

An Introduction to the Sacraments and The Sacrament of Baptism **By Jim Seghers**

SACRAMENTS - CCC 1076-1209

This essay will give an overview of the sacraments in general, but its particular emphasis is focused on the sacrament of Baptism.

Origin of the word Sacrament CCC 774

Two terms were used in Latin to convey the meaning of the Greek word *mysterion*: *mysterium* and *sacramentum*. *Mysterium*, “mystery,” captures the hidden power of Christ in the sacraments working through the Holy Spirit. St. Paul refers to the Church as “the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints” (Col 1:26). The word *sacramentum* captures the visible sign of this hidden reality and recalls Christ’s covenant oath by which he weds himself to the Church because *sacramentum* means “oath.”

What is a Sacrament? CCC 772, 773, 774

When I was a boy I learned the following definition: A sacrament is an outward sign (symbol) instituted by Christ to give grace. Stated in another way, a sacrament is an efficacious and visible symbol of an invisible grace. The term *efficacious* is used, because the sacramental sign actually brings about what it symbolizes. The sacraments effect grace by their very operation. Consider how the sacraments are explained in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

CCC 1127 Celebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace that they signify. They are efficacious because in them Christ Himself is at work: it is He who baptizes, He who acts in His sacraments in order to communicate the grace that each sacrament signifies.

CCC 1116 Sacraments are “powers that comes forth” from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving. They are actions of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body, the Church. They are “the masterworks of God” in the new and everlasting covenant.

Although the sacraments are ministered through the Church, it is vital to recognize that the sacraments are the work of Christ through the Holy Spirit. The sacraments are not something apart from Jesus’ saving work. They are the ordinary means Jesus gave us to experience the dynamic effects of his saving grace. The sacraments have power because they are expressions of the saving work of Jesus Christ.

What do the individual Sacraments do?

Baptism, Confirmation and *Eucharist* are sacraments of **initiation**.

Baptism eradicates all sin, infuses us with the divine life and makes us adopted children of God.

Confirmation matures the divine life in us by conferring a fullness of the Holy Spirit, and it commissions us to win the world for Christ as his soldiers in the great battle of spiritual warfare.

Eucharist transforms us into Christ, strengthens the divine life in us, and becomes the source of our bodily resurrection in paradise. It is the heavenly food of Christ himself under the appearance of bread and wine.

Reconciliation and *Anointing of the Sick* are sacraments of **healing**.

Confession heals us from the malady of personal sin and the attachment to sin. It also gives us special graces to faithfully live the Christian life.

Anointing of the Sick heals us spiritually, gives us courage and hope during serious illnesses, and sometimes heals us physically.

Matrimony and *Holy Orders* are sacraments of **service**.

Matrimony binds a man and a woman for life in the covenant of Christ's love for the Church, displacing the ego and selfishness that wrecks marriages. In this sacrament Jesus gives the married couple the grace to live a lifelong union of love and fidelity, and strengthens them to guide their children to heaven.

Holy Orders extend the priesthood of Jesus Christ into time by empowering consecrated men to act as conduits of supernatural life in the Person of Christ so they can faithfully shepherd God's people.

Sacraments – Faith, Humility and Obedience

The sacraments require faith.

CCC 1253 Baptism is the sacrament of faith (Mk 16:16). But faith needs the community of believers. It is only within the faith of the Church that each of the faithful can believe. The faith required for Baptism is not a perfect and mature faith, but a beginning that is called to develop. The catechumen or the godparent is asked: "What do you ask of God's Church?" The response is: "Faith!"

The sacraments provide important lessons in obedience and humility. Let's consider two examples: Jesus gives sight to the man born blind (Jn 9:1-7) and the narrative of Naaman the leper (2 Kgs 5:1-14).

Jesus cures the man born blind

Jesus "spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and anointed the man's eyes with the clay, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing" (Jn 9:6-7).

The miraculous event took place in two stages. First, Jesus worked through the medium of matter. Secondly, the matter (clay mixed with spittle) produced an effect

that far exceeded anything matter can do because it was backed by Jesus' word. The obedience of faith was the necessary condition for the miracle to occur. Had the blind man not washed in the pool of Siloam, he would not have been cured. Similarly, Jesus uses matter in each of the sacraments (the sign) to either give supernatural life, to strengthen supernatural life, or to convey supernatural powers.

