

SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY: Class 2

Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism

In Baptism you died with Christ: They were five separate occasions. Seven separate lives. But with each one the experience was much the same. With each one, there was wonder and hope, promise and comfort in that dancing flame of the large Paschal candle, the Easter candle. And if one's eyes moved away from the candle, its white and gold warmth and promise were echoed in the white and gold linen which covered the altar and the white and gold Easter vestments which the priest was wearing.

On all five occasions the priest held a bowl filled with the water of Baptism, the fresh clean water of new life. On all five occasions he dipped a branch into the water and pulled it out dripping. He shook it, sending droplets of hope and promise flying out into the air - and onto the coffins.

- The coffin of a great-grandmother who died peacefully in her sleep at age ninety-one.
- The coffin of a father who died at age sixty-one, in the middle of a life still full of plans, because a simple operation went wrong.
- The coffin of a teenager who died because he and his friends were sniffing glue in a small closet in order to get high.
- The coffins of a mother and her two daughters who were killed by a drunk driver in an intersection collision.
- The coffin of a baby who lived for four months in the hospital after his birth but was never able to go home.

On each of these five occasions, as the droplets of water touched the coffin, the priest said, "In the waters of Baptism you died with Christ and rose with him to new life. May you now share with him eternal glory." At the funeral of the great-grandmother the congregation was sad, but also ready to let her go. She had lived a long and good life. She had been ready to die, and her family had known that it was time. They had said their goodbyes. At each of the other funerals the congregation had been unprepared for the death. These questions were too soon. They "shouldn't have happened." They seemed pointless, or stupid, or evil, or just plain unfair. They made people ask questions like, "Where was God?" "Why didn't

God change things?" "Why did it all end this way?" "Why weren't our prayers enough to protect this person whom, we loved?" To all of these questions the Church responded quietly but clearly with the symbols of our Baptism, the symbols of life as God sees it.

Death has a way of making us think about life. Most of the time we take life for granted. We are busy with the day-to-day business of living and we don't stop to think about what life means or why people live. If we notice that life is going well, we rarely stop to ask why. When someone dies, however, we are often overwhelmed with questions. We wonder why something so precious must end. We question the purpose of life when life can be abruptly cut off before we have a chance to finish what we've started. We ask why life is so fragile, so easily destroyed. We wonder why the gift of life seems so unfairly distributed, why some live more years than they want to and others die long before they are ready. We demand to know why foolish mistakes can be "punished" by death, or why some people must die because others are filled with hate and evil.

Death raises the questions to which Baptism is the answer. Baptism is the sacrament that holds answers to the mystery of life. Life, in fact, is a mystery that we cannot fully grasp. The moments of our greatest awareness of its mystery are the moments of birth and death.

The Great Gift of Baptism: St. Gregory of Nazianzus called Baptism "God's most beautiful and magnificent gift." The word Baptism itself is taken from the Greek *baptizein*, meaning to "plunge" or "immerse." St. Gregory went on to explain the greatness of this sacrament: We call it gift, grace, anointing, enlightenment, garment of immortality, bath of rebirth, seal, and most precious gift. It is called gift because it is conferred on those who bring nothing of their own; grace since it is given even to the guilty; Baptism because sin is buried in the water; anointing for it is priestly and royal as are those who are anointed; enlightenment because it radiates light; clothing since it veils our shame; bath because it washes; and seal as it is our guard and the sign of God's Lordship (*Oratio* 40, 3-4: PG 36, 361C).

Baptism Overcomes Sin and Death: It is the sacrament of Baptism that brings about rebirth and initiates us into the Church, the Body of Christ. Baptism gives us the grace to live in the midst of a sinful world and our own sinfulness. As the

Catechism of the Catholic Church defines: Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments (1213).

God is infinitely good and all of his works are good. Yet, certainly, evidence of sinfulness abounds. Terrorism and war occur in many places around the world. Disregard for human life is high: thousands of unborn babies are aborted each day, much of the world's population lives in poverty and despair, and older people and the ill live in a culture that debates the suitability of euthanasia.

In our own lives, sin is present. We face daily temptations. A "friend" asks to copy a homework assignment. Alcohol is offered at a party. We rage in anger at a parent. Sexual temptations are everywhere. In Baptism, sin is overcome. Baptism forgives both original sin and personal sins. In doing so, Baptism is a sign that a community of the baptized can bring the Lord's presence to the world. The succeeding subsections examine more closely how this is so.

Original Sin: We are created by God in his image and in friendship with him. We can only live in friendship with God when we freely respond to him. This is God's plan for us.

Our understanding of God's plan also helps us to understand sin as "an abuse of the freedom" against God (CCC, 387). Original sin - the sin by which the first human beings disobeyed God's commands, choosing to follow their own will rather than God's will - is an essential truth of our faith. However, it is only through the long journey of revelation which culminates in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that original sin can be fully understood. As the Catechism points out, "We must know Christ as the source of grace in order to know Adam as the source of sin" (388).

