

BAPTISM

Father, you give us grace through sacramental signs which tell us of the wonders of your unseen power. In Baptism we use your gift of water which you have made a rich symbol of the grace you give us in this sacrament. These words are from the liturgy of Baptism and remind us that each of the sacraments makes use of some part of God's creation to bring us God's blessings. Whether it is water, bread, oil, or the imposition of hands, God uses what we can see and experience with our senses to give us what cannot fully see, his grace and spiritual assistance.

In Baptism, water is used to cleanse us, by the power of God, from sin and bring us to new life in Christ. As you may recall from our last discussion, the formal definition of a sacrament is "an outward sign, established by Christ to give grace." There are three parts to this definition and we can look at each them as they relate to the sacrament of Baptism.

The outward sign

The outward sign refers to what is seen and heard as the sacrament is celebrated. (Actually all five sense are usually engaged in a sacramental celebration). The outward sign of Baptism is the immersion of an individual in water, or the pouring of water over the head of an individual while these words are said, *I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.* It is usually a priest or a deacon who is the minister of this sacrament but in an emergency anyone may baptize.

The use of water in Baptism is a very fitting sign of what is actually taking place. The word "baptism" comes from a Greek word which means "to

wash." In Baptism we are washed clean of all sin. An adult who is baptized receives forgiveness from all sin committed since birth. Even infants, though they have never committed personal sins need to be washed clean from Original Sin.



Original Sin is the first sin committed by Adam and Eve. That sin touches us all by the fact that we are children of Adam and Eve. (Rom 3:23; Rom 5:12; Rom 11:32; 1 Cor 15:22). So even newborn infants need God's grace and mercy.

The waters of Baptism are thus a sign of the fact that we are washed clean of all sin by God's grace. But the waters of Baptism are more than just a symbol of God's forgiveness. Baptism actually confers that forgiveness. This is what makes the

Baptism given by Jesus different from that given by John the Baptist. The baptisms celebrated by John the Baptist were ritual washings that symbolized repentance on the part the person who entered the water. But such baptisms could not actually bring forgiveness. The Baptism of Jesus however, because it is a work of God, actually does forgive all sin!

Established by Christ

The second part of the definition of a sacrament is that it is a work of the Church established or willed by Christ himself. He shows his will to establish the sacraments either explicitly by what he teaches and commands or implicitly but he himself did.

In the case of Baptism it is clearly established and commanded, by Christ who directed 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.* (Matt 28:19-20).

Baptism is necessary for salvation

Jesus also taught that Baptism was necessary for salvation. *He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.* (Mark 16:16). He also told Nicodemus, *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God* (Jn 3:5). Thus, Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed.

This teaching may provoke some anxiety however. Does it mean that all the unbaptized descend to hell? No, it

does not. There are some who have been hindered from the full proclamation of the Gospel or from a full understanding of all its requirements. Presuming that such individuals seek the truth sincerely and do the will of God in accordance with their understanding of it, they can be saved. It may be supposed that such persons would have desired Baptism explicitly if they had known its necessity. This is called “baptism of desire.” There is a biblical example of a baptism of desire. One of the thieves who were crucified alongside Jesus came to faith in him and asked to be admitted to his Kingdom. There is absolutely no indication that he had ever been baptized. Likewise, Jesus did not climb down from the cross to baptize him. Nevertheless, Jesus said to him, *This day you shall be with me in paradise.* (Lk 23:43). The “good thief” had what we have come to call, “baptism of desire.”

Baptism and Infants

And what of infants and children who have died without Baptism? The Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God. And we can be confident in God’s mercy for them for we entrust them to the God who desires that all be saved (1 Tim 2:4). Likewise we recall the great tenderness Jesus had for children and which caused him to say, *Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God* (Mk 10:14). These passages give us great hope for children who die without Baptism but it should also remind us of the urgency in not “hindering” the children by delaying their Baptism due to negligence or laziness. The Church urges that children be baptized within the first weeks after birth and thus be brought to the new life with Christ.

An interesting side issue is raised by some Christian denominations who reject infant Baptism on the grounds that infants cannot have faith. It is true that Baptism is a sacrament of faith.

But the faith required for Baptism is not a perfect and mature faith but a beginning that is called to develop. For all the baptized, infants *and* adults faith must grow after Baptism. Thus the Church firmly admonishes parents and godparents in their duty to teach and nourish the faith in their children. Failing to do so is like giving a child a wonderful gift at Christmastime and then discarding in the back recesses of a closet to be forgotten. In such a case, it would profit the child nothing. Only if the gift is cherished and explained can it be fully appreciated as the child matures. It is the same with Baptism.

Another way to understand that the practice of infant Baptism is to reason from Scriptures. Jesus says that the kingdom of God belongs to little children (Lk 23:43). But he also says that one cannot enter the kingdom without being born of water and spirit. (Jn 3:5) Thus it follows that he desires children ordinarily to receive the kingdom of God through Baptism and that we ought to follow his desires.

In any case the practice of infant Baptism is an ancient one stretching back as far as the apostolic age. Documents from as early as the Second Century give explicit instruction for the Baptism of infants.

The Graces of Baptism

The third part of the definition of a sacrament is that through it God gives grace. “Grace” comes from a Latin word *gratia* which means “gift.” Thus, to say God gives graces in the sacraments is to say that he gives us gifts through them. What are the gifts that come with Baptism?

We have already discussed the first gift. In Baptism all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins as well as punishment for sin.

Baptism not only purifies us from all sins but in a more positive sense it also makes us a new creation. We become the children of God. We are

not merely called the children of God but are in fact made so (1 John 3:1) and given to share in the divine nature (2 Cor 5:17; 2 Pet 1:4). As true children of the heavenly Father we can rightfully call him “Abba.” We are also made a member of Christ’s Body and a co-heir with him (Rom 8:16-17). Through Baptism the gates of heaven are opened wide for us and a promise of glory and favor and justification rests upon us. One day, if we remain faithful, we shall reign with Christ and delight forever to be among the saints in glory. It is in Baptism that God opens this door for us and places within us the seed of glory. It is in Baptism that we die to the old nature received from Adam and Eve and rise to a whole new life given us by Christ (Rom 6:3).

Since we have received so great a call it is also true that in Baptism God gives us all the graces necessary to live worthily this call. Scripture calls this gift, *walking in newness of life* (cf Rom 6:4). Thus in Baptism God gives us the grace to believe. He also gives us the grace to hope in him and to love with a divine affection. He does this by giving his very love, the Holy Spirit, who dwells in us as in a temple (1 Cor 3:16) and it is with this Love that we love him. And he gives us all the graces we need to keep his commandments and fulfill all their implications. Thus in Baptism God gives us every grace we need to become the man or woman he has called us to be from all eternity.

From the pierced side of Christ there flowed forth both blood and water. It is in this saving tide that we are washed clean and changed for ever. We have died with Christ in Baptism and received a whole new life. For *there is power; wonder-working power; in the precious blood of the Lamb!*