

**2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 9, 2011
10 AM & 5:30 PM Liturgies**

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One of my Christmas presents this year was the paperback edition of a number one *New York Times* bestseller called *The Book of Useless Information*. It claims to be “an official publication of the Useless Information Society” in London, England.

It contains tidbits like this: Did you know that “All U.S. presidents have worn glasses; some of them just didn’t like to be seen wearing them in public.” Or that “no U.S. president has ever been an only child.” Other tantalizing notes say that “Sarah Bernhardt once played a thirteen-year-old Juliet when she was seventy years old.” From the world of music, did you know that Beethoven’s Fifth was “the first symphony to include trombones?” Or that “every time he sat down to write music, he poured ice water over his head?” For the academics among us, did you know that “pomology is the study of fruits?” Or that “tomatoes and cucumbers are fruits?” Or that “the average banana weighs 126 grams?” Fascinating—and relatively useless—usually.

These are all taken from only the first few chapters. The book was a gift from my two grandnephews in Philadelphia. The fact that the book is

hand-inscribed by a six year old and an eleven year old, certainly got me wondering what the eleven year old thinks of the homilies he has heard me give. Did I mention that he thought this gift might be helpful for my homily preparation? Useless information, indeed!

But it is amazing how the strangest things sometimes do come to mind when preparing homilies. Here we are on the very first Sunday back in Ordinary Time and I was struck in my research for today to note a piece of apparently useless information highlighted by several scripture scholars.

All four gospels give an account of Jesus' baptism. It was, after all, a pivotal moment in his life, the inauguration of his public ministry, and one of the earliest confirmations of his mission on earth. If you remember last Sunday's gospel, we heard one of the synoptic versions, St. Matthew's. Matthew, like both Luke and Mark, has the same Jordan river, has the dove appear and a voice from the heavens (presumably God's own voice) testifying to who Jesus really is. He is "the Beloved" in whom God takes great delight.

John's version (just read) has the Jordan river, the actual baptism, and the dove, but *no* Voice from the heavens. No God confirming Jesus' identity. Instead, we have John the Baptist himself hearing God speak to him in his heart and telling *John* to witness to Jesus' identity. And as the gospel

continues past where we read today, the Baptist then does witness to Andrew, who witnesses to his brother, Peter, and down on the line. The earliest community of believers in John's the Evangelist's version, is built on *their witness to each other*, not on the direct intervention of God's Voice.

This is a keen observation. But is it just another illustration of useless information? Does this discrepancy actually tell us anything? Anything useful? Oddly enough, it might.

As most of us know, John's the Evangelist's gospel was the last one written; it is the latest gospel. By the time he was writing, the fledgling early community is by now pretty well established. And it has been decades since Jesus walked the earth with them. They are spreading far and wide; they have taken Jesus' final command quite seriously and quite literally. They are spreading the Word "to the ends of the earth."

But by now John the Evangelist and others realize that it is no longer by any direct Divine interventions, but the Word is spread by their witness to each other—and it's not just the leaders who witness (apostles, close disciples—they didn't yet have priests and bishops). They have to repeatedly tell each other again and again what they see and feel and hear. They have to continue to give witness to what they saw. That's what guarantees the growth

and health of the new community.

So what did the Baptist see that day by the Jordan? What did the others see in Jesus in those early years? John the Baptist tells us saw “the Lamb of God,” the one who was to restore balance to all creation, who would take away the sin that ruptured the world from God. (It’s not the “little sins” here, but “the sin” that is healed by God becoming human.)

That’s what the Baptist saw. But he did not argue himself to that vision by intellectual wrestling; he did not formulate theologies to explain anything. He saw *with his heart* the goodness and love that ultimate forgiveness brings. Repent, be forgiven as you forgive, and have life. That was his message. He saw that Life itself is birthed again in the Lamb of God enfleshed.

In John the Evangelist’s version of the baptism, John the Baptist sees with a different kind of light. He sees with his heart and knows he must give witness to that vision. It has to be shared—in words only if necessary (to paraphrase St. Francis). And so the Baptist ultimately gives his life itself.

What John sees at the Jordan, you and I are invited to see as well. And you and I are likewise invited to witness to it. But it takes a different kind of seeing. Saint-Exupéry’s “Little Prince” knows the kind of seeing it takes when he says: “And here now is my secret, a very simple secret: it is only

with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.”

For the more cynical among us, hear the skeptics’ patron saint, Sigmund Freud: “In the small matters trust the mind, in the large ones the heart.”

St. John the Evangelist’s version of today’s gospel reminds us all that we are in the middle of that long line of believers who need to continue to point to the Lamb of God in our midst. And we need to embrace that Lamb, to give witness in our own lives to that Lamb, and to share the experience in deeds and not just in words “to the very ends of our own earth.”

It seems sometimes apparently useless information can be very interesting and very challenging indeed. Behold the Lamb of God—in our midst!