Prior to the original sin of the first humans, the Church teaches that a fallen angel rejected God and his reign. This fallen angel - "Satan" or the "devil" - was the tempter who led our first parents to sin. Revelation also "clearly tells that the entire human history has been marked by the original sin of Adam. With the original sin, death entered human history and the world has been inundated by sin since then.

The consequences of original sin affect all of us. St. Paul wrote in the letter to the Romans that "through one person sin entered the world, and through sin, death, and thus death came to all, in as much as all sinned" (Rom 5:12). How can one sin affect all of humanity? The Council of Trent explained that the whole human race is in Adam "as one body of one man." By this "unity of the human race" we are all share, in Adam's sin, just as we all share in salvation through Christ. Because Adam's sin permanently wounded our human nature, it is transmitted to all generations - we are all born in this condition. Adam received original holiness and justice for him and all human nature. By his personal sin, all human nature was then affected and took on a fallen state.

Although we share in the original sin, it is not a sin that each one of us has committed personally. While we have lost the gift of original holiness and justice, our entire human nature has not been corrupted. While we are subject to ignorance, suffering, and death, and inclined to sin (known as concupiscence), Baptism grants the life of Christ's grace, erases original sin, and turns us back to God, albeit with a weakened nature that is inclined to evil.

By the sin of our first parents, Satan has acquired a certain domination over us. Life, complicated and filled with the consequences of original sin and all of the personal sins of men and women, is a constant battle with Satan and evil. Thankfully, the doctrine of original sin is closely connected with that of the redemption of Christ.

O Happy Fault! After the original sin, God did not abandon the human race. Rather, God immediately detailed his plan for victory over evil and restoration from the fall to sin. This first announcement of the Messiah and Redeemer, of a battle between a serpent and the Woman, and of the final victory of her descendents comes in the book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. God speaks to Satan about his temptation of Adam and Eve and about the Lord's ultimate victory over sin and evil. God said to the serpent: I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel (Gn 3:15).

The first letter of John tells us "the Son of God appeared that he might destroy the works of the devil" (3:8). Thus the passage from Genesis 3:15 is understood as

God's first promise of a Redeemer for fallen mankind. The woman is understood to be Mary and her offspring is recognized as Jesus Christ.

The passage also helps us to understand Jesus as the "New Adam" who was freely obedient to God even to his death. On the cross Jesus' death won for us our redemption and was the atonement for our sins. His mother Mary was the first to benefit from his victory over sin: she was immaculately conceived without original sin and by God's special grace committed no sin of any kind while on earth.

You may have wondered many times why God simply did not prevent Adam from sinning. Wouldn't life for him and all of his descendants - including us - have been much easier? You have probably already witnessed how sometimes an even greater good can come from a bad situation. So, on the other hand, is the case here. As St. Thomas Aquinas offers:

There is nothing to prevent human nature's being raised up to something greater, even after sin; God permits evil in order to draw forth some greater good. Thus St. Paul, says, "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more"; and the Exultet sings, "O happy fault, which gained for us so great a Redeemer!" (Summa Theo).

Dying and Rising With Christ: Christ's sacrifice on the cross was the source of our salvation. As the letter to the Romans also describes, "For just as through the disobedience of one person the many were made sinners, so through the obedience of one the many will be made righteous" (5:19). With Christ, we die in the sacrament of Baptism in order to live a new life. St. Paul explains further, "Or are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through Baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life (6:3-4).

The element of death is one of the great mysteries in Baptism. In Baptism, we actually die with Christ sacramentally in order rise with him. When we physically die later in life it is not something new; it is just the visible sign of what occurred when we were baptized. Both the suffering we may encounter in life and our eventual death are experienced and dealt with in Baptism. In Baptism we actually die with Christ. More positively, all of the life, love, and hope which we experience after Baptism is a part of our eternal life. That is why when someone

dies Christians do not despair. We do not despair because we have already seen a piece of the eternal life that will follow this physical death.

Like all sacraments, the extent to which we are able to recognize and feel the fruit of the sacrament is dependent upon our own faith. Following our Baptism we are already living eternal life. The meaning we long to find in the face of suffering and death has already been given to us. The devastating pain of suffering and death have already been taken from us. But without faith we will not notice.

More Grace and Effects of Baptism: St. Peter's words to the crowd gathered, outside of the Upper Room on Pentecost summarize the grace and effects of baptism: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). The principal grace and effects of the sacrament of Baptism remain the same: the forgiveness of sins and new life in the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is the first sacrament of Christian initiation, the beginning and foundation of Christian life. Baptism offers a sacramental bond of unity among all Christians, including those not in full communion with the Catholic Church. Baptism, then, becomes "a point of departure" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 22) for Christians from other denominations who are becoming Catholic. The Church accepts Baptisms as valid from Christian denominations that baptize using similar words and rituals, all the while orienting the convert toward a profession of the Catholic faith, incorporation into Catholic teaching and doctrine, and toward complete participation through the sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist.

