

From The desk of Fr. Tim

On The Foundation of the Sacramental Life

Part 11: The Liturgy of Baptism (Cont)

There are three ceremonial gifts that are added to the essential part of the sacrament of baptism, the anointing with chrism, the white garment, and the candle. Each of these has its own significance.

Anointing With Sacred Chrism

The anointing with sacred chrism in the rite has gained a new significance from its origin. In the ancient church, baptism and confirmation were typically celebrated as one rite. Now, while intimately joined in the essential meaning of the sacraments, they are, except in the case of the baptism of adults, usually separated by many years. That portion of the rite of initiation at which the candidate was confirmed included an anointing with sacred chrism. In fact, this, together with the laying on of hands, was considered the essential portion of the rite. Now, there is a remnant of the two sacraments being once joined, in the anointing of the newly baptized. The prayer at the anointing provides an unusual focus:

God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin, given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and welcomed you into his holy people. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation. As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as a member of his body, sharing everlasting life.

The Ministry of Jesus

We are sharers in the prophetic, priestly and royal ministry of Jesus. While a proper explanation of this would take much space, it might be important to relate this to the original dignity of humanity as reflected in the Garden of Eden. The relationship of Adam and Eve to creation is that of priestly care, offering the earth to the Father, of ruling over creation and of becoming ministers of God's truth (the prophetic role). This prayer is a summary of our vocation in the Church. We are called to this service in baptism!

The Alb

The white garment is a remnant of the baptismal attire of old. The alb, the white, long sleeved garment that the priest wears under the chasuble (the seasonally colored outer vestment) is a descendant of the baptismal garment. Today, even the white baptismal dress typically worn by children at baptism finds its origin in the alb. A white stole, an ornamented strip of cloth, is draped around the neck of the newly baptized. The prayer at the giving of the white garment reminds us that we are called to a dignified and pure life.

N., you have become a new creation, and have clothed yourself in Christ. See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity. With your family and friends to help you by word and example, bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven.

The Candle

The candle that is the final symbolic gift at baptism is a reminder of the spiritual illumination given the newly baptized. Both by our participation in the church, and our life of journeying with God, we are assured that we will not be left in darkness or misunderstanding. Confusion, fear and misunderstanding are encouragements to sin. As we grow in our baptismal calling, we also grow in our confidence that God is the source of all truth, and through Christ, we have access to this truth as believers.

The Prayer of Blessing

A prayer of blessing completes the liturgy of baptism. There is an instant joy among those gathered. The presence of God's spirit at baptism is, in one way, evidenced by this happiness and confidence. Equally, we should reflect on our own baptism in a manner that will encourage us even now. Our adoption by grace came at the cost of the cross. We now belong to Christ, which is more than a mere status. It is a vocational relationship. We await the call of Christ each day. He calls us like a Father awakening his children and we respond with eagerness, "Ready!"