

# The Sacrament of Baptism



## FOREWORD

**As a remote preparation for the Eucharistic Congress which is scheduled to take place in Dublin in 2012, the Order has decided to make a study of the Church's Sacraments, beginning with the Sacrament of Baptism.**

**The seven sacraments are like a door opening onto the very life of God. Baptism is the entry point to the other Sacraments and is the basis of the whole christian life, incorporating us into the Church community and making us share in her mission.**

**I am very grateful to Brothers Hugo Tumelty CK12, Paul Murphy CK126 and Barry C. MacMahon Supreme Chancellor, for their individual presentations and insights into various aspects of Baptism, in the compiling of this booklet. It is our hope that members of the Order through diligent study of these guidelines in their Councils will obtain a renewed sense of the power and beauty of our Catholic tradition and will be better equipped to assume their indispensable role in the mission of the Irish Church today.**

**Gerard Dolan  
Supreme Chaplain.**

**Feast of the Queenship of Mary.  
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# **BAPTISM**

## **Chapter 1**

### **AN INTRODUCTION**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council in the mid 60s and the liturgical reforms that followed did much to revise the Catholic Church's sacramental practices, by allowing them to be performed in the vernacular and redesigning the actual ritual themselves. Theologians and Liturgists were careful to ensure that the religious experience, and more importantly the sacramental religious experience was a genuine human experience.

All religions in the world make use of sacraments or signs which attempt to bridge the gap between the human and divine.

#### **Water Rituals:**

Water signifies life, growth, cleansing and purification. Water is the element out of which life itself grows, and without which life cannot be sustained. Two thirds of our planet is water composed. Water gives life, and so initiation rituals which mark the beginning of a new way of life always use water as a symbol. In the Jewish community it also symbolised their ancestors' passage through the Red Sea and their transition from slavery to freedom. We can think too of the Hindus bathing in the river Ganges. John the Baptist also used water in Christ's baptism in the river Jordan.

#### **Ritual meals:**

Sharing food is a sign of acceptance and communion with our companions; (cum pano i.e. with bread). One of the purposes of the Japanese tea ceremony is the achieving of a spiritual communion between host and guest. In primitive hunting communities where food was scarce the sharing of food was quite literally a sharing of life itself. Harvest festivals etc. are still a common part of faith-communities even today when we give thanks for the mysterious realities that make food and life possible.

#### **Ritual Sacrifice:**

Ceremonial offerings of food, property and even human life were often used to show people's dependence on the Divine and symbolise their thankfulness for what they have received. The ancient Israelites were expected to offer the first-born of their flocks and the first fruits of their harvest to God each year and we have similar experiences from our own past. Jesus was taken to the Temple on the Jewish festival of the purification and two doves were offered in thanksgiving.

#### **Atonement Rituals:**

Atonement or at-one-ment rituals were a way of being at one with God in reparation for violating the moral code. In many early and not so early cultures disease and disasters were seen as a sign of God's displeasure and sacramental rituals were employed to bring people back into harmony with the divine. Confessions of guilt as well as public lamentations were required as conditions of atonement. Water again could be used to wash away and restore the relationship between God and man as with John's baptism for repentance and conversion- metanoia.

### **Healing Rituals:**

Health is an important human value and so in traditional religious cultures when health is lost there are always ritual means to restore it. Although often associated with magic, rituals of healing and the restoration of health always involve the participant in the search for the cause illness and a desire for overcoming it. Sacred men or Holy men are the principal agents of invoking cures through sacred objects, chants, exorcisms, which put the healer and the patient in contact with the experience of healing. Again illness was often associated with a sign of God's displeasure.

### **Marriage Rites:**

These are similar to funeral rites in that they represent in ritual the very important role which family values and family life have in all cultures, Family is the glue of society, and when family life breaks down, so too does society. Marriage rites enable those who participate in them to ceremonially enter into that meaning. In most religious cultures the ritual is an elaborate one which includes a preparation or separation and a ceremony of translation which will prepare the parties for their new role in society. During this time they are given instruction about their future marriage and social responsibilities. Sometimes they give away something from their past or childhood to symbolise their break and commitment to their new way of life. The wedding rite includes prayers, promises, exchange of gifts and a ceremonial meal.

### **The Sacraments:**

Surprising at it may seem to Catholics, every religion in the world makes use of Sacraments. The term Sacrament comes from the Latin word "Sacramentum". In pre-Christian times, a "Sacramentum" was a pledge of money or property which was deposited in a temple by parties to a law suit or contract, and which was forfeited by the one who lost the suit or broke the contract. It later came to mean an oath of allegiance made by soldiers to their commander and the gods of Rome. In either case, the "Sacramentum" involved a religious ceremony in a sacred place.

Christian writers in the second century borrowed the term and used it to talk to their Roman contemporaries about the ceremony of Christian initiation. They explained that Baptism was something like the "Sacramentum" administered to the new recruits. It was a ritual through which people began a new life of service to God. By the time of St. Augustine in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, any sacred symbol or ceremony could be called a "Sacramentum" and he once defined "Sacramentum" as a "sign of sacred reality". The Sacraments of the New Testament were instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church. They are actions of Christ and of the Church.