The effects of Baptism are signified by the main elements of the baptismal rite, including water, words, oil, white garment, and light.

Baptism Frees Us From Sin: The prime symbol of the sacrament of Baptism is water. The Church teaches that baptismal waters represent death to evil, sin, and selfishness. The early baptismal fonts were often understood as both symbols of a womb and a tomb. The image of the womb suggests the waters that surround the baby in the mother's womb. Emerging from this symbolic womb, the baptized is "born again" in Christ. He or she shares in the resurrection of Christ and enters a new life in Christ and the Holy Spirit. Likewise the image of the tomb suggested the tomb of Christ from which the newly baptized emerges with the risen Lord.

Baptism is an efficacious symbol that actually washes away sin, both original sin and personal sins. Some may ask how can original sin be forgiven? Surely we cannot be found guilty for something we had no control over, so why do we need forgiveness? Sin is a rupture of our relationship with God, the forgiveness of sins is a restoration of that relationship. When we say that our sins are forgiven we are saying that there is no longer anything which separates us from God. Since both original sin and personal sin separate us from God, both need to be forgiven.

Baptism not only results in the forgiveness of sins, it also entails forgiveness of all punishment for sin. In other words, when we are baptized any punishment that God might have given us because of the things we have done is eliminated. (It is important to remember, however, that for Catholics the forgiveness of sins and the elimination of punishment are two separate things. Baptism forgives all sins and removes all punishment for sins. The sacrament of Penance forgives sins but does not necessarily remove all punishment.)

Baptism does not eliminate all of the consequences of sin, however. We will still experience illness, suffering, and death, but they will no longer have the power to separate us from God or from one another (unless we give that power to them). We may still have weaknesses in our character which make certain sins seem attractive; and we will have an inclination to sin which makes it seem natural to think first of ourselves in many or most situations. However, neither our weaknesses nor our inclination to sin can separate us from God if we do not give in to them.

After being baptized, we can echo these words of St. Paul: I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:38-39).

Baptism Makes Us New: Baptism not only cleanses us from our sins, but it remakes us into a new creation, imparting in us life in Christ. As Jesus explained to Nicodemus about how a person could be "born again": "Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (Jn 3:5). In the waters of Baptism our fundamental identity is changed. We are configured to Christ, becoming "a new creature" who comes to share the divine

nature. We are a member of Christ and a co-heir with him. Baptism makes us children of God and temples of the Holy Spirit.

The words used in Baptism are "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The use of the phrase "in the name of" in ancient Aramaic and Greek was a way to designate a personal relationship to the person named. Thus, Baptism in the name of the triune God relates us to the Blessed Trinity in several ways. The Blessed Trinity gives us sanctifying grace that:

- enables us to believe in, hope in, and love God;
- gives us the power to live and act under the guidance of the Holy Spirit through the gifts of the Holy Spirit;
- allows us to grow in goodness through the moral virtues.

As a way to symbolize new life in Christ, the celebrant puts on or over the newly baptized a white garment and says: See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity. With your family and friends to help you by word and example, bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven. The wearing of the Baptismal garment also is a reminder of the uniqueness of each person and a reminder to live a life of love worthy of our Christian identity.

Baptism Makes Us Members of the Church: Baptism incorporates us into the Church and makes us members of the Body of Christ. The Catechism explains that "from the Baptismal fonts is born the one People of God of the New Covenant, which transcends all natural or human limits of nations, cultures, races, and sexes" (1267).

Baptism has been described as "the embrace of God." In Baptism God reaches out to us and gives us his Spirit even though we are undeserving. Once we have received the Spirit, it is up to us to allow him to shape our lives. It is up to us to actually live as the children of God and not as the children of Adam and Eve. In Baptism the light of God enters us. We have the rest of our lives to learn to let that light shine from us out to the world.

All the baptized are members of the Body of Christ. We no longer belong to ourselves but to Christ. As members of the same body as all other Christians we have a responsibility for keeping their well-being in mind whenever we make a

decision. We cannot ask, "What is best for me?" We must ask, "What is best for us?" We can live out our Baptism only if we put aside our selfishness and care for those whose need is greater than our own. We serve our brothers and sisters in need in communion with the Church and in obedience to the Church's teaching. When this seems impossible we should remember that in Baptism we received God's grace. This grace makes it possible for us to believe in, hope in, and love God. It also makes it possible for us to do what God calls us to do.

Our Baptism gives us a share in the common priesthood of all believers. Every person who has been baptized is responsible for doing the work of the Church, for participating in the sacraments, proclaiming the gospel, and caring for those in need. If we think that the Church is not making a difference in the world, then it is up to us to do more. We cannot wait for the priests and other dedicated leaders to do everything. All the baptized share in the priesthood of Christ. We have been anointed to bring God's transforming love to the world.

