

Homily — 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time, B, 2018
By Fr. Bob Schramm, OSFS

**In the Gospel, Jesus asks James and John
if they can drink the cup he drinks,
if they can be baptized with the baptism with which he is baptized.**

**I want to focus for a few moments on those two images:
drinking from a cup and being baptized.**

**We Catholics belong to a tradition rich in symbols and symbolism.
That's a big part of what liturgy is all about —
symbols that are meant to stir faith in our hearts.
We use things like wine and cups full of it;
like water and pools overflowing of it;
like bread and plates piled high with it.
We use stuff like that to say something crucial
about our relationship with God and with one another.**

**One of our challenges today is that, for all sorts of reasons,
we've had this tendency to tame the symbols we use.
A couple of examples —**

**In most places today, baptism happens in the very tame way.
A little bit of water is trickled over the head of a hopefully sleeping infant,
and then a little bit of oil is dabbed in the infants forehead
all of which is quickly dried off so we don't make a mess of that baptismal
outfit.**

**Or at Mass, we pray over these little round wafers we have come to call "hosts."
That word "host", by the way, is based on a Latin word
referring to "the victim of a sacrifice."
Someone rather sarcastically suggested that it takes two acts of faith now
when we receive communion:
one to believe that this is really the body of Christ,
and then to believe that this is really bread.**

**When the early Church put words on the lips of Jesus
like "cup" and "baptism,"
the images those words conjured up were very different.**

**In the early Church, baptism was more like drowning than
being doused with a bit of water.
It always took place by a full immersion, often in a cold stream of water.
There are stories of bishops who held people under that water
"til they thought they were drowning.
Baptism was just that serious!**

When Jesus asks the disciples if they are willing to endure his baptism,

it's a reference to his passion and death, out of love for us all.
That is what baptism symbolizes.
We are a church of those kinds of symbols.
I think we have a lot of work still to do to untame our symbols.

Then there is the symbol of the cup.
In the early Church at communion time,
people shared from a common loaf of blessed and then broken bread.
They also drank from a common cup of blessed wine.
Sharing the cup brought with it a sense of a willingness
to share together in the suffering Christ
for the transformation of our hurting world.

The cup is this profound reminder that life is a mixture
of suffering and joy, heartbreak and ecstasy, terror and consolation.
No one escapes any of that; and
The cup that we share is a reminder of at least two profound realities:

- That we are intimately bound up with one another
in our sorrows and in our joys.
- That God has leaped into the midst of all that with us and is here to stay.

The Gospel begins with James and John asking to be at Jesus' left and right.
They are looking for places of honor when the glory comes.
Eventually, Jesus talks with them all about what true greatness is.

I'm mindful of what we hear so often these days:
"Make America great again."

Here is Jesus' formula for greatness:
"Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.
For the Son of Humanity came not to be served but to serve,
and to give his life as ransom for many."
Somehow I get the impression that those cheering
to "Make America great again" don't exactly have that in mind.
I think Jesus is quite serious about it though.

So who ends up at Jesus' left and his right in his glory.
In the Gospels, Jesus is entering his glory as he dies on the cross,
That's the place where he seems to have lost everything but LOVE.

God gave the gift that James and John wanted — not to any of the apostles,
but to two unknown, low-down, petty criminals,
hanging beside Jesus, to his left and to his right.