In addition to the potency they give, the sacraments cut away at our pride, which is at the root of all sin. In the example of the man born blind, he could have objected to having clay mixed with spit placed on his dead eyes. He might have protested: "What can that do?" Furthermore, he could have asked: "What was so special about washing in the pool of Siloam?" Humanly speaking the seven sacraments can seem so humble, even ridiculous, that they almost seem to be an insult to our intelligence. Yet, they are the much needed antidote for our pride and disobedience. A comparison can be made with Naaman's encounter with the prophet Elisha.

Naaman the leper

Naaman was an important man. He was the "commander of the army of the king of Syria" (2 Kgs 5:1). When Naaman went to the king of Israel to ask for a cure, the king tore his garments saying: "Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man [the king of Syria] sends word to me to cure a man of leprosy" (2 Kgs 5:7)? Leprosy was a dread incurable disease in the ancient world. It served as an apt image of sin.

The king feared that Naaman's request was a ruse to start a war. At this juncture Elisha intervened. He sent a message to the king of Israel: "Let him come now to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel" (2 Kgs 5:8).

When Naaman came to Elisha, the prophet did not go to see him but sent a message to him, saying: "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean. But Naaman was angry, and went away, saying: 'Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me [After all, he was an important man.], and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place [of the leprosy], and cure the leper. [Naaman wanted the miracle performed according to his ideas.] Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean? So he turned and went away in a rage' (2 Kgs 5:10-12).

Now for the rest of the story: "But his servants came near and said to him, 'My father, if the prophet had commanded you to do some great thing [according to the standards of the worldly thinking], would you not have done it? How much rather, then, when he says to you, "Wash, and be clean?" So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean" (2 Kgs 5:13-14). Naaman received a double cure: one for his leprosy and the other for his pride. This is how the sacraments impact us!

What assurance did the blind man have that the water, spit and clay would give him sight? The water, spit and clay that touched the blind man's eyes were utterly powerless to transform anything until Jesus invested his potency in them. The blind man had Jesus' word on it, so do we in the sacraments. Let us now turn our focus on the sacrament of Baptism.

BAPTISM – CCC 1213-1284

Introduction

The majority of Christians accept Baptism as a sacrament. The Catholic Church generally accepts as valid the baptisms of: Orthodox, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Mennonites, Moravians, and Seventh Day Advents, Church of Christ and Lutherans. The Catholic Church rejects the baptisms of Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses because they deny the Trinity. Thus then invalidate the baptismal form, which must be made as follows:

“I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

Quakers, Christian Science, and Salvation Army do not baptize. Many Fundamentalists reject the necessity of Baptism. They may consider it as a mere symbolic prescription, an ordinance, but not an essential requirement. Therefore if it is used at all it is seen merely as a public manifestation of the adult's conversion – accepting Jesus as his Lord and Savior. In addition, some Christian churches reject infant baptism, while others argue that only baptism by immersion is valid.

Let's examine what Sacred Scripture teaches on these important issues.

The Necessity of Baptism

CCC 1257 The Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation. He also commands his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to all nations and to baptize them. Baptism is necessary for salvation for [1] those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and [2] 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."

The following biblical passages support the Church's teaching regarding the necessity of Baptism.

John 3:1-15

Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly [These two words almost have the weight of an oath formula.] I say to you, unless one is born *anew* [*anowhen*], he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:3).

The Greek word *anowhen* has a double meaning. It can mean “again” or it can mean “above.” Nicodemus was thinking on a merely human level, so he thinks Jesus is speaking of a second natural birth. “Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can a man be born

when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (Jn 3:4)?

Jesus' reply reemphasized the necessity of baptism and clarified that he was speaking about a supernatural rebirth: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh [according to human nature]" is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit [therefore supernatural]" (Jn 3:5-6). Water is the material element, the sign of cleansing, but the words of Jesus bring the Holy Spirit who causes an internal transformation – a new birth.

The idea of a spiritual new birth should have been easily grasped by Nicodemus because the Jews spoke of the admission of a proselyte to Israel as a "new birth." This explains Jesus' response to Nicodemus, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this" (Jn 3:10)?

Mark 16:16

When Jesus commissioned the apostles he declared: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved." Jesus did not say that only belief is necessary, but baptism also.

