

The Sacrament of Baptism

Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit (*vitae spiritualis ianua*) (Council of Florence: DS 1314: *vitae spiritualis ianua*), and the door which gives access to the other Sacraments. (CCC #1213)

The word “baptism” means to “plunge” or “immerse.” This plunging does something beyond description. It actually brings about a complete transformation of the person baptized. They are “born again.” Remember what Jesus said to the Pharisee Nicodemus: “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit” (Jn 3:5). Baptism is that new birth. And this is not simply some symbolic or inspiring statement. Jesus is not just speaking in an analogous way. He’s telling the truth! Baptism is an actual new birth by water and the Holy Spirit. The result of this new birth is that a new person emerges. The old person enters into the water of baptism and dies. Then the new person rises from those waters. For this reason, the ideal form of baptism is full immersion. The person is completely plunged into the water just as Jesus died and entered into the tomb. And then, just as Jesus rose from the tomb, so also the newly created Christian rises from the waters.

Effects of Baptism

The fact that water is used for baptism signifies that there is a true cleansing that takes place. It’s a washing away of sin and death. And since baptism is a sacrament, it accomplishes that which it signifies. In other words, it actually does wash away all sin and death.

Original Sin: First of all, *baptism washes away original sin*. When we were conceived in our mother’s womb, we were conceived in a state of original sin. This means we were conceived and born into the world in a state of 100% need. Our human nature is wounded to the point that we cannot achieve happiness without some essential help. We cannot make it to Heaven or union with God without some essential gift from God. This gift is what we call grace. And without grace we are doomed to sin and death. But God did not leave us abandoned. He did not leave us in our sin. His death and resurrection destroyed death itself and restored life. But the key question to ask here is this: How does God impart to us the grace that He won by His death and resurrection? How do we receive what He offered our fallen human nature? The answer, first and foremost, is Baptism!

Baptism is the first action in our lives that truly gives us grace. It is the doorway through which we enter the life of grace, become members of the Church, and

share in the life of the Trinity. As the waters of Baptism are poured upon us, we are transformed by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Personal Sin: When an adult is baptized, baptism also washes away all personal sins committed. Yes, we all sin. Therefore, those who are old enough to sin (those who have reached the age of reason) carry more than original sin, they also carry personal sins. But baptism is so transformative and complete that, when an adult is baptized, each and every personal sin they have committed is washed away. In the early Church, there were even some who chose to wait to be baptized until they were older so that every sin would be washed away in this Sacrament just before death. This early Christian practice misses the fact of God's ongoing mercy and forgiveness, but it illustrates the point that all personal sin is washed away. This is often received as very good news by those adults who are baptized after a checkered past. It's received as good news because, when they are baptized, all their sins are wiped away! What a grace!

Indelible Spiritual Mark: Baptism also places what we call an "indelible spiritual mark" on our soul. We're like animals who get branded. The physical mark is a permanent sign of who that animal's owner is. Similarly, in baptism our souls are marked with a permanent spiritual marking to reveal the fact that we forever remain children of God. Even if we seriously sin, this marking remains a constant source of grace calling us back to God.

Children of God: Baptism makes us adopted children of God. When we are baptized, we enter into the new family of the Trinity. We become one with Christ Jesus, are filled with the Holy Spirit and are made children of the Father in Heaven. It is the unity with Jesus that brings this about. Since baptism has the effect of making us members of the Body of Christ, we are automatically filled with the Holy Spirit as a result. And when the Father looks at His Son Jesus, He also sees us as a member of His Son's body. Therefore, we can now call God our Father.

New Brothers and Sisters: If God is my Father, and God is your Father, then we share a new spiritual kinship. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ, sharing the same Father in Heaven. So baptism brings about a spiritual unity and a spiritual family bond that cannot be lost. Once baptized, we will always share in this grace. Even if we become like wayward children, our Father is always waiting to welcome us back into His family by grace.

Old Testament Prefigurations

Baptism was seen in a veiled way from the beginning of time. The fact that God would save us one day through water is also seen in the many ways that God saved His people in the Old Testament. Let's look at those ways.

Creation: The second sentence of the book of Genesis says there was “a mighty wind sweeping over the waters” ([Gn 1:2](#)). This is a reference to the Holy Spirit breathing on the waters of creation, making them a source of holiness for the world. This is the first baptismal image we have in the Scriptures.

Noah: God first chose to destroy the sinful world with water. This was a sign of baptism. Just as the waters covered the Earth and destroyed all things, so also baptism covers us and destroys sin. Noah and his family are the new humanity. So also we are part of that new humanity since washed with the waters of baptism.

Red Sea: The Red Sea is the most notable sign of baptism in the Old Testament. In this event, we see God's people saved as they walk through the waters of this sea. As they pass through the waters, evil is destroyed behind them, symbolized by the covering of Pharaoh's army with water. Yet the Israelites are led into freedom through these same waters.

Jordan River: On the final journey into the promised land, Joshua led the Israelites through the waters of the Jordan River. It was a mighty river. However, as soon as the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant entered the waters, the river stopped flowing and the Israelites were able to pass through. This points to Baptism as the gateway to the promised land of grace in our lives.