Rites of Baptism: The rites of Baptism using essential words and symbols have quite a bit to do with understanding the meaning and grace of the sacrament. For typical Baptisms of infants, the sacrament ideally takes place on Sunday, the day of the Church's celebration of Christ's Paschal mystery. The sacrament may be held within Mass or outside of it, but always communally with other recently born children, friends, relatives, neighbors, and the community of faith. A description of some of the rites that make up the sacrament follow:

- **Welcome.** The celebrant asks the parents of each child these questions: "What name do you give your child?" and "What do you ask of God's Church for your child?" The child's name is important as he or she is God's unique creation. The answer for the second question is "Baptism" or "faith" and is supplied by the parents. Baptism is the sacrament of faith.
- **Sign of the Cross.** The celebrant and then the parents and godparents trace the sign of the cross on the infant's forehead. This marks the person with the imprint of Christ and signifies the grace of Christ's redemption won for us by the cross.
- **Word of God.** One or two gospel passages are read. For example, Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus (Jn 3:1-6), the commissioning of the apostles to preach and baptize (Mt 28:18-20), or the baptism of Jesus (Mk 1:9-11). "The

proclamation of the Word of God enlightens the candidates and the assembly with the revealed truth and elicits the response of faith, which is inseparable from Baptism" (CCC, 1236).

- Exorcisms. One or more exorcisms are pronounced to signify liberation from sin and the devil, and the child is anointed on the breast with the oil of catechumens.
- Blessing of water and renunciation of sins. The celebrant recalls the various roles of water in salvation history. Then he blesses the water by a prayer of epiclesis. The parents and godparents are asked questions in the name of the child to reject Satan, sin, and evil. Then they profess their faith in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- Baptism. The essential rite of the sacrament follows. Baptism is performed with a triple immersion in the baptismal water or the pouring of water three times over the child's head accompanied by the minister's words: "Name. I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."
- Anointing with Chrism. The celebrant anoints the child on the crown of the head, in silence. This signifies the child has received the gift of the Holy Spirit, anointed by the Holy Spirit and incorporated into Christ who is anointed priest, prophet, and king. In the Roman Catholic Church, this post-baptismal anointing announces a second anointing with chrism that will be conferred at a later time by the bishop—the sacrament of Confirmation which completes the baptismal anointing. (In the Eastern liturgies, the post-baptismal anointing is the sacrament of Confirmation.)
- White garment. The clothing with a white garment signifies that the child has become a new creation and has been clothed in Christ.
- Lighted candle. A candle lit by the father or godfather from the Easter candle signifies that Christ has "enlightened" the child and that he or she is to become "light of the world."
- Approaching the Altar. The child, clothed in the white garment of Christ, is readied to receive the body and blood of Christ in Eucharist. In the Eastern Churches, Holy Communion is given to all the newly baptized and confirmed. In the Roman Church, First Holy Communion occurs later at the

age of reason. To express the orientation of Baptism to Eucharist, the newly baptized child is brought to the altar for the praying of the Our Father.

- Our Father. As a child of God, the newly baptized participates in the prayer of the children of God, the Our Father.
- Solemn blessing. This is the conclusion of the celebration of Baptism. The celebrant first blesses the mother, who holds the child in her arms, then the father, and lastly the entire assembly.

Baptism Marks Us With the Seal of Eternal Life: Baptism is the seal of eternal life. "Baptism seals the Christian with the indelible spiritual mark (character) of his belonging to Christ" (CCC, 1272). Nothing - not even sin - can erase the mark of Baptism, though sin can prevent the person from gaining the rewards of salvation. Baptism is given one time only and cannot be repeated.

In earlier times a wax seal indicated documents were authentic and that nothing had been added to or taken away from them after they had been "sealed" shut. In Baptism Christians are marked by God as people who belong in the kingdom of heaven. If we "keep the seal" and remain faithful until the end we can be sure that God will recognize us and welcome us into his kingdom while we are on the earth and in body and spirit after our death.

The Biblical Roots of Baptism: The sacrament of Baptism was prefigured in the great events of the Old, Testament. To say that Baptism was prefigured means that there were events which came before Baptism which can help us to understand Baptism and vice versa. These events are prefigured because their essential shape is similar to the essential shape of Baptism. When Noah and his family were carried through the killing waters of the flood, they became a sign of the mystery of Baptism. The waters of Baptism are the waters which change the face of our world. They are the waters that erase the life of sin and death into which we were born. But just as God carried Noah through the waters of the flood and saved his life, so too God carries us through the waters of Baptism and gives us salvation.

When the people of Israel crossed the Red Sea to escape from slavery, that too was a sign of the Baptism that was to come. The crossing of the Red Sea and the liberation from Egypt is the event which gives identity to the Jewish community. It turns a group of slaves into a free nation. The crossing of the Red Sea is the sign of

the true liberation from sin and the path which was yet to come. The creation of the Jewish nation from scattered groups of slaves was the sign of God's plan to create one people from all the nations of the world. Baptism is the feast of freedom and unity for which the crossing of the Red Sea was only the appetizer.