There are many other types of ritual throughout man's search for meaning, and the above mentioned have parallels with the seven rites of the Catholic Church. The followers of Jesus lived in a world which was familiar with these rites and adopted them for their use.

Our lives are full of everyday experiences. We eat, sleep, recreate etc, but every now and again we go beyond ourselves and glimpse a Place, where, what we once thought impossible becomes possible. In 1995 Liam Griffin took over as manager of the Wexford hurling team. Wexford while being a very proud hurling county had not won an All Ireland in 27 years. In 1996 Griffin got them to the Leinster final against Offaly. No one gave Wexford a chance. They were dismissed as contenders.

Griffin in a "Sunday Times" article recounted how he felt about all the adverse criticism about himself and Wexford hurling. "I started to think of all the great Wexford teams that were gone and the way of life I had grown up with, and that hurling was synonymous with the people I felt we were. Next morning I got up early and I wrote down exactly what I wanted to say to the lads. . . We need something that's going to be mind-blowing, something to raise the whole thing onto a different plane. . . it's about our life, it's about who we are, I felt we have got to transcend Sport". Just before the Wicklow border he stopped the bus, walked the team across the County bounds and delivered his speech, which finished. "*Today we are playing for a way of life. Breathe in now, long and hard, and as you walk, think of yourself since childhood. All the matches you played, all your friends, both alive and gone, and make this promise to yourself. Today is the day we will be proud again. And remember WE ARE THE BOYS OF WEXFORD WHO FOUGHT WITH HEART AND HAND. . . That's real Tradition, lets go*"

"Sunday Times" 9/10/05.

The rest, as they say is history; Wexford beat Offaly that day and went on to win the All Ireland, beating Limerick in Croke Park.

While the above is about sport, or as I have said earlier about an ordinary event in life, it somehow becomes Extraordinary and shows how we can transcend even ourselves. Isn't this what Spirituality is all about? Spirituality is the way we express our spiritual beliefs in how we think, act and feel about God. The Spiritual world is mysterious in many ways and often we do not have adequate words to capture or describe it. WE believe, as it says in the Nicean Creed *IN ALL THAT IS SEEN and UNSEEN.*

## Chapter 2

### **What is a sacrament?**

We know that Baptism is a sacrament, but what is a sacrament? An old catechism- A Catechism of Catholic Doctrine (approved by the bishops of Ireland 1951) tells that a sacrament is 'a sensible or outward sign by Christ to signify grace and confer it on our souls'. How many of you fully understand this? Most Catholics recognise that sacraments are an important part of life in the Church. We see them as significant moments that mark transitions in life. We bring our babies to be baptised and our young children to prepare for First Communion. We go to the church to be married and ask for anointing when someone is seriously ill.

Sacraments, however, are much more than milestones in our spiritual lives. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) called for a renewal of the liturgy that included reviewing the theology of all the sacraments. The purpose of this review was to rethink our understanding of these basic actions that shape our identity in the church. In its first document, the Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy (section 69), issued in 1963, the Council Fathers spoke of the importance of the sacraments for the Christian life:

*The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify people, to build up the body of Christ and finally to worship God. Because they are signs they also belong in the realm of instruction. They not only presuppose faith, but also by words and objects they nourish, strengthen, and express it. That is why they are called sacraments of faith. They confer grace, but, in addition, the very act of celebrating them is most effective in making people ready to receive this grace to their profit, to worship God duly, and to practise charity.*

*It is, therefore, of the greatest importance that the faithful should easily understand the symbolism of the sacraments and eagerly frequent those sacraments which were instituted to nourish the Christian life.*

### **Sacraments are actions of the Church Community.**

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy says: "*It is very much the wish of the church that all the faithful should be led to take that full, conscious, and active part in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy*" (no.14).

Liturgy is the public worship of the church in its various forms. Though we may celebrate around an individual (e.g. baby at a Christening) we all celebrate the sacrament together, so the sacrament has an effect on all present.

### **Sacraments are also Human Activities:**

The celebration of the sacraments involves human activity. We often think of the sacraments in terms of the elements that are used: water, oil, bread and wine etc. Yet the sacraments are better understood as the actions that are done with these elements and these actions are all human gestures. We wash bodies, anoint foreheads, eat bread and wine, lay on hands as a gesture of conferring power, etc. These human actions become the means of encountering the Lord.

These actions have become rituals; we follow familiar patterns of movement and recite the official words of the rite. We perform these rituals as our ancestors did. Nonetheless, these rituals are revised from time to time to keep them fresh and true to their original purpose.

All the sacraments also rely on the word of God and the celebration always includes a formal proclamation of the word of God. The word clarifies the meaning of the symbols we use. Proclaiming God's word in the celebration also reminds us that our actions are always a response to what God has done for us.

