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Kenneth R. Overberg  
*Xavier University - Cincinnati*

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# Turning Point

## Encountering John the Baptist

Kenneth R  
Overberg, SJ

The writer, a regular contributor to *Spirituality*, is professor of theology at Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA

356

*I realized that so much of my life... was different because of Peru.*

Peru and its people changed my life and ministry. In 1972, the year before I was ordained, six of us from the Jesuit School of Theology in Chicago spent our summer in Peru. The opportunity to study, travel, see, and listen offered us an experience of ‘conscientization’ (transforming awareness). We met with generals and bishops, pastors and students, the poor and the wealthy to learn about Peruvian reality.

Throughout the country, we encountered profound poverty. Questions of human dignity and justice, ethics and economics, the mystery of God and suffering stretched my worldview.

I returned to the US, wrestling with how I might best ‘help souls’ (one of St Ignatius Loyola’s favourite phrases for describing the work of the Society of Jesus; he meant the whole person). Going to Peru after ordination did not seem my path. Instead, I chose to study for a Ph.D. in Christian ethics, focusing on social justice. I have now spent many years at Xavier University in Cincinnati teaching and publishing about all the fundamental questions I experienced in Peru.

Recently I returned to Peru and revisited Villa El Salvador, a shantytown established in 1971 where we had lived briefly. Now looking out over a sprawling area with hundreds of thousands of people, I realized that so much of my life—my ministry, my worldview, the majority of people in my life, my sense of God—was different because of Peru. I asked how appropriately I had responded to this amazing gift, and I cried tears of wonder and gratitude.

When I returned from Peru after this experience, I continued to ponder what it all meant for my life and faith. A wise retreat director suggested that I consider Jesus’ return to the Jordan where John baptized—and where, according to the synoptic gospels, Jesus himself had been baptized. John’s gospel does not mention Jesus being baptized by John, but it does include various details also found in the accounts in Mark, Matthew, and Luke, such as the Spirit descending on Jesus and John the Baptist’s testimony about Jesus. The story of Jesus’ return to this specific spot ‘across the Jordan’ is found only in John’s gospel (10:40-42).

I reflected on both scenes—Jesus with John at the Jordan and then Jesus’ later return to that place. Jesus’ baptism evidently was a very special experience for the early communities to remember it. In some ways, though, the baptism must have been seen as an embarrassment to the followers of Jesus. How could it be that Jesus, Messiah and

Lord, needed to be, or at least chose to be baptized? Perhaps this is why the gospel of John omits the baptism altogether.

The gospels' descriptions of John the Baptist and Jesus, of course, are told from the perspective of Jesus' followers. At the time, John was better known. Both had disciples, and there must have been competition on both sides to 'set the record straight.' All this makes the synoptic gospels' accounts of Jesus being baptized by John even more remarkable.

*So why was this event remembered and handed on?*

So why was this event remembered and handed on? Perhaps because of its significance for Jesus' understanding of his life and vision for his ministry. Taking seriously that Jesus was fully human (as the Church teaches—and also fully divine) I recognized that Jesus had to discern his life's path just like we all do. His encounter with John and the baptism must have marked a turning point in Jesus' life, giving him a deepening sense of being God's 'beloved,' called to live and proclaim Abba God's loving presence, the Reign of God. The specifics of all this would have to be worked out and confirmed in the doing. In all four gospels, the stories of Jesus and John the Baptist mark the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.<sup>1</sup>

1. For much more on Jesus' experience, please see my Catholic Update, 'Finding the Heart of Jesus' Life,' at [www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU/ac1203.asp](http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU/ac1203.asp)

Then, when Jesus' words and deeds eventually led to conflict and threats of arrest and even stoning (John 10:31, 39), Jesus returns to where his ministry began. Was he looking back to the first experience and wondering how he in fact had responded? Was he questioning it all? Was he searching for confirmation, for renewed commitment, for new life and energy? John's gospel simply says that 'many there began to believe in him' (10:42).

357

Peru and its people were John the Baptist for me. The first encounter transformed my vision of life and ministry, turning my attention to structural injustices and raising the age-old question of how to hold together suffering and a gracious God. When I returned many years later, I asked myself (and others) about my response to that first significant encounter. After years of everyday work as a professor of theology, with both achievements and failures, affirmations and conflicts, I reviewed and evaluated my efforts for the poor and marginalized. I prayed for deepening trust in the God of compassion and nonviolence revealed by Jesus, searching for renewed energy and commitment. How best to continue 'helping souls' now?

I wonder if encounters with John the Baptist throughout the liturgical cycle can be for others as they now are for me: a reminder of a significant turning point in life. Can they also evoke a return in search of renewed consolation and creativity in serving others, along with the desire for a more intimate relationship with our God of life and love?