

# From the desk of Fr. Jim

## On the Foundation of the Sacramental Life

### Part 5: More About Baptism

One of the big puzzles of Christianity has to do with the notion of salvation. A little elementary reading of the New Testament reveals the fact that the word salvation is a catch word to describe something that includes a variety of details.

Salvation includes forgiveness of sins, freedom from the sentence of death that is a result of original sin. It means entry into the Kingdom of God and strengthening grace to endure trial. Baptism and belief are actions that result from the cooperation of man with God, and are aspects of the salvation that God gives us as a gift.

We must be careful, however, with one of the chief effects of Baptism: to make us Christians. One of the errors of modern parlance is to confuse the word Christian with the concept of being good. The effect of this can be seen in our regard (or disregard) for people of other religions.

We might think, for example, that Buddhists would be good people if they were Christians. They would then follow a certain natural moral code that could be used to determine that they are “good”. Of course, life is not best understood in such simplistic ways of thinking. How do we explain that a great many Buddhists are, in fact, good people, perhaps even better than a majority of the Christians that we know? The point of being baptized is first, not that we become good. That will come, hopefully, as we grow in God’s grace.

The first thing that happens to us along the path to salvation is that we are changed from being strangers to God into his adopted children. This may seem to be a simple matter, like changing the labels on a file folder from “strangers” to “friends”. In fact it is one of the great and wondrous miracles of God’s gift. It is as wonderful as that of changing water into wine or feeding five thousand families with a little boy’s lunch. In Baptism, we receive an indelible mark that identifies us as belonging to God, and therefore, proper recipients of his grace.

Perhaps another analogy will help here. Baptism is called a “birth,” the birth to the new life of grace. We understand natural birth, even though it too is charged with a good deal of mystery. It means in one sense that a child is given to a family. They have a father and mother who take care of them. When they need something they are available, ready to feed, clothe and provide for that child. Now, unless there is some unusual circumstance the thing that identifies that child as being a proper recipient of the parents help is that child’s birth into the family.

Notice several things about this. The worthiness of the child is not a consideration here. The child does not choose to be born to a particular family, and the family accepts the child without having even the slightest knowledge of how well the child will do in the future. Indeed, the folks who are generally in charge here are the parents, not the child (despite the power over the whole family that the child has at 2:00 AM feedings).

Perhaps surprisingly, all this is true about Baptism. God does not say to us, “When you are ready, I will adopt you into my family through the water and the Holy Spirit of Baptism.” The fact is that we would never be perfectly ready, because what is given to us in Baptism is necessary for us to be ready. Our readiness is not the issue. It is God’s action upon our soul that is the focus.

This is not to say that the response of the person Baptized is unimportant. The openness to God that forms that response is the point at which grace begins to truly transform our soul, but this usually happens gradually and as a result of pushing something “out” in order for there to be room for God’s grace. As long as our soul is full of worldly concerns and allurements (or even the selfishness of infancy), then there is little room for God.

To finish where we started, the name of the family to whom we belong when we are baptized is “Christian”. Obviously there are Christians who do not function very well with the tasks given them as members their family. Others do very well and they are saints. Most of us are muddling along, growing gradually, becoming more and more open to God. All of us who are baptized are members of the same family.

*I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

**(Ephesians 4:1-6)**