### **Sacraments are the actions of Christ**

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy says: *“By his power he is presenting the sacraments, so that when anyone baptises it is really Christ himself who baptises”*. For the fruitful celebration of the sacrament of Baptism the minister presiding should strive to live a life of holiness and be true to his vocation. Nevertheless, the Church has long taught that the power of a sacrament is not dependent on the ability or holiness of the bishop, priest or deacon. The sacrament is effective even if the minister is unworthy or sinful. It does not depend on the minister, for it is Christ who acts through the gathered community, which is his body.

The encounter with Christ in the sacraments is possible only through faith. The sacraments express our faith and also strengthen and nourish it, because they bring us into contact with the living Christ. Sacraments should never be viewed as isolated moments in our lives. They are part of our relationship with God, part of our faith life and so when we come to look at the sacrament of Baptism we must see the sacrament as the beginning of a process that flows from the moment we are baptised into our future and effects not only ourselves but our community.

## **THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM:**

### **The Old Testament**

The Catechism of the Catholic Church quotes a form of words used at the blessing of the font at the Easter Vigil that refers to water as a ‘rich symbol’ of baptismal grace. This is true in the first place of the natural value of water as an indispensable source of life and as a means of cleansing. The blessing goes on to trace the role of water in the history of salvation, namely in the account of God's creation of the world from the primal waters (Gen 1), the waters of the flood (Gen 7- 8) which made **‘an end to sin and a new beginning of goodness’**, and the waters of the Red Sea which the Israelites crossed on their journey from captivity in Egypt to the Promised land (Ex. 14). In the third passage the drowning of Pharaoh's army shows another side of the symbolism, namely water's capacity to be a means of death. The Catechism also recalls the water of Jordan that the Israelites crossed when Joshua led them into the Promised Land (Josh. 3). We could also add the use of water as a symbol for moral purification, the best-known example of which occurs in Psalm 51 (50): 7: **‘0 purify me, then I shall be clean; 0 wash me, I shall be whiter than snow ‘.**

**Other prefigurements from the Old Testament which you may want to explore:**

- (a) The Lord said to Moses, *“Take the Levites from among the Israelites and purify them. This is what you shall do to purify them. Sprinkle them with the water of remission; then have them shave their whole bodies and wash their clothes, and so purify themselves.*  
*“(Num 8:5-6)*
- (b) *“Any unclean man who fails to have himself purified shall be cut off from the community, because he defiles the sanctuary of the Lord. As long as the lustral water has not been splashed over him, he remains unclean “.* (Num 19:20-21).

- (c) *“Wash your heart from wickedness, O Jerusalem, that you may be saved.” (Jer.4:14).*
- (d) *“For I will take you from among the Gentiles and will gather you together out of all the countries, and I will bring you into your own land. And I will pour clean water upon you, and you will be cleansed from all your filthiness, and I will cleanse you from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh. I will put My Spirit in the midst of you, and I will cause you to walk in My Commandments, and to keep My judgments and to do them.” (Ezek 36:24-27).*
- (e) *“. . .And I will save them out of all the places in which they have sinned, and I will cleanse them, and they shall be my people, and I will be their GOD.” (Ezek 37:23)*
- (f) *“In that day there shall be a fountain open to the house of David, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem; for the washing of the sinner; and the unclean woman.” (Zech13: 1).*

### **Original Sin:**

When Adam sinned by disobeying God, he brought upon himself and all his descendants a spiritual and physical death. Every one of us would be condemned to die and to be eternally deprived of God’s Divine presence because the sin of disobedience contaminated us. When God put the first man, Adam, into the Garden of Eden he commanded him, *“You can eat of every tree in the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat”*. (Gen. 2: 15-17).

We know what happened. The Devil tempted Eve and Eve tempted Adam and they disobeyed God’s command. By this one act, sin entered the world and by sin death and this sin has been passed on to all peoples.

But God did not abandon man. He made a covenant with his Chosen people: *“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord; I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people”* (Jer. 31; 33) and again: *“I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh”* (Ezek. 11:19; 36:26).

These are God’s promises that are found in the Old Testament. He would bless his children with the indwelling Holy Spirit, give his children a new heart and a new human spirit, and write his laws on their hearts. He was giving them some hope. As for us, when we are born, we are born in the image of Adam (Gen. 5:3). This means that we are born with a body and a soul that has been contaminated by Original sin. As Adam died so we too will experience physical and spiritual death.

The Sacrament of Baptism changes all this. When we are baptised all traces of Original sin and personal sins (if we are adults) are erased. Through this sacrament we are given a new life through Jesus. But there is one thing that Baptism does not change, that is the physical body and its inclination towards sin. The body continues to be weak in nature, desiring to sin and so we have a constant spiritual and worldly battle within ourselves.

### **The New Testament:**

John the Baptist was not the first to use a rite of Baptism. It is recorded that the Jewish Essene sect practised ritual washings once or twice a day. The community at Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, similarly admitted candidates to *'purifying water'* after a period of probation. A

form of Baptism also existed in mainstream Jewish practice, together with circumcision, as part of the rite by which Gentiles entered the Jewish community.

