

Catholic Church... Justified by the faith received at baptism, incorporated into Christ, they are justly called Christians, and the sons of the Catholic Church rightly recognize them as brothers in the Lord" (Vatican Council II).

Sealed as they are by the Holy Spirit for the day of redemption (Eph 4,30), all Christians share the blessed expectation that by remaining faithful to the requirements of their baptism they will come on that Day to the vision of God and resurrected life with Christ.

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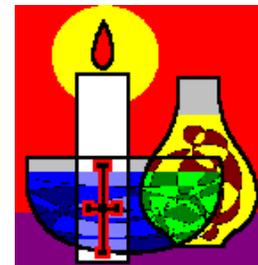
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## WHAT IS THE THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM?



Then Jesus came ... to John at the Jordan to be baptized (Mt.3,13):

"Christ is baptized not to be made holy by the water, but to make the water holy, and by his cleansing to purify the waters which he touched ... For when the Saviour is washed, all water for our baptism is made clean, purified at its source for the dispensing of baptismal grace to the people of future ages" (Saint Maximum of Turin).

When John objects that it is he who should instead be baptized by Jesus, the Saviour replies: "Allow it for now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Thus does Jesus manifest the full extent of that "emptying out" of his divine dignity upon coming into the world (Phil 2,7). Jesus "who knew no sin was made sin for us" (Roman Breviary) so that we might escape the condemnation due our sins through baptism which he our Lord will give. Though free of every sin, he fulfills all righteousness for us the Church, which will come to birth by water and the Holy Spirit, his sacramental gift of baptism.

As Jesus comes up from the Jordan, the voice of the Father welcomes his beloved Son and the Spirit like a dove broods over the water to signal the beginning of the new creation, the Church. The flow of that saving flood of baptismal grace will be signaled at Calvary when Christ's side is pierced and blood and water issue forth (Jn 19,34). Yet even at this beginning of Christ's ministry, that sacrament is already endowed with its future grace.

"He chose to bury sinful humanity in the waters. He comes to sanctify the Jordan for our sake and in readiness for us; he who is spirit and flesh comes to begin a new creation through the spirit and the water" (Saint Gregory of Nazianzus).

### **Baptism in water and the Spirit:**

John the Baptist had told the crowds that the one who was coming after him would baptize not with water alone but with water and the Holy Spirit And it was to Nicodemus that Jesus announced this baptism in water and the Spirit as the sacrament of new birth. So

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fundamental is this being born again from above that without it no one can enter into the Kingdom of God (Jn 3,3-5). As the chosen people were saved by God's power in their passage through the Red Sea and so came to the promised land, so too must all who would come to God's Kingdom pass through the waters of baptism "sired up" by the Holy Spirit (Jn 5,7).

Such then is the necessity of baptism and its promised fruition in the Kingdom. What, however, are its present gifts, the fruit already granted now which destine the baptized to such glory?

The salvation history of the Old Testament is rich in historic event and prophetic word that foreshadow the grace of baptism. Among these are the moving words of the Lord to the prophet Ezekiel in which he promises the return from the exile of Babylon:

"For I will take you from among the nations, gather you from all the foreign lands and bring you back to your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you to cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols I will cleanse you. I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts. I will put my spirit within you and make you live by my statutes, careful to observe my decrees. You shall live in the land I gave your fathers; you shall be my people, and I will be your God" (Ez 36, 24-28).

### **I will sprinkle clean water upon you to cleanse you:**

By the waters of baptism all sins are remitted, original sin and all personal sins as well as all punishment due to sin. In fact, in those who are reborn there remains nothing that would hinder entrance into the Kingdom of God, neither Adam's sin, nor personal sin nor the consequences of sin, the most serious of which is separation from God.

Still, in the baptized there do remain certain temporal effects of sin such as suffering, sickness, death, the inherent weaknesses of life and, most challenging of all for the daily struggle of Christian living, concupiscence, that is, the inclination to sin.

Yet, even this attraction to the old life of sin can do no harm to those who do not consent to it and who resist with a courage founded on Christ's grace. The Christian life is a combat in which each must bear a share of hardship like a good soldier of Christ: it is a contest in which the athlete receives the crown for having competed according to the rules (2 Tm 2,3-5).

### **I will give you a new heart... I will put my spirit within you:**

Baptism not only purifies from all sin but also makes of the baptized a new creation. "So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: old things have passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Cor 5,17). Endowed by the Holy Trinity with sanctifying grace, the grace of justification, the baptized as new creation is rendered capable of leading the supernatural life of the Christian through the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, the gifts of the Holy Spirit and growth in the moral virtues.