Matthew 28:20

When Jesus uttered the great commission, he commanded: "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"

Acts 2:37-38, 41

After Peter preached on Pentecost his hearers "were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the Apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" Peter's response is demonstrative: "And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. . . So those who received his words were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls."

This passage is important because it highlights:

- The necessity of Baptism
- That Baptism brings about a forgiveness of sins.
- Shows that the Apostles were obedient to Jesus' command (Mk 16:16; Mt 28:20).
- Demonstrates that Baptism was the rite of entrance into Christ's Church.

Acts 9:18; 8:11-13, 36-38; 10:44-48; 22:16; Mt 3:11

The practice of the apostolic Church is clear. Converts were always baptized to remove sins by being reborn in the Holy Spirit so they could become a Christian.

What about those who do not receive sacramental baptism?

CCC 1257 God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments.

We have an obligation to be obedient to Christ's sacramental system. However, God in his mercy can and does operate outside the sacraments.

Baptism of Blood CCC 1258

Those who die for the faith without having received Baptism are baptized by their death. Therefore they will receive the benefits of Baptism without receiving the sacrament.

Baptism of Desire CCC 1258

Explicit – Those who desire to receive Baptism but are prevented by death for receiving the sacrament will receive the fruits of Baptism without receiving the sacrament.

Implicit – Those who are ignorant of the necessity of Baptism through no fault of their own may also receive the fruits of Baptism without receiving the sacrament if they desire it implicitly in their determination to do all the things God commands them to do for their eternal salvation.

In Baptism Christians are reborn as God's sons and daughters

Gal 3:26-27

“For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”

Baptism gives us a new life in Christ

Rom 6:3

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”

Baptism cleanses from Sin

CCC 1263 By Baptism *all sins* are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as all punishment for sin. In those who have been reborn nothing remains that would impede their entry into the Kingdom of God, neither Adam's sin, nor personal sin, nor the consequences of sin, the gravest of which is separation from God.

Acts 22:16

“And now why do you wait [Ananias to Saul]? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.”

Heb 10:22

“Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

1 Cor 6:11

“And such were some of you [that is, sinful men and women]. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”

Eph 5:25-26

“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.”

1 Pet 3:21

“Baptism, which corresponds to this [saving of Noah’s family], now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

Acts 2:38

“Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”

Titus 3:5 - Summary - “he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us rightly through Jesus Christ our savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.”

Baptism makes us a new creature

CCC 1265 Baptism not only purifies from all sins, but also makes the neophyte "a new creature," an adopted son of God, who has become a "partaker of the divine nature," member of Christ and co-heir with him, and a temple of the Holy Spirit.

New creature and Partakers of the divine nature

2 Cor 5:17

“Therefore if any one is in Christ, he is a new creature, the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.”

2 Pet 1:4

“By which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature.”

Gal 4:5-7

“But when the time had fully come, God set forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”

Members of Christ and Co-heir with him

1 Cor 6:15

“Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?”

1 Cor 12:27

“Now we are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

Rom 8:16-17

“It is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”

Temple of the Holy Spirit

1 Cor 6:19

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”

Baptism is the entrance Rite into the Church

CCC 1267 Baptism makes us members of the Body of Christ: "Therefore . . . we are members one of another" (Eph 4:25). Baptism incorporates us *into the Church*. From the baptismal fonts is born the one People of God of the New Covenant, which transcends all the natural or human limits of nations, cultures, races, and sexes: "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor 12:13)

Acts 2:41

“So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added [to the Church] that day about three thousand souls.”

1 Cor 12:13

“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body”

Col 2:11-12

“In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ.”

Baptism confers the Gift of the Holy Spirit.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is Sanctifying Grace that transforms the soul. This is the difference between the baptism of John, which was symbolic of repentance, and the sacrament of baptism, which is a spiritual rebirth (Mt 3:11; Mk 1:8; Lk 3:16; Jn 1:26; Acts 19:2-6).

Jn 3:5 - “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

1 Cor 12:13 - “for by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body”

As a result the whole Church is “a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph 2:22; also: 2 Cor 6:16; 1 Pet 2:5); and each individual Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19).

Baptism replaces circumcision

Col 2:11-12

“In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.”