The baptism of Jesus in the Jordan seems to be a turning point in his life. Although he was sinless, he submitted himself to be baptised to show his solidarity with sinners. The words of the Father, *"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased"* (Mk. 1:11) and the descent of the Holy Spirit revealed him to be the prophesied Servant of the Lord who would be anointed and filled with the Holy Spirit to bring relief to the weak and the suffering (Is. 42:1-4; 61:1-3).

However, the Baptism by John the Baptist was not yet a Christian Baptism. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance.

***"I indeed baptise you with water, for repentance. But he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to wear. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire"*** (Matt. 3:11).

There are many more examples of Baptism in the New Testament. Soon after the descent of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles began baptising the people. ...

***"But Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptised 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)

***"Now they who received his word were baptised, and there were added that day about three thousand."*** (Acts 2:41)

***"And now why do you delay ? Get up and be baptised and wash away your sins, calling on His name."*** (Acts 22: 16)

So we can see that the public life of Jesus began on the shore of the River Jordan and ended with Jesus commanding the Apostles to ***"go and make disciples of all, baptising them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that he had commanded them."*** (Mt. 28:19-20). These words of Jesus from the Holy Bible teach Christians the great importance of the Sacrament of Baptism.

### **The Early Church:**

Saint Luke in his account of the beginning of the Church in the Acts of the Apostles gives many descriptions of the baptism of converts. A key moment came when the decision was taken to baptise the gentile Cornelius and his family without requiring them first to become Jews (Acts 10:47-48) The second chapter of Acts depicts a kind of compressed ***prebaptismal catechumenate*** which the first converts went through on the day of Pentecost. They heard instructions from Saint Peter; they believed what they heard; they repented their sins; they were baptised; they received the Holy Spirit; they celebrated the Eucharist ('the breaking of bread'). In subsequent centuries the process became much longer. In the third century, three years were laid down as the norm. Various rites, such as scrutinies and exorcisms, formed part of the process, the last part of which was a period of more

intense preparation, generally coinciding with Lent and culminating in Baptism, Confirmation and First Communion at the Easter Vigil.

So, as we can see, in the early Church the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation were performed at the same ceremony. However, the ceremony required a Bishop to be present. In the earlier rite the candidate was immersed in water and then anointed with the oil called chrism by the Bishop. The anointing by the Bishop after the baptismal bath is the ancient root of what we know as Confirmation.

As long as dioceses were small and the Bishop always presided at Easter initiations, there was no problem. But when that was no longer possible due to the increasing size of the Church, the question arose about what to do with that portion of initiation when the Bishop was not present. In the East the decision was made that whoever presided at the Easter rites would do the anointing. Thus among Eastern churches, the anointing or chrismation is, to this day, celebrated immediately after the water bath of Baptism, whether the initiate is an adult or an infant.

In the West, however, Pope Innocent I insisted in the year 412 that this anointing had to be done by a Bishop, so it was delayed until he was available. This is the first time we find the ritual being called Confirmation, as the Bishop was confirming the baptism at which the priest had presided. Thus it became separated from the baptismal rite. Baptism and Confirmation became separate sacraments.

### **The Sacraments of Christian Initiation:**

*There are three sacraments of Christian initiation -Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist. These three sacraments lay the foundation of every Christian life. 'The sharing in the divine nature given to men through the grace of Christ bears a certain likeness to the origin, development and nourishing of natural life. The faithful are born anew by Baptism, strengthened by the sacrament of Confirmation and receive in the Eucharist the food of eternal life'.*  
(Catechism of the Catholic Church 1212)

## Chapter 3

*“Oh come to the water all you who are thirsty;  
Though you have no money come,  
Buy corn without money, and eat.  
And at no cost wine and milk  
Why spend money on what is not bread  
Your wages on what fails to satisfy?  
Listen, listen to me, and you will have good things to eat  
And good things to enjoy.  
Pay attention to me  
Listen and your soul will live “ Isaiah 55 : 1-3*

The Church begins with the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus and his baptism, on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-21)

This is a collective baptism of Jewish adults. The baptism of the Ethiopian by Philip, one of the seven, is the first case of individual baptism (Acts 8:20-39).

Soon non-Jews will also be baptized; Cornelius and his followers (Acts 10:47).

When Acts tells us that Paul’s jailer received baptism with his family at Philippi (Acts 16:33) this would indicate that small children were also baptized.

From the middle of the second century with Justin Martyr there is evidence that preparation for baptism was being introduced. With the increasing number of candidates and the risk of apostasy (denial of the faith) or heresy as a result of persecutions or sects, the Church came to strengthen its demands for the training of catechumens and the pattern of Christian Baptism derives from this. *“God the father of our lord Jesus Christ has freed you from your sin and has given you a new birth, by water and the holy Spirit. He has made you Christians now and welcomed you into his holy people, As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet and King, so may you live always as members of his Body, sharing everlasting life “ (Rite of Baptism)*

### **Rite of Baptism.**

Christians have celebrated the sacrament of baptism from the very beginning. Unlike the baptism of John, baptism in the early church assumed a special significance. For them it was a symbol of Salvation, and through it they entered the mystery that Jesus had revealed to them, and they entered it socially, because they joined a community that accepted Jesus as a source of their salvation. During the centuries which followed, the Christian rite of baptism varied from total immersion to sprinkling and pouring water on the head.