Giving Us This Sacrament

The Sacrament of Baptism was immediately presented to us when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan. John had been baptizing people and calling them to repentance. He was preparing them for the coming of the Messiah. And then Jesus the Son of God showed up to be baptized by John. John didn't want to do it at first, but Jesus insisted. So He entered the Jordan and was baptized by John.

Did Jesus need this baptism? Did He need to repent? Obviously not. What Jesus did in that baptism could be called a “reverse baptism.” In other words, as Jesus entered the water, He Himself baptized the water. And by entering into the water, He made all water holy and transmitted His grace to it so that it could henceforth be used as the instrument of the baptism of others.

Though Jesus was not changed by His baptism as we are, it was the beginning of His public ministry and the first manifestation of who He was. The Spirit descended in manifest form, and the Father spoke from Heaven. This is a revelation of Jesus as a member of the Trinity, sent by the Father and empowered by the Spirit, to fulfill His divine mission of salvation.

Baptism, as a sacrament, was formally instituted by Jesus just before He ascended into Heaven. He said to His Apostles, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” ([Mt 28:19](#)). With this command, we have the glorious gateway to grace that Jesus intended.

Who Baptizes Whom?

Baptism was entrusted to the Apostles by Jesus. He commanded them to go forth and baptize. Therefore, it is first and foremost the responsibility of bishops and priests to carry out this duty. Deacons are also ordinary ministers of Baptism, since they share in the Sacrament of Holy Orders. However, since Baptism is necessary for salvation and is intended for all people, it is possible for anyone to baptize. Here are a couple of examples to illustrate.

Imagine a child is born and the doctor says this child only has minutes to live. It would be proper for a parent to take water and baptize. This is done by three acts: 1) Pour water on the child’s head; 2) Say, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; 3) Intend to baptize as the Church intends. So water, words and intention are all required.

This same child could actually be baptized by the doctor or nurse, even if, for example, the doctor or nurse were Jewish or atheist. As long as the person baptizing fulfills the three requirements above, the child is truly baptized.

Something additional is required of those to be baptized who have reached the age of reason. They must desire Baptism and choose it for themselves, whereas infants are baptized when the parents alone intend to raise them in the faith of the Church. This poses an interesting question.

Is it better for a child to become an adult and then freely choose Baptism, or is it better to baptize someone as a child? Of course, our Church teaches it’s best to baptize children rather than adults, but the reasoning is important to understand.

Some will argue that it's better not to baptize as children, because they need to make their own decision about their faith when they grow up. Children cannot choose Baptism or Christ. But our Church has the tradition of baptizing children. We do so because we believe it's better for a child to be raised in the faith. This presupposes they will choose Christ as they grow and mature and affords them all the grace they need to make this essential choice throughout their lives. So they still must make the choice to follow Christ as they grow and mature, but infant baptism helps them make the right choice. And even a two-year-old needs grace to begin learning right from wrong. So Baptism gives them what they need as they need it.

Now what about those who are not baptized, you ask? What happens to them? And what about children who are not baptized? Are they doomed?

These questions can only be understood if we understand the perfect love and wisdom of God in all things. God is not legalistic. He does not look at a child who dies and say, "Well, sorry, but I only take baptized children into Heaven." This would be contrary to the infinite mercy and wisdom of God. Yet at the same time, the Church teaches that Baptism is the only way we know of that leads to salvation. Therefore, it is necessary. So how do we reconcile these views that appear to be opposed? That is, how do we reconcile a loving God with the teaching that Baptism is necessary for salvation?

This is done quite easily. We believe that Baptism is the only way we know of (the only way God revealed to us) to receive the grace of salvation. But God, in His infinite love and wisdom, is not constrained or bound by the limited revelation He shared with us. God can do whatever He wants to do. We are bound by the Sacraments, but God is not. Therefore, if a child dies before Baptism, the parents should rest assured that God loves that child far more than they do. And this perfectly loving God will act in a way that is perfectly loving toward that child. One speculation is that God offers that child the same choice He offered the angels. They had a one-time opportunity to choose. So it is entirely possible that when this child dies and faces God, this child will be invited to choose to love God freely and, thus, spend eternity with God. But we must always remember that Heaven does require a free choice. Therefore, not even a child would be forced to be there against his or her will.

Another interesting scenario is the adult who is not baptized. What happens when that adult dies? Again, we must look at this from the point of view of a God who is infinitely wise and infinitely loving. In this case, there are a few possibilities. The first possibility is what is referred to as "baptism by blood." This would be the person who desires Baptism but, before actually receiving this sacrament, is martyred for his faith. We don't see this that often today, but it was a real situation in the early Church. We believe that this desire to be baptized, as well as

the act of martyrdom, earns the grace of Baptism by means other than water, and thus the person receives all the graces and effects of a traditional baptism.

Similarly, we speak of “baptism by desire.” This would include those who believe and desire Baptism but die before they are baptized by water. Again, the desire alone suffices for God to pour forth His grace. This would also apply to children who die before they are baptized when the parents desired Baptism. The desire on the part of the parents suffices for the grace to be poured forth.

