

What an amazing, joyous occasion it is to welcome home into the Holy Orthodox Church. Thirteen new Orthodox Christians have been baptized this morning. And it's not over, because they'll receive their first communion here in the Divine Liturgy, they'll receive absolution, and they'll give their first sacrifice at the tonsure toward the end of the service.

Today we've got a two-fer, because it is the Sunday after Theophany, which is very appropriate for baptisms. We heard the Epistle and the Gospel readings for the Sunday after Theophany, and because it's a baptism, we also heard the Epistle and Gospel readings for baptism. I promise you I won't give you a two-fer for the homily this morning. Instead, I'm going to talk about the reading for the Sunday after Theophany, which ends with Christ telling the Gentiles the most foundational words for salvation: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

This is how Christ began his ministry when he went into the land of Galilee, and we hear it was after John the Baptist had been arrested. We know that John the Baptist was the last of the Old Testament prophets. Christ began his ministry after the last of the Old Testament prophets had been taken away. He begins his ministry in Galilee, where they have seen a great light.

There is a connection here. The Church, in her wisdom, places this Gospel reading on the Sunday after Theophany because there is a strong connection between Christ beginning his ministry in the land of the Gentiles—who did not properly understand who Christ was—and telling them the most fundamental thing, the essential doctrine of salvation: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

This connection between Theophany and this Gospel reading is very important for us to understand how strongly it relates to our own baptism. We witnessed 13 of our newest Orthodox Christians being baptized this morning. They were washed, cleansed, and given spiritual new life as they rose out of the water. How important it is for us to understand the connection of repentance with our own baptism.

You see, repentance is continual. Repentance doesn't happen just once. It doesn't happen just a few times. Repentance doesn't even just happen at confession—a wonderful sacrament often called the sacrament of repentance. But it is not just about those specific times. Our repentance must be continual because, for us to truly live the life of Christ, we must continually repent for our own sinfulness. Our sinfulness affects not only ourselves; it affects all of those around us.

As Christ revealed himself to the Gentiles, we also see his revelation in Theophany. In fact, the word "theophany," as Father George spoke about last week, means "the revealing of God." In Theophany, we see God manifest. In the hymn we sing, "When thou, O Lord, wast baptized in the Jordan, worship of the Trinity was made manifest." At Theophany, we hear the voice of the Father saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." We have the Son physically, in his humanity and incarnation, being baptized. And then the Spirit, in the likeness of a dove, revealed the truth of the Father's word as it descended upon Christ. We see the Trinity in Theophany. We see God revealed to us. This happened at baptism, and that connection exists between the baptisms we celebrated this morning and the event of Theophany celebrated last week.

I want to talk very briefly about repentance to give you three ways we can relate repentance to our everyday life, because it's essential for each of us to understand what repentance truly is. First, our Father in Christ Metropolitan Saba says in his writing on repentance that repentance is "the new birth and a spiritual battle." This is what happens in baptism. We continually rise from every fall and ceaselessly reach upwards.

Think about that. In our repentance, we should be continually rising from every fall, every stumble, every struggle we encounter. We should continually rise and reach upward as an act of repentance—rising back up out of the baptismal waters with new spiritual life and rebirth.

So repentance requires three things:

First, it requires humility. Without humility, which is the cure for pride, we might not even recognize our need to repent. Without humility, we cannot truly repent.

Second, repentance requires obedience. Obedience to others. When we are obedient to others, nothing is beneath us. We willingly place ourselves below all things. Obedience and humility go hand in hand.

Finally, repentance involves forgiveness. Forgiveness is both the beginning and the end of repentance. As we hear in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 6: "If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father in heaven forgive you." Repentance must start with forgiveness. It begins and ends there. In repentance, we start with forgiveness, we practice humility, and through this, we are forgiven by our Father.

As we celebrate such an amazingly joyous occasion today, with the baptism of 13 new Orthodox Christians whom we warmly welcome home, let's remember—all of us, not just those baptized today—how important repentance is in our lives and in our salvation. Let's remember how crucial it is to start and end with forgiveness, to understand humility as the cure for pride, and to practice obedience toward others faithfully.

May that be our continual struggle—as Metropolitan Saba says—to rise repeatedly from repentance, from baptism, from our new life, continually reaching upward toward the Father who grants us forgiveness.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen. Christ is in our midst. He is and ever shall be.