

- Now that we've moved past the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, which we celebrated last Sunday, we find ourselves in what is traditionally known as Epiphanytide, that period of time between the end of the Christmas Season and Lent.
- While we call this period Ordinary Time in the new calendar of the Mass, traditionally this period of time is really an extension of Christmastide.
- So even though the Christmas Season officially ended last Sunday, we still find the vestiges of Christmas lingering on today in our readings as we cling to themes we enjoyed in the Epiphany and Baptism of our Lord.
- Our first reading from Isaiah speaks of the "light to the nations" so that "salvation may reach to the ends of the earth," which recalls the prominent themes of the Epiphany.
- And in our Gospel story today we have St. John the Baptist's testimony to the Spirit descending upon Jesus like a dove, a clear reference to our Lord's baptism.
- So why linger with Christmas themes now that we're in Ordinary Time? Well, because Christmas is important! It's in the Christmas Season that we learn Who Jesus truly Is.
- And Holy Mother Church dwells on these Christmas mysteries to inspire us to a greater holiness, a greater sanctity of life – which is what God wants for each of us.
- In our first reading the Lord speaks of His desire to reveal His glory by making Israel a light to the nations, so that His salvation may reach to the ends of the earth. Truly, God desires to transform each of us so that we shine with His glory and lead others to Him!
- And in the second reading, St. Paul tells us that those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus are called to be holy. We are sanctified in Christ Jesus through baptism, and at our baptism we make the promise to be like Him in holiness!
- In truth, holiness is demanded of all of us by God. *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council, states that: "All the Christian faithful, of whatever state or rank, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity" (no. 30).
- In other words all of us are called to be saints, whether we be saints with a capital "S" – those who are formally recognized by the Church as people who have lived lives of heroic virtue, or saints with a lowercase "s" – those who, while not formally recognized by the Church, lived holy lives nonetheless or have been purified through the fires of Purgatory.
- And let us be clear about one thing: there are **only** saints in heaven. Therefore, there is only one alternative to not being a saint. I think you can figure out what I mean....
- So personal sanctity is something we must take seriously. We can't just bumble through life as we wish, casually practicing the Faith according to our own good pleasure, and then just expect that we'll go straight to Heaven when we die. Salvation doesn't work that way!
- Entering Heaven requires that we be free from sin, for God and sin can never exist together. If we have any sin on our souls when we die, we cannot go straight to Heaven. We must be purified first through the fires of Purgatory – and that only happens if our sin is venial.
- If we have not repented of any mortal sins at the moment of death, then we damn ourselves to Hell. While we know and trust that God is merciful and extends His mercy to us until that last moment of our lives, we must never presume upon His mercy by delaying repentance.
- Indeed, if any of you are struggling with a habitual mortal sin, or living in a way that is not in keeping with the Church's teaching on a serious moral matter, please repent and come to confession. Do not live apart from God any longer!
- Moreover, do not be so proud to think you know better than the Church on moral matters. The Church's teachings are God's teachings. If you are deviating from a teaching of the Church, you are deviating from God's will.

- You see, sin is an act of our will that deviates from God's will. Sin is the free and intentional act of doing something we know to be wrong. It's a matter of turning away from God, His laws, and from what He desires for us. Sin is choosing to be separated from God, at least to some degree.
- Growing in holiness is a matter of learning how to unite ourselves to God and His holy will. The more perfectly united we are to God and His will, the holier we become.
- Because of the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, we all now suffer with concupiscence, which is our disordered desire for sin. Yet despite our disordered desire for sin, mankind can reach great levels of holiness.
- By seeking out God's will and choosing to cooperate with God's grace, our nature can be gradually transformed so that we grow in union with God and in our likeness to Him.
- We can foster our union with God in lots of different ways. But there is nothing more effective for us Catholics than receiving the Sacraments worthily, reverently, and frequently, and by cultivating a life of prayer.
- We are so richly blessed as Catholics to have the Eucharist, to have our Lord so accessible to us.
- In the Christmas Season, we celebrated that God became man and was revealed as the Savior of the whole world. Yet, that wasn't enough for our Lord; He also becomes our food and drink in Holy Communion.
- There is nothing better for our souls than going to Mass and receiving our Lord in Holy Communion. What is most important when we receive Communion is that we're reverent, in a state of grace, and that we have the intention of being intimately united with our Lord.
- While we no longer have the luxury of using our altar rail, we can still kneel in our minds and hearts, and I daresay that type of intentionality is even more pleasing to our Lord.
- In addition to frequent reception of Holy Communion, prayer must be part of our daily routine. If we're serious about our personal holiness, if we really want to be united with our Lord for all eternity in Heaven, then we must make time to be united with Him in prayer now!
- Stopping by the church for 20 or 30 minutes of quiet time before or after work or even committing to an hour of Adoration each week is a wonderful habit to get into because it really helps us to know God better so that we can love Him as we should.
- Lastly, regularly going to confession is absolutely indispensable to growing in holiness. There is an abundance of grace poured out upon our souls every time we make a good confession.
- When we go to confession regularly, we are much more attuned to our sins and make greater progress in overcoming them. Moreover, there is grace conferred upon in this sacrament that helps us to avoid future sin.
- Léon Bloy, a French Jewish convert to Catholicism, once wrote: "The only real sadness, the only real failure, the only great tragedy in life, is not to become a saint." Certainly words we should all take to heart, for failing to become a saint is a failure to be who God calls us to be.
- Let us trust that by frequent and worthy reception of the sacraments of confession and Holy Communion, and daily prayer, we will all become united with our Lord in this life in a manner that prepares us for eternal union with Him in Heaven.