Finally, the crossing of the Jordan River prefigured Baptism too. When the people crossed the Jordan they entered the Promised Land, a land which symbolized eternal life with God. In the years prior to this crossing the people were not faithful to God and they lost the Promised Land-and were scattered throughout the world as an oppressed and persecuted people. Nonetheless, they continued to believe that Yahweh would one day return them to the Promised Land and allow them to live there forever. Jesus came to do just that. He came to restore the promise and the blessing to those who had lost it. He came to lead all people into a new Promised Land which cannot be taken from them. We enter this eternal Promised Land - God's Kingdom - by crossing through the waters of Baptism.

All of the events and all of the promises of the Old Testament find their fulfillment in Jesus. When we say that events are fulfilled in Jesus we are saying that the full meaning of those events can only be understood in light of what Jesus said and did. Jesus began his own public ministry by being baptized. In his person he repeats Noah's experience on the ark and the Israelites' journey across the Red Sea and across the Jordan. But while the Israelites were afraid and grumbled about God's way of doing things, Jesus trusted God completely and accepted whatever God put before him. Though sinless, he submitted to the baptism which John intended for sinners as a sign of his willingness to empty himself and to become one with us. When he came up from the waters, all that he had laid aside was returned to him as God said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3:17).

The Spirit descending upon Jesus at his baptism is the sign that the new world, which the destruction of the flood hinted at, has finally come into being. The Spirit of God who hovers over the waters at Jesus' baptism is the same Spirit who hovered over the waters at the time of creation. The presence of the Spirit is the sign that something new is occurring. The waters of the flood wiped out creation, but they did not renew it. Sin reared its ugly head almost as soon as the ark landed (see Gn 9:20 ff). After the waters of Baptism wipe out the old world, the Spirit will create something new and sin will no longer be present.

It is not only Jesus' baptism by John which helps us to understand the meaning of Christian Baptism, it ' is also Jesus' baptism of suffering. Jesus refers to his passion as a baptism in a bath of pain (Mk 10:38). Because of this the Church has understood the water that flowed from Jesus' side when he hung on the cross to be the defining image for the waters of Baptism (Jn 19:34). The waters of our new life flow from Jesus' death. Baptism makes us partakers of that death so that we may be partakers of the resurrection. Unless we die, we cannot be reborn.

Jewish Baptisms: Baptism rituals existed in Judaism before the time of Jesus. There were two forms of Jewish baptism. The first was a ritual washing which was intended to purify persons or objects that were unclean according to Mosaic law. This person was somehow unfit for contact with God and a ritual washing was intended to cleanse the person and restore unity with God.

John's baptism of repentance for sinners was a variation on this type of baptism. John's baptism offered cleansing but not a cleansing that would allow one to participate in religious ceremonies. Instead it was a prophetic sign of the divine cleansing that would accompany the coming of the messianic age. Those baptized by John were preparing themselves for the day of judgment - "the wrath to come." When Jesus accepts John's baptism, he, indicates that Baptism is to be understood as a cleansing and purifying activity that prepares one for the end of time. Jesus says, "Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt 3:16). The term righteousness indicates Jesus' submission for the saving works of God the Father.

A second type of Jewish baptism was proselyte baptism. This was a ceremony for converts to Judaism. This washing of gentile converts was often accompanied by circumcision. Accompanying the ritual was the reading of the Torah; the law which the new converts were to follow. The conversion from a pagan religion to Judaism was understood as an entrance into new life. It seems evident that the Jewish-Christian writers of the New Testament saw similarities between Christian Baptism and Jewish proselyte baptism, particularly with respect to the new life which accompanied it.

As Jesus traveled around Galilee teaching and proclaiming the kingdom of God, his disciples, and perhaps Jesus too, baptized those who heard and believed (see Jn

3:22; 4:1-4). These baptisms were not baptisms in the Spirit. Rather, they were water baptisms like John's which had a strong emphasis on the initiation of the messianic era. They were also a sign that people were changing their lives and preparing for the new life which the Messiah would give. When the Spirit descended on Jesus' disciples at Pentecost these earlier baptisms were completed. They took on new meaning. At Pentecost Baptism with water and Baptism with the Spirit merge and it becomes possible for a person to be born again "of water and the spirit" (Jn 3:5). As Peter said to the crowds assembled below the window of the Upper Room: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

Baptism in the Early Church: Following the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Jesus' disciples began to carry out his command to "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). From the day of Pentecost onward, there are several steps that have always been essential to the process of becoming a Christian.

- First, one must hear the Word of God and be converted by it.
- Next those who wish to be Christian must profess their faith and their desire to live by that faith.
- Following this profession they are bathed in water with a triple immersion or triple pouring in the name of the Trinity.
- Finally they take up their new life as members of the Church which prays together and shares the Eucharist.

