

The Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults

by Fr. Antony

Sacrament of Baptism

Baptism can be defined as the sacrament of supernatural rebirth, or regeneration. Baptism gives us a new life. As the Apostle Paul puts it, the believer enters through Baptism into communion with Christ's death, is buried with him, and rises with him, as a new creature. 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. Through Baptism, we are freed from sin, and reborn as children of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission (**CCC. 1213**).

We have the sacrament of baptism by the command of Jesus; He said, "I solemnly assure you, no one can enter into God's kingdom without being begotten of water and Spirit" (**John 3:5**). At the ascension, our Lord commanded the apostles, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name 'of the father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you" (**Matt. 28:19-20**).

The word 'Baptism' comes from the Greek word *baptizo*, which means immersion or washing up. The Catholic Church accepts the forms of immersion, sprinkling and pouring. The entire record of the early Church indicates the mode of baptism was not restricted to immersion.

Didache, the earliest Christian writing (around A.D. 70) outside the New Testament, is a strong witness to the sacramental practice. It says concerning baptism, "baptize in this manner: baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living water [that is, in running water, as in a river]. If there is no living water, baptize in other water; and, if you are not able to use cold water, use warm. If you haven't either, then, pour water three times upon the head in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

In the first centuries of the Church, Christian initiation was for adults, and thus we find a long period of catechumenate which included a series of preparatory rites. Today, in all the rites, Latin and Eastern, the Christian initiation of adults begins with their entry into the catechumenate, and reaches its culmination in a single celebration of the three sacraments of initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist.

The first effect of Baptism is the remission of sin, both original sin and actual sin—only original sin in the case of infants and young children, since they are incapable of actual

sin; and both original and actual sin in the case of older persons. The second effect is that, by baptism, one receives the supernatural life which mankind lost by the sin of Adam. We become heirs of heaven. We call it sanctifying grace. The most important effect of baptism is the indwelling of the holy Trinity. The Sacrament of Baptism incorporates a person into the Church, which is the body of Christ. The final and most mysterious effect of Baptism is to receive a permanent, irremovable character or seal. The seal will remain throughout our lives.

It also gives the soul supernatural powers (the virtues, gifts, and fruits of the Holy Spirit); to do what is impossible for human nature alone. The three most important of these powers are the virtues of faith, hope and charity. By faith we are empowered to believe everything which God has revealed. By hope we are empowered to confidently trust that all the good things promised us by God, we shall obtain. We are confident of His mercy, no matter how sinful we are. The only condition here is that we repent, make a good Confession, and resolve to amend our lives. By charity, we are empowered to love God above all things; to love Him more than ourselves; to love Him in all the circumstances of life. Charity also empowers us to love others.

The role of the godparent for baptism is rooted in the role of the sponsor in the catechumenate, which originated in the early Church for the adult baptisms. The role of the sponsor, then, was to attest to the integrity of the person seeking admission into the Church. The sponsor also used to assist the candidate in preparing for these sacraments and living a Christian life.

For infants, these sponsors would make the Profession of Faith in the child's name, and accept the responsibility of instructing the child in the faith, especially if the parents failed in this duty. Parents need to find good practicing Catholics for godparents. A godparent should be trustworthy witnesses of the faith who will help the godchild attain salvation.

The sponsor must have completed his sixteenth year, unless the Bishop has established another age for sponsorship. He must be a Catholic who has received the sacraments of holy Eucharist and confirmation, and "leads a life in harmony with the faith. The sponsor cannot be impeded by some canonical penalty. The mother and father of the child cannot serve as sponsors (**Code of Canon Law, No. 874.1**).