### **After his Resurrection Christ gave this mission to his followers;**

*“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,”*

(Mt.28 : 19-20)

Baptism is the sacrament by which a person is cleansed of all sin by water, and by the word of God. In Baptism sin goes out and God comes in.

*“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”* (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1213.)

In Baptism, we become sons and daughters of God. It is the first of the sacraments of initiation and is appropriately described as the “basis”, the “gateway” and the “door.” Already by Baptism we are freed from sin, incorporated into the Church, which is Christ’s body, reborn in Christ, made like to him by an indelible character and given a share in the Church’s mission.

### **The Prebaptismal Catechumenate Today (Baptism of Adults):**

The prebaptismal catechumenate mentioned earlier, which had gradually died out as adult baptisms became less common, was restored by the Second Vatican Council.

This new Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA), which was published in 1972, reintroduces many of the practices of the early Church. The rite is divided into four periods linked by three steps. The first period of evangelisation and precatechumenate, during which the candidate makes a first exploration of the Church and reaches an initial conversion, is terminated by the step of entry into the catechumenate, which forms the second period. This catechumenate, which will commonly last six months or even longer, is a time not only for instruction but also for an introduction into the life of the parish. It ends normally at the beginning of Lent with the second step of enrolment or election, when the candidates are admitted to the final preparation for baptism. This third period of purification and enlightenment has as its most intense moments the three scrutinies (which are rites at which in the presence of the community the candidates in deep silence examine their readiness to accept the obligations of a Christian life) and the presentations at which they are formally taught the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. The third step is the celebration of Baptism, Confirmation and First Communion at the Easter Vigil. Finally, in the fourth period of post-baptismal catechesis or mystagogy, the new Christians familiarise themselves with the sacramental life of the Church.

### **The Necessity of Baptism.**

The Lord himself says that Baptism is necessary for salvation. He says, *“Unless you are born again of water and the Holy Spirit, you will not enter the Kingdom of God.”* When Nicodemus asked him what he should do to be saved, Jesus replied,

*“You must be born again.”* (John 3:5) He also commands His disciples to proclaim the Gospel to all nations and to baptise them. Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament. The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal life. (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1257).

## Chapter 4

Baptism is the sacrament through which we enter the church. Most people think first of babies when they think of baptism, but the church also baptises older children and adults. In fact, it is the adult process of entry into the church that gives us the clearest understanding of the meaning of baptism. Most people also think of baptism as their ticket into heaven, but the Catholic Church teaches that people who are not formally baptized can also be saved.

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church issued by the Second Vatican Council sees the possibility of salvation extending far beyond Catholics and beyond other Christians. It states that Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, and even agnostics (who aren't sure whether there is a God) and atheists can get to heaven.

No 16 from that Constitution says “Nor will divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at the explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life.”

Where does that leave baptism? Should we even bother? Does it matter? Absolutely! For those who have the gift of faith, baptism is necessary. Those who are called by God to baptism and given the gift of faith must respond to that call in order to be saved. For such a person to reject baptism is to reject God's will.

Baptism is the sacrament by which we are initiated into the Christian life and the church community. Thus, baptism is the means by which the church gains members. It is the sacrament that enables the church to carry on the mission that was entrusted to it by Christ. That church does not exist for its own sake but for that mission. So, too, those who are baptised are not baptised purely for their own sake (to reach heaven) but for the sake of Christ's mission. Those who accept the call to baptism are accepting God's call to continue the work of Christ in the world today.

### **The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.**

Although infant baptism has become and remains the most common practice for Catholics, it is the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults that stands as the model for understanding baptism. Participants in this rite, called catechumens, prepare for baptism through a lengthy process that included instruction (catechesis), experience of the Christian community, prayer and worship, and Christian service.

Catechumen is the term to describe a person preparing for baptism. The catechumenate is the process of formation for the sacraments of initiation. Both are related to catechesis, which means “teaching” or “instruction”.

They become members of the church when they are enrolled as catechumens, even though it will be months or years before they are baptised. The decision to admit them to the sacraments should be based

on judgment of their readiness to carry on the work of the church. Through the sacraments of initiation (baptism, confirmation and Eucharist), they become members of the order of Christ's faithful.

There are four major periods in the initiation process. These periods are separated by various liturgical rituals that articulate and celebrate what is occurring in the process.

### **The Pre-Catechumenate**

The first period is called the pre-catechumenate, which is a time of evangelisation, a time for the church to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to those who come to find out what the church believes. On the part of the inquirers, it is a time for questioning and a time in which their intentions can mature and become clear. It involves an initial call away from sin and a first introduction to Christ and to the community that follows his way of life. This period lasts as long as necessary for each person. When the inquirer is ready to make the decision to join the church, he or she moves from this period into the catechumenate proper.