In the first century Jewish Christians were already familiar with the laws and faith tradition of God's original covenant. They understood the concept of one God and the concept of a faith which demanded a particular lifestyle. The period of "preparation - especially for Jewish Christians - was short. As Christianity began to spread to people who were unfamiliar with Judaism, there was a need for a longer period of preparation between the first proclamation of the gospel and the Baptism of those who were moved by it. By the third century the Church had developed a fairly long and involved process (usually three years) for those who wished to become Christians. This long catechumenate - from a word meaning "to resound"

or "echo" - gave people time to reshape their world view according to Christian beliefs.

In order to even enroll in the catechumenate a person had to demonstrate a willingness to change. Those who wanted to be Christians had to change - often radically - their way of life if they were involved in any activities which were opposed to the basic principles of Christianity. Careers like teachers of pagan philosophy, soldiers, and actors were forbidden. Once a person was enrolled in the catechumenate, he or she was expected to live in a manner befitting a Christian.

Each year at the beginning of Lent those catechumens who seemed most ready to become Christians would be publicly examined. Questions would be asked concerning how well they had been living out the faith. Had they honored widows, visited the sick and so forth? If a person was truly living as a Christian should live, he or she would be named one of the elect and would begin a final period of intense preparation for Baptism. The newly elect were given salt as a sign of the wisdom and the preaching of the word of God which would sustain and preserve them through the days ahead.

Throughout the season of Lent the elect would fast and pray, and come daily for a laying on of hands and an exorcism. On Sundays the elect would gather with the rest of the Church to hear the word of God and receive instructions. After the instructions the bishop, priest, or lay catechist laid hands upon them as a sign of the Church's prayers for them. Then they were dismissed to pray by themselves apart from the faithful.

On the fourth Sunday of Lent the elect were solemnly presented with the texts of the four gospels, the Creed, and the Lord's prayer. These treasures of the Church now belonged to them as well. The elect were expected to memorize the creed in order to be able to recite it on Holy Saturday morning.

On Holy Saturday the elect met one last time. They knelt before the bishop for a final exorcism. Any remaining attachment to their sinful way of life was broken. Then the bishop breathed on their faces and sealed their foreheads, ears, and nose with the sign of the cross. The bishop's breath was the sign of the life-giving air of the Church which they would now breathe. The sealing with oil and with the sign of the cross was the sign of the protection which the Church was giving them

against the death-dealing, forces of the world. In the early Church sealing with oil was seen as the mark, of the shepherd on the sheep. Sealing with oil was also a way of strengthening a person for the struggle against evil, in much the same way that athletes rub oil on their bodies to prepare for a race or event.

The elect would spend the Holy Saturday night in vigil, listening to scripture and praying. In the morning following the night of vigil, the elect were led to the place of Baptism. When they arrived the waters were blessed. Then while the bishop prayed, the elect moved to another place to loosen their hair and strip off all clothing and jewelry, symbolizing a return to the primitive innocence of Adam and Eve.

When the elect stripped off their clothing they were abandoning any signs of evil which remained in their life. They were also indicating their intention to leave death behind them. The standard clothing of the day was made of wool. Because animals were dirty, they were viewed as a sign of death. They knew that when they came up from the water, the newly baptized would be clothed in linen. Because linen was made from plants, it was seen as a sign of life.

However before they descended into the waters of Baptism, the elect publicly renounced Satan and were anointed with the oil of exorcism. This second anointing from head to toe was an adaptation of the medical practices of the day. In the pagan world, sickness was considered to be the work of evil spirits. Those who were sick were anointed with oil to help them fight off their sickness. This baptismal anointing with oil was intended to cure spiritual sickness.

Following the second anointing the elect descended naked into the water down three steps (symbolizing the three days Christ spent in the tomb). The priest who was in the water with them laid his hand on their head and asked, "Do you believe in God the Father?" After a candidate said, "I believe," he or she was immersed in the water. The candidate was then asked, "Do you believe in God the Son?" Again the "I believe" was followed by an immersion. The candidate was asked a third time about belief in the Spirit and was once again immersed following his or her confession of faith. Then the candidate left the waters and was immediately anointed with the oil of thanksgiving as the presider prayed that the Spirit would

descend upon the one being anointed. This anointing was what completed Christian initiation.

The newly baptized Christians were then dried and dressed in a white linen robe. They were to wear these robes for the entire Easter week. They were also given a candle as a sign of the light of Christ that lived within them. The bishop then led the newly baptized into the assembly while a litany was sung. The bishop went to the front of the sanctuary and the new Christians gathered around him. In the presence of the whole congregation the bishop prayed for them and anointed them once more. He then greeted the new Christians with the kiss of peace. By his actions the bishop publicly confirmed that these people now belonged in the Church.

The entry into the Church, and all the acts of hospitality which accompanied it, was the high point of the baptismal liturgy. If we wish to appreciate the full wonder of Baptism today we need to reflect upon the fact that Baptism allows us to work with one another in a way that would be impossible without it. Baptism is what makes individual persons into members of the Body of Christ.