The baptized is also an adopted child of God: "God sent his son... to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption" (Gal 4,4-5). And since adopted children of God, the baptized are likewise co-heirs with Christ: "The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him" (Rom 8,16-17)

A new creation, a child of God, a co-heir with Christ, the dignity of the baptized culminates in his becoming in his very flesh the dwelling place of the Most High: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God... Therefore, glorify God in your body" (I Cor 6,19-20).

### **away from among the nations... you shall be my people:I will take you**

Baptism makes of us members of the Body of Christ, members of the Church, that is, those who have been called out from every nation and race and assembled as the People of God. In one Spirit all the baptized from one body; they are living stones "built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (I Pt 2,5).

In the Church the baptized participate not only in the priesthood of Christ but also in his royal dignity by their struggle against evil and in his prophetic ministry by the witness of their lives. Entitled by baptism to all the rights of Church membership - to receive the sacraments, to be nourished by the Word of God and to be sustained by all the other spiritual aids of the Church - the baptized are likewise bound by the responsibilities of this sacrament: to profess before men the faith received from God through the Church and to participate in the apostolic and missionary activity of the people of God.

"Whoever goes down into these waters of rebirth with faith renounces the devil and pledges himself to Christ. He repudiates the enemy and confesses that Christ is God, throws off his servitude and is raised to filial status. He comes up from baptism resplendent as the sun, radiant in his purity, but above all, he comes as a son of God and coheir with Christ" (Saint Hippolytus).

### **The necessity of baptism:**

"Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit (Jn 3,5). The clear meaning of these words of Jesus to Nicodemus, emphasized the more by their solemn formulation, declare the universal obligation to receive this bath of regeneration. So basic is this necessity that whereas the ordinary minister of baptism is a deacon, priest or bishop, in an emergency anyone, even someone not baptized himself, may baptize. Such a one must have the intention of doing what the Church does by baptizing and, while pouring the water on or immersing in water the one to be baptized, must invoke the Blessed Trinity: "I baptize you in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Even in such an extraordinary circumstance, the Church's faith is celebrated, that faith which holds that "Christ is present in the sacraments by his power in such a way that when someone baptizes, Christ himself baptizes" (Vatican II).

Nor are infants or children exempt from this necessity. Christ's works make no such exception nor does the tradition of the Church which from earliest time attests to the baptism of little children. Possessing of Adam's fallen nature, they too need the new birth of baptism. In fact, the baptism of children manifests in a special way the gratuity of the grace of salvation, its nature as pure gift, for which no human act can adequately prepare one and 'which no human act can merit.

### **The salvation of the unbaptized:**

"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16,16). These words from Jesus final commission to the apostles before his ascension confirm his earlier words to Nicodemus on the necessity of baptism. What then is the destiny of those who die without being baptized?

Since the beginning the Church has reflected on this question. Already in earliest times she was of the conviction that those who died for the faith without having received the sacrament are saved by a baptism of blood. Likewise, catechumens who die before their baptism are assured of salvation by their explicit desire of the sacrament united to repentance for their sins and charity.

As for the vast number of others who have never heard, nor will ever hear, the gospel, the Church's reflection is governed by the conviction that God in his great mercy wills that all men be saved (I Tim 2,4). "Since Christ died for all and since man's final destiny is truly unique, that is to say divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers all men, in the manner known to God, the possibility of being associated to the Paschal Mystery" (Vatican II). Everyone then who, though ignorant of the gospel of Christ and his Church, looks for the truth and does the will of God insofar as he knows it can be saved. For such persons would have explicitly desired baptism if they had known of its necessity. Similarly, with regard to little children, incapable of any moral act, who die unbaptized, the Church confides them to God's mercy in the hope that for them too there is a way to salvation. Here the Church is especially consoled by that tenderness of Jesus toward children which made him say: "Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mk 10,14).

"God has bound salvation to the sacrament of baptism, but God is not himself limited to his sacraments" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1257).

### **Baptism and the unity of Christians:**

Through baptism the baptized is configured to Christ, sealed with an indelible mark, a permanent character, as one belonging to the Lord. Therefore, this sacrament can never be repeated. So, when validly baptized Christians from other confessions seek admission to the Catholic Church, they make a profession of Catholic faith but are not baptized anew.

Indeed, even before the achievement of the visible unity for which Christ prayed, baptism constitutes a present bond of unity among all Christians. "Those who believe in Christ and have received valid baptism are in a real, however imperfect, communion with the