

- This week I had the sad privilege of burying a man who died very suddenly from a massive stroke. And as it always does, celebrating the funeral liturgy led me to meditate on the deeper and ultimate realities of our existence.
- While I cannot say that I “enjoy” funerals, as a priest I do appreciate the rituals and symbolism that are present within the funeral liturgy, for I think it provides a great deal of comfort and hope for those who truly believe in Christ and in His promises.
- One of my favorite symbols in the funeral liturgy is the casket itself, which symbolizes a seed that is sown in hope of an eternal harvest.
- St. Paul has this wonderful passage in his first letter to the Corinthians in which he talks about our bodies being buried, much as seeds are sown, in the hope that, someday, something greater will come of them.
- Thus, when we bury the bodies of those we love, we are actually testifying to our hope in the resurrection in a very powerful and visible way.
- Interestingly, the beginning of the funeral liturgy recalls the rite of baptism. When a baby is baptized, it is first welcomed into the community at the doorway of the church.
- In the same way, funerals also begin in the doorway of the church, as the community receives the body of the deceased and greets the loved ones who have accompanied the casket to the doorway of the church.
- Once the priest has begun the funeral with the Sign of the Cross, he recalls the baptism of the deceased by sprinkling the casket with holy water.
- In this way the seed that is to be planted in hope of the resurrection is watered with the waters of baptism so that it may produce a rich harvest.
- As a further remembrance of the importance of baptism, the casket is then draped with a large, white cloth called a pall, which recalls the white garment that is placed on a newly-baptized person to signify the newfound dignity that baptism gives us.
- As we look beyond the rituals and symbols of the funeral liturgy to grasp their deeper meaning, the importance of baptism becomes very clear, for our baptism is our Lord’s pledge of eternal union with Him in heavenly glory.
- By recalling our baptism in such a concrete manner, the Church is calling our attention to the singular importance of this event in our life. In fact, for those who have had the Gospel proclaimed to them and who have had the possibility of asking for the sacrament, baptism is necessary for salvation.
- And it’s not only at funerals that we are reminded of our baptisms, but at every Mass. For example, today at the beginning of Mass we had a sprinkling rite, in which we were sprinkled with holy water and by which we prayed for the forgiveness of our sins.
- But even when we don’t have a sprinkling rite at Mass, every time we step into a Catholic church we dip our fingers into the holy water fonts at the doors as a reminder of how we’ve been signed with the love of the Trinity through our baptism.
- And we are reminded of the dignity that we took on at our baptisms by the albs worn by the priest and the altar servers. Just as we were clothed in a white garment symbolizing our newfound dignity at our baptism, so too do the priests and the altar servers wear white albs to remind us of this very important fact!
- We remind ourselves of our baptismal dignity so that we will be properly disposed to serve at the altar.

- With today's liturgy of our Lord's baptism, we come to the end of the Christmas Season. By commemorating our Lord's baptism, we recall the last of the mysteries associated with Christmas, and tomorrow we enter once again into Ordinary Time on our liturgical calendar.
- Moreover, we are reminded of the great importance of this sacrament and of the many graces that we receive through it. Truly, our baptism is one of the most graced and important moments of our entire life because through it we are made members of Christ's body.
- Baptism is absolutely crucial because it is baptism that identifies us as Christians, as followers of the crucified and resurrected one. In this sacrament we are freed from the power of darkness and joined to Christ's death, burial and resurrection.
- And our souls are marked with an indelible seal that can never be removed. We are marked by the Holy Spirit as one of God's own, and thus we become God's adopted children.
- Moreover, baptism pardons all our sins, and we are made new creations through water and the Holy Spirit. God actually remakes us in this sacrament, and He remakes us in the image of His Son.
- We enter into the water of the baptismal font as sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, but we emerge as sons and daughters of God. In baptism we actually become new creations!
- Just as the skies opened at Christ's baptism and God the Father said: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased", so too is God the Father pleased with us at the moment of our baptism.
- As we commemorate this august sacrament today, let us pray for the grace to live in a manner worthy of the dignity we now bear in our souls because of our baptism.
- Let us strive to live up to that name "Christian", which we all now bear by living like Christ, by living in the light of His love and manifesting that same light to the world.
- And in so doing, let us be confident in our hope of Christ's promise of everlasting life. May God bless and keep you always.