Who Can Receive Baptism? Christ himself taught that Baptism was necessary for salvation: "Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (Jn 3:5). Jesus also commanded his disciples to "go to all nations and to baptize them" (see Mt 20:19-20). While God is not bound by his sacraments, he has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism. The Church does not know of any way to assure salvation other than Baptism. That is why the reception of the sacrament is so important and remains protected by the Church to this day.

God's love has been freely given to all people; therefore all people may be baptized. The ordinary minister of Baptism is the bishop, priest, or deacon, but in an emergency any person, even a non-Christian, can baptize. Catholics believe that God will honor every Baptism that is done in the name of the Trinity as long as the person administering the Baptism intends to do what the Church does. A person acting in a play or playing a practical joke cannot validly baptize someone else. On the other hand, a non-Christian who does not know exactly what Baptism is but who knows that it is important to Christians could administer a valid

Baptism in an emergency. For example sometimes non-Christian nurses working in infant care baptize an infant in danger of death because they know it is important.

What about those who, for various reasons, are unable to be baptized? How are they able to be saved? The Church holds that this same gift of salvation is given to all of those who specifically desired Baptism but who died before they received it. This is known as the baptism of desire. If catechumens die before Baptism the Church teaches that they still receive the gift of salvation. Likewise, any who are martyred for the faith, even though they are not baptized are given the salvation that comes with Baptism. This is known as the baptism of blood. Remember, God is not bound by the sacraments. He can act outside of them (see CCC, 1257).

The Church also believes that every person who does not know or understand the teachings of the Church but who "seeks the truth and does the will of God in accordance with his understanding of it can be saved." We assume that such a person would have chosen to be baptized if they had known that Baptism is what God desires (see CCC, 1260). All children who die without being baptized are entrusted to the love and mercy of God. God's tremendous love for all people and Jesus' tenderness for children allow us to believe that God will bring all children into his kingdom.

The very fact that Jesus became man tells us that God loves and values humanity. By becoming a human being, the Son of God has in a certain way united himself with each [person]. . . . Since Christ died for all, and since all [people] are in fact called to one and the same destiny... we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the Paschal mystery (Gaudium et Spes, 22).

Baptism of Adults: The Second Vatican Council reemphasized the connection between Baptism and an adult's "coming to faith" which was prevalent prior to the Middle Ages. The Council restored the catechumenate and made adult Baptism normative. When we say that adult Baptism is "normative," we do not mean that it is the form of Baptism used most often. The majority of Catholics are still baptized as infants. When we use the word "normative" we are saying that the full meaning of Baptism is most clearly revealed in the process of Christian initiation of adults..

Baptism requires a conversion of the heart to God in order to bear fruit. In other words, Baptism requires the process of the catechumenate. This catechumenate does not just involve learning the facts of the faith. It involves learning to turn one's heart away from the evils of the world and toward God.

Church father Tertullian said that Christians are not born but made. The grace of Baptism is able to burst forth in those whose lives have been honed and shaped by the teaching, prayer, and discipline of the catechumenate, whether the catechumenate occurs before or after Baptism. The restored adult catechumenate can help us to understand all that is involved in making or truly becoming a Christian.

Today's catechumenate resembles the catechumenate of the early Church. Adults and unbaptized children over the age of seven (the age of reason) who wish to become Catholic Christians are publicly enrolled in the catechumenate. From the moment of their enrollment, catechumens are considered to be members of the Church, although not full members. If they were to die they would be entitled to a funeral Mass. The catechumens begin a period of regular prayer and study during which they are to develop an understanding of the Catholic faith. They will experience several minor exorcisms. These exorcisms are in the form of petitions to God: "They draw the attention of the catechumens to the real nature of Christian life, the struggle between flesh and spirit, the importance of self-denial and the unending need for God's help ('Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, 90).

They will also be formally blessed and anointed with the oil of catechumens. "The anointing with oil symbolizes their need for God's help and strength" so that they may break free of any unhealthy bonds in their past, overcome the "opposition of the devil," and accept and live out the Christian faith {Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, 99). At each Sunday liturgy the catechumens are called forward after the homily and before the prayers of the faithful. They are prayed for and then sent out to study the scripture more thoroughly.

The exorcisms, blessings, and anointings which are part of the catechumenate today are a reminder to the entire Church that we must constantly resist evil and seek to do the will of God. The fact that the catechumens leave before the prayers

of the faithful and the Eucharist is a reminder of the awesome responsibility of prayer and of the awesome gift of the Eucharist.

At the beginning of Lent, those who are ready are named as the elect. In the presence of the whole Church, their godparents and teachers testify to the sincerity of their desire to become Christians and live the Christian life. The catechumens publicly express their desire to receive the sacraments. They then begin a period of more intense preparation for the three sacraments of initiation: Baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist. During the Sundays of Lent they will participate in several scrutinies and exorcisms. "The scrutinies are meant to uncover, then heal all that is weak, defective, or sinful in the hearts of the elect; [and] to bring out, then strengthen all that is upright, strong and good" (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, 141).