### **The Catechumenate**

This period begins with a rite of acceptance into the order of catechumens. This rite includes a signing with the cross, an optional exorcism and renunciation of false worship, and an enrolment of names in the Book of Catechumens. By this rite the inquirers become members of the church though not yet baptised; they enter the order of catechumens, but not yet the order of Christ's faithful. At least by this point, the catechumens are to have sponsors, either chosen by them or appointed by the community. These sponsors walk with them and share in their journey through the catechumenate, providing a one-to-one relationship of sharing faith and offering support. This is a time of instruction in Christian doctrine, a time for association with Christians in their way of life, a time for sharing in public worship, especially celebrations of the Word, and a time for engaging in Christian service along with others in the community. In short, it is a time for experiencing the Christian way of life by involvement with the church community in all its activities. The catechumenate period includes a variety of rites, including prayers to overcome the power of sin, blessings, seasonal liturgies of the Word, anointings and prayer services.

### **3. Period of Purification and Enlightenment.**

When it is determined by the catechumens, their sponsors, their catechists and the community that the catechumens are ready for the celebration of the sacraments of initiation, they enter the period of purification and enlightenment.

This generally coincides with the period of Lent, and it begins with a rite called Election, celebrated by the bishop, generally on the First Sunday of Lent. This is a celebration of the choice of these candidates by the church (and thus by God) for admission to the sacraments. This rite includes the testimony of the sponsors as to the readiness of the catechumens, and the presider may ask for the assent of the whole assembly.

The period of purification and enlightenment is basically a time of retreat, a period of intense spiritual preparation for the reception of the sacraments. It is shaped by several special rites,

including the Scrutinies, which are celebrated at Mass on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent. These rites are prayers of the whole congregation to assist the elect in strengthening what is upright and holy in their lives and overcoming what is weak and sinful. In two other rituals the elect are formally given the Creed and the Lord's Prayer to memorise. These two texts stand as models of faith and prayer in the Christian community, and their formal presentation symbolizes the entrusting of these treasures to those who are about to join the order of the faithful.

At the Easter Vigil the catechumenate reaches its peak with the celebration of the sacraments of initiation. The whole structure of the Vigil presumes the celebration of these sacraments as its core. After the lighting of the Easter fire and the paschal candle, the community listens to a lengthy series of readings that recount the history of God's people and also reminds us of many symbols of baptism and God's promises of salvation and new life. Following this liturgy of the Word, the candidates renounce Satan and profess their faith. Then they are baptised (preferably by immersion in the water), clothed in a white garment, and given a baptismal candle. Next they are confirmed by the presiding bishop. Then they take their place in the order of Christ's faithful, taking part in the Prayer of the Faithful, presenting the bread and wine for the Eucharist, and sharing in Communion for the first time.

#### **4. Period of Mystagogy.**

Following the celebration of the sacraments, these new members of the order of the faithful are known as "neophytes" ("newborn"), and they enter the period of "mystagogy", or "studying the mysteries". The period of mystagogy begins during the fifty days of the Easter season and continues throughout the next year. The rite calls it a time for deepening the Christian experience and entering more fully into the life and unity of the faithful. With the community, the new members meditate on the gospel, share in the Eucharist, and perform works of charity. Their further instruction occurs primarily at Sunday Masses during the Easter season. By sharing this period with the whole community, they invite all the faithful to renew their own joy at being members of Christ's Body. This final phase of the catechumenate concludes with a celebration around Pentecost. The local bishop is expected to meet with the catechumens sometime within the next year, and an anniversary celebration on the first anniversary of their baptism is recommended.

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults makes it clear that Christian initiation is about conversion. If we think of baptism primarily as an infant experience, it is easy to forget that it presumes conversion. For catechumens the conversion precedes baptism.

Catholics often associate the word "conversion" with adults joining the church, such as when someone is said to have converted to Catholicism. However, conversion is what brings us to a Christian way of life. Conversion is the process of turning one's life over to God. It occurs as a result of personal contact with the living God and is ultimately brought about by the action of the Holy Spirit. It involves developing a personal relationship with Christ and shaping one's life according to gospel values. We embark on this journey at the beginning of our life in Christ, and we do not really finish it until our death (or perhaps even after that, since purgatory can be seen as the completion of our conversion to Christ).

Because the Christian has been sealed by the Holy Spirit through Baptism, he/she is now allowed to participate in the liturgy of the Church. The Christian is now obligated in love to serve God and live out the baptismal priesthood which he/she has received by living a holy life and practising charity.

### **Infant Baptism**

The origin of infant baptism is not very clear but it has been traced to the second century and could also have existed during the days of apostolic teaching when whole 'households' were baptised. Because of the greatness of the eternal gift that is received during the Sacrament of Baptism, the Church does not want to see anyone die without it. The Church also realises that Baptism requires a Profession of Faith, something that infants and younger children cannot profess. Because of this the Church also realises that infants must be educated later on after their Baptism, this being the role of the parent(s). The school will help the parents but the parents have the sole responsibility, as they are the first and best educators. This is where the catechism of the Catholic Church is of a great benefit to parents, giving them the information they need to carry out this responsibility.

