

Blessed Marie-Eugene of the Child Jesus on Baptismal Grace

Talk given by **Fr Matt Blake OCD** on 17 March 2022 as a Lenten reflection

Transcribed from the recorded talk available at: <https://youtu.be/8NXyRtnIO9w>



This is the third of our five Lenten reflections and today the reflection I take is from Blessed Marie-Eugène. We celebrated quite recently his ordination and his entry into the Carmelite order in 1922, exactly a hundred years ago. He died in 1967 and was beatified a few years ago.

The theme I want to draw from his teaching is baptismal grace.* One of the aspects of Lent, in fact the fundamental aspect of Lent and the origin of Lent, is that it is the season of preparation for baptism, and it became very early on the season of renewal of baptism. We renew our baptismal promises at Easter, but it is a season when every Christian is invited to reflect on what it means to be baptised, on what baptism does in our lives: the change that baptism brings about, the possibilities that it opens up for us. And so I want to take just a little bit of Blessed Marie Eugene's teaching to help us to enter deeply into this. There can be many other things that we do in Lent, but all are at the service of this fundamental of living more deeply the grace that God gave us in baptism when we were baptised into the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, became members of His Church and were given the priestly, prophetic and kingly power of Jesus Christ. That is what changes everything and is something that was very important in the teaching of Blessed Marie-Eugene.

I just want to read a little text first. He is talking about baptismal grace and he is speaking about it in terms of hope:

Our great hope is our baptismal grace. We need to be aware of this reality; it is absolutely necessary that we be conscious of this treasure which we have been given, which we possess. Our great treasure is our baptismal grace, we must value it rightly above all else; it determines our eternal destiny and throws light on the path we should follow in this world, the furrow we are meant to plough. Let us not be led astray by other truths, whose importance and necessity I do not deny, but which sometimes risks overshadowing this great truth, leaving this treasure in darkness.

That puts it very well for us, the conviction that he had, and looking around the church in his time when he was ministering in the first half of the twentieth century up to 1967, this is even more true today. So often this is left a little bit in the shadow, a little bit

* 'Baptismal Grace' in *Where the Spirit Breathes – Prayer and Action*, Marie-Eugene of the Child Jesus, OCD, Translated by Mary Thomas Noble, St Pauls, Alba House, New York, 1998.

outside of our thinking – what it means to be baptised, the grace that we were given then, this unique gift of God that we have been given that God never takes back, that no matter what may happen in our lives and no matter how we may live, this gift is never taken from us, whoever has received it has it for ever.

And in the midst of this paragraph he picks out two things in particular: *it determines our eternal destiny* – we are children of God. That doesn't just mean after our death, though of course that's part of it, but the eternal destiny of the life we live here, this life of grace, we live a life that is determined by the fact that we are reborn as children of God. St Paul rightly describes baptism as an entering the tomb and coming out again, a dying and a rising with Jesus Christ; in other words, we are living already, by virtue of the fact that we are baptised, a life that is eternal. But then he gives this second point: *it throws its light on the path we should follow in this world, the furrow we are meant to plough*. That's a gospel image that he brings in here; we plough a furrow in this world, we leave our mark; our baptismal grace determines that, throws light on the path that we should follow. It is from that grace of baptism that we discover who we truly are and the life that is right for us to live; what kind of people we are, what kind of people we are meant to be. How does somebody with the grace of baptism live everyday lives in this world?

I want to read another paragraph where he goes deeper into this. He began by saying how important it is for us to be aware of this and to hold on to this awareness of the gift we have been given. *Once we are aware of our baptismal grace* – he then gives us four things:

- *the seal it confers,*
- *the light it gives,*
- *the orientation it ensures,*
- *the hope it bestows.*

We have an anchor in life for our souls.

I just want to reflect on these four things – the grace that gives our souls the anchor it needs in this world; in other words, the key to living life well in this world.

The seal it confers: that's an image we associate more with confirmation than with baptism, but of course it is baptism which gives that fundamental seal. Let the words of confirmation be sealed with the Holy Spirit – that seal, that stamp, that indelible mark – another term that's often used. Something that happens to us, that change that's brought about that's irreversible, that is fundamental to our identity. A fundamental change takes place with baptism, a fundamental change in who we are, an indelible one, permanent, cannot be changed and like any seal it confers our true identity and it gives power, authority. So the seal that is put on us at baptism.