The Church also prays for their healing and conversion. The scrutinies serve as a reminder to all of us of the power of sin and the need for ongoing conversion. During the scrutinies the baptized pray among other things that the elect will "sincerely reject everything in their lives that is displeasing and contrary to Christ" and that the Holy Spirit will help them to overcome their weaknesses and teach them to know the things of God (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, 163).

Of all the things that the baptized can learn from observing adults who are joining the Church, none has as much power as the silent testimony of a truly changed heart. If we see the transforming power of the Holy Spirit during an adult Baptism we will never be the same. When an adult convert to Christianity has participated wholeheartedly in the conversion process of the catechumenate the transforming power of Baptism is hard to miss.

The Easter Vigil: The vigil didn't begin solemnly at all. In fact, for Chris, who was there to support her friend Hope, it began with a laugh that she almost couldn't suppress. The litany of the saints had been sung and the waters of the baptismal pool had been blessed and a sense of great anticipation seemed to hang over the congregation. Father Tom called the candidates for Baptism to come and stand around the font. They came forward barefooted and wrapped in gray-colored sheets. Chris noticed Father Tom staring at their bare feet. Then he looked down at his own feet. In a couple of minutes he was going to have to walk down into the

font with these candidates and he was still wearing his shoes and socks. As the candidates renounced their sins and professed their faith, Chris tried to guess what Father Tom would do.

"Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting?" "I do!" seven voices called out in unison.

Then the pastoral associate responsible for RCIA stepped forward to lead Hope to the font. Father Tom stepped on the heels of his good leather shoes and forced them off his feet. Then he stepped into the font, socks and all! Chris wanted to laugh. She looked at her friend Hope to see if she was laughing, and then she noticed it: Hope's eyes were filled with a joy like none Chris had ever seen. Her face shone with the certainty that in this moment her life would change forever. Chris knew that Hope had not lived an easy life. She had experienced more than her share of pain. But now she was walking into this two foot deep pool and leaving her pain and the anger behind. Of course Father Tom had not taken off his socks. What difference did wet socks make in a moment as holy as this one?

Hope knelt and Father Tom put one hand on the back of her head. "I baptize you in the name of the Father." He gently pushed her forward until her head was under the water. "And of the Son," he pushed Hope down a second time. "And of the Holy Spirit." One final immersion and then Hope was standing, dripping with the water of Baptism and the tears that poured down her face. Hope's godmother handed her a towel and led her to a place where she could change from the gray sheet to a new white robe. When all of the candidates were baptized and dressed in the robes that symbolized their new life they were given candles to remind them to keep the flame of faith alive in their hearts. As Chris watched Hope mesmerized by her candle flame she knew that the flame of fire was nothing compared to the flame of joy which flashed in Hope's heart.

Infant Baptism: The practice of baptizing infants has been with the Church since the beginning. Some other Christian denominations have questioned the practice, saying that adult commitment is needed in order to make the decision to live a Christian life. The Church believes in infant Baptism for several reasons. First, as we are all born with a fallen human nature and tainted by original sin, infants, too,

need to be baptized in order to be freed from the power of darkness and brought into a life in which they live as children of God. Infant baptism is a grace and gift from God. If the Church and parents were to deny Baptism to an infant, they would be keeping the child from the true freedom which he or she deserves from as close to their birth as possible.

Second, infant Baptism has explicit roots in the Church dating back to the second century and it seems reasonable to believe that when entire households were baptized in the days of the apostles, those households included infants too (see for example, Acts 16:14-15).

Third, having their child baptized as an infant is a sign of love of parent for child. At Baptism, parents, godparents, and others in the Church promise they will love the child and nurture his or her faith in a loving community. By being an example of Christ for them, parents, especially, encourage their children to accept Christ's love on their own as they grow into adulthood. As the Rite of Baptism for Children states: To fulfill the true meaning of the sacrament, children must later be formed in the faith in which they have been baptized. The foundation of this formation will be the sacrament itself which they have already received. Christian formation, which is their due, seeks to lead them gradually to learn God's plan in Christ, so that they may ultimately accept for themselves the faith in which they have been baptized (3).

The sacrament of Baptism received at any age reminds us of God's unconditional love. God loves us simply because we are his creation, his children. It is God's grace and providence that brings us into the Church and offers us the gift of salvation. Baptism is a free and unconditional gift. God calls us and makes us his own children because he loves us. But we will not experience the blessings of being God's children unless we allow that identity to be the most important thing in our lives. We will feel the full joy of Baptism only when our first heartfelt answer to the question, "Who are you?" is: "I am part of the family of God." We will experience the full joy of Baptism only when we have taken the words of St. Teresa of Avila to heart: "Let nothing trouble you, let nothing frighten you. The one who has God, lacks nothing." It takes a lifetime to grow into this kind of faith. Those who were baptized as infants need to learn to orient their lives to God in such a way that they can trust him completely. This does not happen without effort.