(Lapsed or non-practising parents present a problem. They sometimes want their child baptised for the wrong reason, offering no hope that the child will be brought up in the faith.) Should a child be denied Baptism because its parents are lapsed or non- practising? This might be a good question for you to discuss!

### **Baptism or Desire:**

Some people die while being ignorant of the Gospel of Christ and His Church.

In such cases, it can be presumed that they have received the Baptism of Desire and were saved if they truly searched for the truth and lived righteous lives by the will of God in accordance with their understanding. *"It may be supposed that such persons would have desired Baptism explicitly if they had known its necessity."* (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1260, 1281).

### **Baptism or Blood:**

In a situation where someone endures death for the sake of his faith without having received the Sacrament of Baptism, he is baptised by death for and with Christ. The Church recognises that in such a case, he has received the Sacrament of Blood, this being like a Baptism of Desire. Although not a Sacrament, the Baptism of Blood reflects the fruit of the Holy Spirit that shines forth. (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1258).

## **Unbaptised Infants:**

In situations where infants die without being baptised, the Church can only rely on the mercy of God to invite them into His Kingdom. The Church is fully aware that Jesus wanted the children to come to Him while He lived on earth. *Jesus said to His disciples "Do not stop the children from coming to me, for the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to people such as these."* (Matthew 19:14)

The Catechism states that *'God has bound salvation to the Sacrament of baptism, but He himself is not bound by his sacraments'* (1257). God's desire that all should be saved (1 Tim 2:4) and Jesus' appeal that little children should be allowed to come to Him are cited as grounds for the hope that *"there is a way of salvation for children who have died without baptism"* (1261). The Vatican II Decree on the Church in the World suggests that they share in Christ's *death and resurrection 'in a manner known only to God.* 'The Requiem Mass for a deceased child in the new Order of Christian Funerals contains prayers for a child who has died without baptism.

## **Emergency Baptism:**

In the case of an emergency, where a child or adult may die without Baptism anyone can baptise this person as long as he or she has the intention of doing so and says the proper words. They are only required to pour water over the person's head and say the words, *"I baptise you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.* " (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1284).

However, a Baptism celebrated like this must be reported to the parish priest so that he may enter it in the Baptismal Book. If the child or adult does not die after all, the other ceremonies for solemn Baptism are to be supplied later on.

## **The Effects of Baptism**

The two principal effects of Baptism are purification from one's sins and new birth in the Holy Spirit.

By Baptism, all sins are forgiven, Original sin and all personal sins, as well as all punishment for sin. Baptism makes the baptised an adopted child of God who has become a partaker of His divine nature, a member of Christ and co-heir with Him and a temple of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit gives the baptised sanctifying grace:

- enabling them to believe in God, to hope in him and to love him.
- giving them the power to live and act under the prompting of the Holy Spirit through the gifts of the Holy Spirit.
- allowing them to grow in goodness through the moral virtues.

Thus the whole nature of the Christian's supernatural life has its roots in Baptism. (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1262- 1265)

## **Names for Baptism.**

Baptism has been given various names-

- (a) The name '*Baptism*' itself, a word which originally meant '*dipping*' and could refer to an action such as bathing, reminds us that in baptism we symbolically go down with Christ into his tomb in order to rise with him to new life.
- (b) '*Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life*' (Romans 6:4)
- and '*But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him*'. (Romans 6:8)
- (c) The name '*washing*' expresses not only the removal of the stain of sin but also the new life of Christ which is well symbolised by water, the source of refreshment and life. We can find the link between water and rebirth in Jesus' words to Nicodemus about being born again by water and the Spirit and also in the reference in the Epistle to Titus to '*the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit*'. (Titus 3:5).
- (d) The name '*enlightenment*' (derived from Heb 6:4) suggests the Christian's union with Jesus Christ at Baptism, the Light of the World (Jn 8:12), a union which is symbolised by the lighted candle given at the baptismal ceremony. This enlightenment includes the catechesis which the adult candidate will have received, but involves a reality which is deeper than instruction, namely union with Jesus Christ the Word who makes the Father known (John. 1:18), '*the Way, the Truth and the Life*' (John. 14:6) - and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who leads the Church into the truth. Enlightened by Jesus who is the Light of the World, the new Christians now have the potential of becoming '*children of light*.'

## **The Rite of Baptism**

Each parish has or should have booklets containing the Rite of Baptism and each Pastoral Council would be advised to obtain a booklet from the parish priest.

The following section briefly explains the symbolic meaning of what happens during the celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism.

### **1. Reborn in Christ**

Through the Sacrament of Baptism, the believer is born as a Christian, as another "Christ." Through this privilege, he enters a new and divine life - sharing in the life of God. Becoming a member of the spiritual Body of Christ, he now has the mind of Christ in his thoughts, words and actions.

