eucharist the Blessed Sacrament, but Father Benson would claim that it is actually Holy Baptism. He laments how “In Western Christendom the Holy Eucharist has so entirely overshadowed Holy Baptism that the food of our life is made to be a gift greater than the life which it sustains.” He means to point out how the Eucharist renews and sustains the life we were given in baptism. Baptism is the fundamental event by which we are invited to share in the divine life. In the Eucharist, we have an opportunity to renew, reaffirm, and nourish that life. Even those of us who were baptized as infants and have no memory of the event can have an ongoing, powerful experience of our baptism – of meeting God and being embraced by God – when we are fed by God in the Eucharist. For in the Eucharist we are again brought into communion and community with God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As we reach out for the Bread and Wine, we can remember the divine life which it sustains in us, and by which we are made members of Christ, the children of God, and inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The weekly renewal of our baptism through the Eucharist aims to remind us that the life we share with God is not a life that is “yet to come.” We are not simply waiting for someday when we will share in the life of God or be united with God. Baptism promises us that we are already sharing the life of God. We’re already sharing in the life of God, already joining the Trinity around the table, as in Rublev’s icon, already sharing in the glory of the life of the Ascended Christ. Baptized in the name of the Trinity, we are already sharing in the mystery of this communion.

Here and Now

Our sharing in the life of God, here and now, is why the sacramental signs of baptism and the Eucharist are so powerful: water, oil, bread and wine. These concrete elements ground our experience of the divine life in the here and now. They tell us that this mystery which we proclaim – the divine life we share – is happening right now. So I love the fact that we use real bread in our Eucharist at the Monastery, because you don’t need to pretend that the Eucharist is feeding you. You actually experience how the Eucharist is feeding you. You can actually taste the bread, you have to chew and swallow. And so too, I love the way we celebrate baptisms at the Monastery, because people actually get wet. Babies go all the way into the font: toes, knees, bellies, elbows, and heads. The water, the bread tell us that this is happening right now. You can feel it, smell it, and taste it.

We can sometimes treat baptism as if it’s cute, all dolled up with christening gowns and frilly bonnets. Baptism is not cute. It’s awful – not in the ghastly or dreadful sense of the word, but in the sense of the word that means “inspiring awe or wonder.” Baptism is awe-full. Baptism should strike terror and wonder into our hearts, for by it we are made
members of Christ, children of God, and inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven. And this is not kids’ stuff, not child’s play, though God wants children to share in the divine life, too. While we might feel child-like wonder faced with God’s glory in baptism, we should also feel a very grown-up terror.

At their best, the visual signs we use in baptism can help us to perceive the danger we are facing as we encounter the living God. Imagine if, while baptizing you, the celebrant held your head under the water for a few seconds longer than you expected. If you were lucky, you’d come up gasping. If you were unlucky, you’d come up choking. Just as the Eucharist is about eating and drinking, chewing and gulping, baptism is about drowning and rising. It is about death and life. It is about washing and bathing. Baptism is dangerous because you could die. But it is also life-giving because, at the very moment of death, you are pulled out of the water and saved. The stark reality is that there is a danger in baptism, but there is life as well, for just as the celebrant says, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” you are plunged into the water, and then, just in time, are lifted up to breathe in the life of God – not later – right now.

Water and oil, bread and wine: these are vivid signs and seals of God’s desire for us to share in the divine life. In baptism, even as we drip with the water of life and smell the fragrance of the oil of our sealing in the Spirit, we realize that our life has been given back to us, and that it is no ordinary life, for the life we live now is the very life of God, whose divine life we share as members of Christ, children of God, and inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Br. James Koester, SSJE was born in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. He holds a B.A. in History and English literature from Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, and an M. Div. from Trinity College, Toronto, Ontario. He was ordained to the diaconate and subsequently to the priesthood in British Columbia, where he served parishes in Parksville and Salt Spring Island.

In 1989 he came to the United States to test his vocation with the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, where he was life-professed in 1995. Br. James has served in a wide range of leadership posts in the Society, currently serving as the community’s Superior. During his time in the Society he has traveled widely in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, the Holy Land, and in Africa, leading retreats and workshops, preaching, teaching, and offering spiritual direction. His personal interests include genealogy, the study and writing of icons, and beekeeping.
The Brothers of SSJE are a community of men giving our whole selves over to living the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Rooted in the ancient monastic traditions of prayer and community life, and critically engaged with contemporary culture, we seek to know and share an authentic experience of God’s love and mercy. We live a common life shaped by worship, prayer, and our Rule of Life.

We invite you to learn more at www.SSJE.org

Monastic Wisdom for Everyday Living

Monastic Wisdom for Everyday Living is a continuing series of sermons, workshops and teachings from the Brothers that seeks to distill the collective wisdom of the past and offer practical timeless messages to live by in today’s world.

Visit SSJE.org/monasticwisdom to view all the available titles, including:

- Baptism
  "Sharing the Divine Life"

- Beloved
  "Marks of Mission, marks of Love"

- Conversion
  "Pruning, Time, and Help"

- Eucharist
  "A Sacrifice of Thanksgiving"

- Forgiveness
  "Transformation in Love"

- Incarnation
  "Behold what you are"

- Intercession
  "Carried Close to the Heart of God"

- Living in Rhythm
  "Following Nature’s Rhythm"

- Living Intentionally
  "A Workbook for Creating a Personal Rule of life"

- Reconciliation
  "Preparing for the Sacrament"

- Resurrection
  "Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!"

- Time
  "Redeeming the Gift"

- Transfiguration
  "To Bear the Beams of Love"