

# From the desk of Fr. Jim

## On the Foundation of the Sacramental Life

### Part 7: What Does Baptism Do?

Among the list of accomplishments that Baptism provides is included the simple but rather dramatic statement that Baptism saves us from our sins. That has become such a stock phrase that it may have lost some of its meaning for us. We have to go back to an understanding of human nature and the effect of the Fall of man from the life of grace.

When Adam and Eve sinned, a change took place in human nature. This is called original sin, and every human being contracts it at the beginning of their life. We usually think about sin as something that we do. Original sin is not like that, except that because of it, our nature now is inclined toward sin and sinful acts. And, without the direct intervention of God, we would be overwhelmed by sin. The Genesis account of creation is written from this perspective. The rebellion in the Garden of Eden was against God and created a situation for the entire human race, one that is “without” God. This is the meaning of Adam and Eve being driven out of the Garden. By their sin, they now live life without God.

An aside here might help us grasp the desperation of this moment. We certainly see it as being set in the remote recesses of history, and of little value in explaining the condition of our life. This conclusion is a grave error. The flood story in Genesis may trouble people unless they reflect on the sad condition of human society. The effects of this rebellion in a remote corner of the world at the beginning of human history are horrific. It includes the scourge of war, the tragedy of abortion and the imagined state that leads us to believe that we are the captain of our destiny. The cascade of destruction is beyond our mind’s capacity to grasp. During the Reformation, reflecting on this idea became very popular among Protestants. It led to the idea that the human situation was hopeless. The complexities of these teachings are beyond the scope of this article, but it needs to be clearly noted that the remedy of man’s sin was rejected by these reformers. They saw any help as being without hope. The Catholic position has always been that human sin may be a mortal wound in the heart of man, but God’s grace is stronger.

*For if, by the transgression of one person, death came to reign through that one, how much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of justification come to reign in life through the one person Jesus Christ. In conclusion, just as through one transgression condemnation came upon all, so through one righteous act acquittal and life came to all. For just as through the disobedience of one person the many were made sinners, so through the obedience of one the many will be made righteous.*

**(Romans 5:17-19)**

There is hope for the human race! That hope is Jesus Christ and the redeeming grace that is his gift to the Church. There is the issue: How does redemption relate to Baptism?

*The Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation. (John 3:5) He also commands his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to all nations and to baptize them. (Matthew 28:19-20) Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed, and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament. The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude; this is why she takes care not to neglect the mission she has received from the Lord to see that all who can be baptized are “reborn of water and the Spirit.” God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments.*

**(Catechism of the Catholic Church, # 1257)**

We can draw two conclusions from this paragraph in the Catechism. First, Baptism assures the recovery of the human heart. It is now possible that we can return to perfect fellowship with God. This is a result of his action in Jesus Christ. The good effects of Baptism are a result of his command, not our innovation. Second, it is possible that a person can be saved without Baptism. This would not be according to a plan that we might have. To approach this that way would be gravely presumptuous. It is the result of irreparable circumstances.

*Since Christ died for the salvation of all, those can be saved without Baptism who die for the faith (Baptism of blood). Catechumens and all those who, even without knowing Christ and the Church, still (under the impulse of grace) sincerely seek God and strive to do his will can also be saved without Baptism (Baptism of desire). The Church in her liturgy entrusts children who die without Baptism to the mercy of God.*

**(Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, #262)**