## **2. The Reception of the child**

Because of the importance of the Sacrament of Baptism, whenever possible, this event should take place on a Sunday in the presence of the faithful. This Sacrament involves the relatives, friends and neighbours. The sign of the cross, on the threshold of the celebration, marks the child with the imprint of Christ and signifies the grace of the redemption Christ won for us by His death on the cross.

## **3. The Symbol of Water.**

Water is used during the administration of the sacrament of Baptism because it is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. It shows the actions of the Holy Spirit during the rebirth of Baptism in God. (Catholic Catechism, 1213.) *From the believer's heart will flow rivers of living water.* (John 4:10; 7:38-39.) From the Holy Spirit flows all the blessings (Rev. 21:6) of Jesus who was crucified. Baptism allows the new Christian to drink of the Holy Spirit, (Catholic Catechism 694) to be sanctified so he may inherit the Kingdom of God.

During the ceremony of Baptism, the priest says a prayer of blessing, asking that the water within the font be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Touching the water with his right hand, he asks the Heavenly Father to send the Holy Spirit upon the water that will be used for the baptism of the child (or adult.)

## **4. The Prayers of Exorcism**

Because the Sacrament of Baptism signifies liberation from sin, the priest may say one or more prayers of Exorcism.

The first prayer is said after the reading of the Gospel. During that prayer, the priest commands any impure spirits who might be present to depart from the person to be baptised. This process is to

purify the physical body of the believer. The spiritual body does not need to be purified because a new creation will be born when the sinful one dies.

The second prayer of Exorcism is called "Ephpheta." (Ephpheta means 'Be opened'). After the prayer, the priest touches the ears and mouth of the child with his thumb. He then says, "The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May He soon touch your ears to receive His word, and your mouth to proclaim His faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father."

## **5. The Oil of Catechumens**

Before anointing the child with the Oil of Catechumens, the priest proceeds to invoke God to set the child free of original sin, to become a temple of His glory in which will dwell the Holy Spirit.

## 6. The Oil of Chrism

The Sacred Chrism is perfumed oil that has been consecrated by the Bishop (Catholic Catechism 1241). When the priest anoints the one to be baptised, he asks God to bless the believer with all the necessary graces to achieve a Christian life. The word ‘Christian’ comes from the name of ‘Christ’, which means ‘Anointed One’. The baptised person is admitted into the common priesthood of which Jesus is the High Priest.

## 7. The White Garment

The white garment represents putting on Christ. The priest puts the white garment on the new Christian and announces that the believer has become a new creature, having been clothed with Christ. He then proclaims that this garment is the outward sign of the believer’s Christian dignity. In the case of infants, with the help of the parents, godparents and friends, by their word and example, it is proclaimed that the newly baptised child be allowed to bring that dignity into the Heavenly eternal life.

## 8. The Candle

Taking the Easter candle, the priest says, “Receive the light of Christ.” Then, when an infant is involved, the father or the godfather lights the child’s candle from the Easter candle. The priest tells the parents and godparents that they have been entrusted with this light so it will be kept burning brightly. Having been enlightened by Christ, the child is to always walk as a child of the light.

### **The Importance of Parents and Godparents.**

Because Baptism is the Sacrament of faith, when parents and godparents speak on behalf of infants, they are asked “what do they ask of Gods Church?” To this question, they answer, “*Faith.*” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1253).

After Baptism, faith must grow within the child. For this reason, the renewal of baptismal promises is made each year at the Easter Vigil. (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1254).

The parents and godparents of newly baptised infants bear the main responsibility for the spiritual growth and the safeguarding of the grace that the infants receive during the Sacrament of Baptism. (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1255).

For parents and godparents to carry out these responsibilities they must be strong believers, ready and willing to help the newly baptised on the Christian journey.

Below are some questions you may like to discuss.

1. I am used to celebrating my birthday. How should I celebrate my baptismal day? Every Easter we renew our baptismal vows. What is the value of renewing our faith commitment to Christ and the Church?

2. Have I been involved in the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) process? From what I know about it why is the involvement of the parish community so important?
3. Converts remind cradle Catholics about the value of faith. What steps am I taking to undergo lifelong conversion to Christ?
4. Should a child be deprived of Baptism because parents do not practise their faith? After all it is not the child's fault!
5. Parents are asked to give their child the name of some saint. How do you feel about Catholic parents giving children names like Poppy?
6. Find the passage in the Acts of the Apostles where new converts were baptised and read it to the Council!
7. What do the Scripture readings in the Paschal Vigil tell us about Baptism?
8. Are you a godparent? How do you carry out your responsibilities towards your godchild?
9. If Baptism is the necessary Sacrament for salvation, what happens to the many millions of people who have never heard of Christ?
10. In your opinion do many parents and godparents take the sacrament of Baptism seriously? Do many regard it a day out, a few drinks and a meal and the sacrament is never mentioned! What can you do to rectify this?



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