

## Orthodox baptism in the frozen lake

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**Faith is a serious matter.** But even **if you do not believe, there are strong parables, like the Gospel,** that teach us the rules of life: **to rid ourselves of bad things, we must suffer.** To rid ourselves of sin, we must wash away the dirt, the dirt in our souls.

**And everyone suffered a bit this afternoon,** when they plunged into the frozen waters of Lake Ghirla; the layer of ice had been cleared for the occasion, this morning at 7 o'clock, using a chainsaw, **to prepare the location for the Orthodox baptism.**

And the pieces of ice were used to make a cross, which awaited the faithful for a singing mass on the lake, commemorating the **Jesus's baptism in the River Jordan.** Everyone suffered because of the cold, including those who came to witness the event which is not only religious.

**The example was set by Vladimir Khomenko, the orthodox priest** of the Varese community, about eighty followers who pray together every Sunday, at the church in Via Milazzo, in the Casbeno neighbourhood.

**Vladimir is a pleasant person, he has a deep expression, long hair and beard,** and before the ceremony, he was careful to remove a stone from the bottom of the lake, so that the faithful would not hurt themselves when they entered the water.

Before the baptism, **a service was held:** behind the ice cross, the priest sang and prayed in Italian and Russian, splashing the crucifix from time to time with the water of the lake.

His wife, standing on the wharf, sang with a very sweet voice, making you forget the children shouting from the lakeside and chasing each other around the fire which had been lit to keep warm.

**The water, thus blessed, reached the faces of the people who smiled.** They were blessed on the wharf and on the lakeside.

**And then the test,** preceded by some words from the priest, which almost made you want to try, to understand whether this bathing can really help. But it was a thought that everyone abandoned as they put their hands, frozen by the -6°C temperature, back into their pockets.

A makeshift changing room was put up, using a few sheets, between the trees; here, the people could change before going into the water, but above all, they could remove their dripping clothes once they had come out.

**The first was Vladimir. He went in, puffed, made three complete immersions, his whole head under the water, then out.**

Then it was the turn of three little girls, 10 or 11 years old: it was very hard for them, but the priest accompanied them under the water and brought them out and onto the shore, after the palpitations

caused by the cold. The priest said something in Russian, told them to make the sign of the cross. **When they re-emerged, he greeted them with an amen.**

**Then a tattooed youth, and a father with his son. A young woman, and a boy. A little girl with her father, who helped her from the frozen shore.**

There may have been fewer than twenty followers who washed their sins away in the waters of the lake, which had become holy for an afternoon.

The sun went down early between the mountains, and at four o'clock, was getting ready for the night; for this, there was the fire, with warm soup, red wine, sausages and potatoes cooked on the barbecue: after the soul, **it was time to feed the body.**

di Andrea Camurani Translated by D'Andrea & Mane (Reviewed by Prof. Rolf Cook)