

From the desk of Fr. Jim

On the Foundation of the Sacramental Life

Part 4: Baptized into the Death of Jesus

As the Catechism of the Catholic Church points out, there are a variety of ways to approach the order of the Sacraments. One is to approach them in an order that is reflective of the natural progression of our life. Since Baptism is understood as a life-giving beginning, it is the place to start.

We need to be cautioned even here, at the outset, that we not see any of the sacraments as disconnected from the others. This is especially important with the sacraments of initiation, Baptism and Confirmation. Many Christians regard these sacraments as “standing alone” and are done without any regard for faithful participation in the Sacraments or in pursuing the virtues of the Christian Life. Of course, this makes little sense.

The Sacraments are intended as essential helps to our salvation and our growth in the knowledge, love and service of God and neighbor. It is even possible that if the sacraments are not approached this way, damage can actually be done. The Sacraments involve us in the holy, and to abuse them is to put our soul in the same kind of jeopardy that an amateur electrician faces as he stands before a high voltage transformer with a screwdriver. Getting things right is desperately important.

Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist are the foundation of the Christian Life. Baptism is referred to in numerous places in the New Testament as the first sacrament instituted by Christ. His teaching and commands make it essential:

Jesus answered, “Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

(John 3:5)

In the proclamation of the Gospel, Baptism is the first step in the realization of the effect of that proclamation. As the faith is received and affirmed by the recipients of the Church’s mission, they are baptized. This is in accord with Jesus’ command:

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. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”

(Matthew 28:19 20)

Baptism is directly related to the saving event of Christ’s sacrifice. While this is true for all the Sacraments, it is both a dramatic aspect of the event of one’s Baptism, as well as directly connected in the teachings of the Apostles. St. Paul’s teachings are clear:

Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life. For if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection. We know that our old self was crucified with him, so that our sinful body might be done away with, that we might no longer be in slavery to sin. For a dead person has been absolved from sin. If, then, we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. We know that Christ, raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has power over him. As to his death, he died to sin once and for all; as to his life, he lives for God. Consequently, you too must think of yourselves as (being) dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus.

(Romans 6:3-11)

All the Sacraments are a participation in the Passion of Jesus. An intimate spiritual union with Christ's sufferings is their focus. The result in the individual's life is something new, the life of grace, God's life flowing in and through the life of the Baptized.

Perhaps the first pastoral note concerning Baptism is appropriate here. Whether as a child or as an adult, when a person is Baptized they accept a new commitment in their life. It may involve the conscious formation of new habits, ways of thinking and seeing the world around us. We begin to do things that we have not done before: care for the poor, seek reconciliation with and for others, devote ourselves to seeking and teaching the truth. While the grace of Baptism may remain fallow at the door to our soul, when we open our heart to God, his transforming grace begins to operate on our life. As parents presenting a child for Baptism, their disposition must be that the celebration of this Sacrament in their life is the beginning of something new. The old ways of selfishness and sin are passing away.

The failure on our part to see Baptism in this way is one of the more grave defects of a superficial approach to the Sacraments, and is clearly an abuse. There is more here than merely a custom that celebrates an addition to our family. As a person is baptized, they become a new creation. In them, the saving Death and Resurrection of Jesus is at work.