Secondly, *the light that it gives*, the light of Jesus Christ, the light of the Holy Spirit. This image of light, the light that has come into the world, that light that on the one hand shows us what truth is; a light that guides us, a light that ensures that we live in the truth – so this light that is Jesus Christ, his presence in our lives.

The third is *the orientation it ensures*. In other words, we know the direction; it gives direction to our lives. It is baptism that directs us: where are we going, who are we, what direction do our lives take? It ensures that we take the right direction.

And fourthly, *the hope that it gives us*. Hope is the theme running right through this, as we have seen. And hope isn't just about something that's going to happen in the future, hope is a way of living life in this world, it's a way of living life that takes us beyond the everyday, what is visible. It's like we're living in this world, but our hearts are set on something that is bigger and greater, our hearts are set on the life that lasts forever, but it is the fact that our hearts are set on that that gives us the strength and the courage to live our lives well here. The person who lives with true Christian hope lives a profound commitment to life in this world. It doesn't take one out of this world but rather gives the person the inspiration to insert themselves ever more deeply into life in this world. So these four fundamentals, he tells us, constitute *the anchor for our souls*.

Then he goes on to develop this a little bit: *It seems that despair cannot touch us any more and all our anxieties are quieted*. What a wonderful statement. We never despair, even in the midst of the kind of difficulties our world is living through at the moment. A baptised Christian never despairs, because a baptised Christian has this grace, lives with this hope; so despair cannot touch us, so whatever anxieties or worries we have, they are quieted when we return to this great source that we have, the grace of baptism that we have been given. So now more than ever is a time to return to this grace and to allow this grace of baptism to orientate our lives.

God loves me, he said, *God gives me His grace, God calls me, He is my hope, what more do I need?* This is a very short talk, so I haven't the time to really go into it as much as I would like to. There are two directions he then develops in his teaching on this: one is prayer and the other is service or mission, or purpose, goal – whatever word we want to use.

Firstly, *prayer* – because of our grace of baptism, when we truly grasp what this means – fundamental to our prayer that brings us face to face with God, with the reality, with the existence, with the truth of God. I know that God loves me, that I have been given this life, this grace of God; then I want to know God, I want to see Him, come face to face with him. That's why, for Marie-Eugene's teaching on prayer, a fundamental passage in the Bible, (the first reading we have this Sunday), is Moses and the burning bush. He tells us that that is the starting point for his teaching, there Moses comes face to face with the reality of God. There were many great things that Moses did in his life – all of his achievements – but this is by far the most important and fundamental: he stood before God, before the reality of God; he stood on sacred ground. God is real for us. When the grace we have received in baptism is real for us, when we live lives aware of it, then God is real; prayer brings us face to face with the reality of God. Like Moses, the burning bush is there in our lives. God is real; he's a fire that is burning in our lives.

The second aspect he develops in his teaching is: *the furrow that we plough in this world, the contribution we make to this world, the good that we do, the mission that we're given and that we accomplish, the practical living out of the grace of baptism in our lives*. That has a certain quality to it, an orientation; it is lived with the light of the Holy Spirit; it's always a work of grace, a work of the Holy Spirit. There's a quality to what this person does, there's a depth to what he or she does. Life is not lived at a

superficial level. Whatever is done, whatever decisions are taken, whatever standpoints are lived by, they come from that place within, they are the fruits of the grace of baptism. When the grace of baptism is lived, and lived well, everything that a person does, every viewpoint and attitude and belief that a person holds, every relationship that the person has comes from this grace of baptism and is an expression of this grace of baptism. This is something so fundamental to the teaching of Blessed Marie-Eugene; it's a starting point we might say, because it is, when we think about it, the starting point of Christianity and it is the reason why Lent is the most important season in the Church's year. It is the season that brings us back to our starting point, to the fundamental of who we are as baptised Christians, people who have the grace of baptism; how we live that, how we live our relationship with God, and then the consequences, the fruits of that relationship, how they are lived and experienced.

Marie-Eugene spent his life training, forming, guiding what he called *apostles* – people from every walk of life, every situation in life, who would be apostles. It wasn't about achieving great things or getting great fame, but it was living in a deep and authentic way one's baptism and where that happens great good always flows from it. Most of the time that good is very hidden, but it is real, it is effective and that's what we today hold on to, each one of us. If we live our baptism well, if we live with ever deeper awareness that we've been given this greatest of all gifts, the grace of God, the light of God, put there within us then we have the gift, the capacity to live life really well and then our lives bear great fruit, do great good in this world, because they are lives of hope, lives that are rooted and anchored in true Christian hope.