“Born Again” in Fundamentalists and Evangelical Protestantism

The expression “born again” in Protestant terminology is frequently used in reference to a powerful, personal conversion experience during which the individual accepts Jesus Christ as ones Lord and Savior. Many Christians, Catholic and Protestant, have experienced this powerful conversion.

This is an important event, as anyone can attest who has experienced it. This grace should never be discounted. However, it is not a substitute for Baptism, nor does it have the effects of Baptism. Sacred Scripture never use this language in place of Baptism.

The benefit of this conversion experience is it motivates the person to surrender his or her live to Jesus. It is unfortunate if it leads to an exaggerated emphasis on feeling and not a commitment to obedience to God’s will.

Infant Baptism

CCC 1252 The practice of infant Baptism is an immemorial tradition of the Church. There is explicit testimony to this practice from the second century on, and it is quite possible that, from the beginning of the apostolic preaching, when whole "households" received baptism, infants may also have been baptized.

There is no text in the Bible that explicitly commands the baptism of infants, nor are there passages in Sacred Scripture which rejects infant baptism. However, there are biblical passages that clearly imply infant Baptism.

Infant Baptism is implied in those passages that speak of its necessity. Consider Acts 2:38-39: “And Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him.’”

In addition there are biblical passages that speak about the baptism of whole households receiving Baptism (Acts 11:13-14; 16:15, 30-33; 18:8; 1 Cor 1:16; 1 Cor 7:14). It is probable that children were among those who constituted the household.

Infant baptism is also implied in Jesus’ statement, “Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God” (Mk 10:14). In the parallel passage of Lk 18:15 and Mt 19:14 “little children” refers to infants in arms. They can’t approach Jesus on their own but are brought to him by baptism.

Of particular importance is the highlighted expression “do not hinder.” The Greek word verb, *kolyo*, is part of a technical term for baptism (*Harpers Bible Dictionary*, “Baptism”), for example, compare the use of *kolyo* in Acts 8:36 - “See, here is water! What is to prevent (*kolyo*) my [the eunuch speaking to Philip] being baptized?”

Paul taught that just as all the Jews of the Exodus, including children, were baptized into Moses by passing through the Red Sea and they were also blessing by Christ. The connection with Baptism is clear:

“I want you to know, Brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and in the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:1-4).

Faith and Baptism

The Church teaches that faith is necessary for Baptism. This raises the question of how can an infant receive baptism if he or she is incapable of making an act of faith. The Church teaches that the faith of the Church in the persons of the parents, godparents, priest, etc., substitutes for the faith of the child until the child is capable of making an act of faith. In this regard the Church follows the example of Jesus who forgave sins and healed on the basis of another’s faith.

Mk 2:3-5 (Also Mt 8:5-13)

And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and when they had made an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic lay. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘My son, your sins are forgiven.’”

The issue of Baptism by immersion only

Some Christians claim that baptism is only valid if a person to be baptized is immersed in water. Pouring (infusion) and sprinkling are rejected as invalid methods.

This idea is rooted in a flawed understanding of the etymological range of the words used for Baptism in the New Testament: “to dip,” “to wash,” “to immerse,” “to submerge,” “to make clean,” “to bathe.” So while immersion is certainly one meaning of the words that are translated as baptism it is not the only meaning found in the New Testament. For example, in Mk 7:4 the Greek word *baptizo*, from which we derive the English word “baptize,” has the meaning of wash: “and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they wash (*baptizo*) themselves”

Many biblical scholars, Protestant as well as Catholic, see the origin of John’s baptism and Jesus’ sacramental Baptism rooted in the Jewish purification rites which are not limited to immersion. In addition, the lack of water would make immersion extremely difficult in many areas of the world including Palestine. It is highly unlikely, if not impossible, that 3,000 people were baptized by immersion on Pentecost (Acts 2:41). Similarly, when Paul baptized his prison warden and his household, it is improbable that it was done by immersion (Acts 16:33). Lastly, it is unlikely that Jesus would prescribed this necessary ritual be administered only by immersion because it would eliminate many people because of the scarceness of water, and the danger to those near death, ill or injured.

The practice of the early Church also supports Baptism by methods other than immersion. Pouring, or example, is explicitly mentioned as a valid form of Baptism in the *Didache*, which was written in the first century.