Lastly, we need to look at the situation of those who did not choose to be baptized and, therefore, died without this sacrament. These cases will fall in one of two categories. First, there are those who *through no fault of their own* did not come to an explicit faith in Christ and, as a result, did not seek Baptism. In this case, God will judge only the heart. There are many reasons why a person may not come to explicit faith in Christ through no fault of their own. Say, for example, that a person lives in some culture where the Gospel has never been preached, and they actually have never heard of Jesus. Does God consider them to be deserving of eternal damnation because they never had the opportunity to hear about Jesus? Certainly not.

Another example would be the person who heard about Jesus but received only a message of hypocrisy. Let’s say that the message preached was continually skewed and malicious. Perhaps the preacher was living a double life, and the person hearing about Jesus rejected the explicit Gospel message because of this messenger. Furthermore, we should presume that the Gospel message was being presented in a very disordered way. In that case, the rejection of the message may actually have been a rejection of the hypocrisy of the messenger. And that may be a good thing!

The bottom line is that God knows the heart, and God sees the intention in that heart. So if someone fails to come to an explicit faith in Christ and, therefore, fails to receive the Sacrament of Baptism in an explicit way, God will still look only at the heart. And when He does look into that heart, if He sees goodness and faith, He will pour out His grace anyway. So, a person who is not baptized may actually be following the voice of God in their conscience without even realizing whose voice it is. In reality, this person has faith and God will see that!

The only case that may end with eternal damnation is the person who fails to receive Baptism through their own fault. They are given every opportunity to hear the Gospel, they have the good Christian witness of others, and they interiorly reject this of their own free will. Free will is the key here. And, again, only God knows the heart, and only God can be the judge of one’s heart. So if God sees in the heart an obstinacy that is freely chosen, then this person is guilty and may lose that offer of eternal salvation. This is sad.

The Celebration of Baptism

Baptism is celebrated according to a set liturgical rite that has evolved over the centuries. A detailed explanation would be a book in itself. For our purposes, we will look only at some of the essential parts of the liturgical rite and speak to their symbolism and meaning. This reflection is based on the Rite of Baptism for Children, but the symbolism and meaning applies to adults who are baptized also.

Beginning at the Entrance of the Church: Baptism begins at the entrance of the Church. This is done as a symbolic gesture of what is happening. The child being baptized is being welcomed into the Church as a member of Christ's body. The church building is a symbol of Christ's spiritual Body, the Church. Therefore, the person is met at the entrance and welcomed into Christ Jesus.

Marked with the Sign of the Cross: The person to be baptized is then marked on the forehead with the sign of the Cross by the minister, the parents and the godparents. This symbolic gesture is an indication of what is soon to take place. The child will be marked by Baptism with an indelible spiritual marking from God on their soul.

Proclamation of the Scriptures: The Word of God is read, and a homily is given. This shows that faith comes through hearing the Word of God. And the response to that faith is first and foremost Baptism.

Anointing with Oil of Catechumen: A prayer against evil is prayed over the child (a prayer of exorcism), and then the child is anointed with oil that was previously blessed by the bishop. This prayer acknowledges the reality of evil in our world and, at the beginning of the child's Christian life, offers the grace of protection. The child is then anointed on the breast as a sign of receiving a breastplate of protection.

Blessing of Water: The minister moves to the baptismal font and prays a prayer of blessing upon the water. The most traditional of prayers used is one which recounts the history of God's use of water. It recounts the events mentioned earlier in this chapter regarding the following: the Spirit breathed on the waters at Creation; the story of Noah; the Red Sea; the Jordan; and the Baptism of Jesus.

Renunciation of Sin and Profession of Faith: The parents and godparents are asked to profess their faith and, in so doing, to profess the faith in which the child is about to be baptized. In this profession of faith, they are promising to raise the child in this faith they profess.

Rite of Baptism: The essential part of Baptism is the pouring, sprinkling or immersion with water. While the water touches the person, the Trinitarian formula is said: “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” The minister must also have the intention to do what the Church intends to do, namely, to baptize.

Chrism: Chrism is a mixture of oil and perfume. It is blessed by the bishop at a special Mass during Holy Week called the Chrism Mass. This chrism is also used in Confirmation and Holy Orders. The oil is a symbol of the anointing of the Holy Spirit, and the perfume is a symbol of the sweet fragrance of Christ which must always permeate their lives.

Baptismal Garment: The child is covered with a white garment, which is a symbol of being clothed in Christ. White is a symbol of purity and freedom from sin.

Candle: The parents and godparents then receive a lit candle. The candle is lit from the Easter candle, which is a symbol of Christ Himself. The light is entrusted to the parents and godparents as a way of telling them they are now responsible to keep this light of faith alive in the heart of this child through their words and actions so that the faith given in Baptism will reach culmination one day in Heaven.

Blessing of Parents: The rite concludes with a special blessing of the parents. This blessing acknowledges the fact that parents play an essential role in the Christian upbringing and formation of children who are baptized. They can only fulfill this role with the help of God!