

From the desk of Fr. Jim

On the Foundation of the Sacramental Life

Part 10: The Liturgy of Baptism (cont'd)

Considered the essential rite of baptism, the pouring of water follows. Actually there are two ways of administering the rite: by pouring or by immersion. From the perspective of both history, and to provide something dramatic, immersion is preferred. In order to accomplish what the name of the sacrament means, immersion would be considered necessary. The original Greek means to disappear beneath the water. This can apply to anything: a sinking ship, cloth being dyed in a vat of color, or to a person being immersed beneath the surface. In all these instances, it is being beneath the surface that matters. The idea being conveyed is that a person has died and, in coming up out of the water, they are alive again, or alive anew.

How can we who died to sin yet live in it? Or are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

(Romans 6:2-3)

While these symbolic words and actions certainly point us in a variety of directions that encompass the whole meaning of religious belonging, the act of baptism is more than merely symbolic. It is, in fact, at the moment of baptism that a person becomes one with Christ.

For through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

(Galatians 3:26-28)

It should be noted that although, as far as we can tell, not an original manner of giving baptism, pouring water rather than immersion was used from early days. It certainly proved necessary in many circumstances when, for example large bodies of water were frozen or unavailable, or sickness prevented immersion.

Concerning baptism, baptize this way: Having first rehearsed all these things, "baptize, in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," in running water; But if you do not have running water, baptize in other water, and if you cannot in cold, then in warm. But if you have neither, pour water three times on the head "in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." And before the baptism let the baptizer and him who is to be baptized fast, and any others who are able. And you shall bid him who is to be baptized to fast one or two days before.

(Didache, Chapter 7. Some date this in the First Century, perhaps as early as some of St. Paul's letters.)

The triple formula of baptism is part of the essential rite. Water is poured with each mention of a Person of the Holy Trinity: “[Name], I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” When we speak of “essential rite,” we mean that this is the minimum that is required in order for a sacrament to be considered valid. This Trinitarian formula, together with pouring water, is that essential minimum. As well, even though the ordinary minister of baptism is a Bishop, Priest or Deacon, in an emergency anyone, even an unbaptized person, may baptize. (Canon Law of the Catholic Church, #1256) Of course, these are minimums and not norms.

In a parish such as ours, where we have so many young children and many involved in health care, it is important that we understand how to do a baptism in an emergency. Every Catholic should be able to do this: Pour water over the head while saying the words: “[Name], I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Now, once this is done, be sure to report this to the parish, as a record needs to be made of the conferral of baptism. Actually, the record is made in the geographical territory of the parish in which the hospital, home or institution is located, but the parish office will help you sort that out. Hopefully, the child or adult will survive the emergency. When they have recovered, the remaining parts of the baptismal liturgy can be celebrated at the Church, with a Bishop, Priest or Deacon presiding. We will address those remaining parts next time.