

# Baptism

For those baptized as adults, the experience is usually memorable. It was an important decision in that person's life and generally involved some kind of conversion. Much preparation was required, sometimes several years. The ceremony, which is the Church's initiation rite, is usually held at the Easter Vigil, where the community is celebrating the all-important resurrection of Jesus. The candidate is surrounded by family, friends, and a large community, intent on the ritual. Solemnly the person is washed with the waters of baptism, anointed, dressed in a white robe, and applauded by the community. The whole experience makes it quite apparent that this person is celebrating his or her new relationship with Jesus and his Church and will now be committed to the gospel way of life.

## Infant Baptism

Many Catholics are baptized as infants and therefore have no memory of the event. It is a sacrament that celebrates the new life, its covenant with Jesus, and the initiation of this baby's life into the Christian community. Just as the baby, without realizing it, has already been introduced into a family, a nationality, and the human community, he or she is now introduced into the discipleship of Jesus.

The baby can certainly experience the care and love of its family. But the religious experience is profound for the parents, family, and parish. In faith they are witnessing the life and energy of God in Jesus touching this little life and are committing themselves "to be there" for this child in his or her search for God.

## The Sacrament of Baptism

Like all things Christian, it all begins with Jesus Christ. He is the center of Christian life, as the savior, role model, and source of life and energy. It all began with people following Jesus as disciples and promising to live his gospel way of life, a way of love, forgiveness, mercy, compassion, prayer, and justice. Jesus, then, lives as the central symbol (sacrament) of God's gracious presence among his people, creating them and sustaining their physical and spiritual lives.

The main symbol in the sacrament of baptism is water. Water is so basic to our life. They say our bodies are made up of 79 percent water, and two-thirds of the earth's surface is water. Water is necessary for all life, including human life. Water nourishes; water sustains and cleanses; water also kills.

Given the importance of water, it is not surprising that it is an important religious symbol for spiritual cleansing, renewal, and rebirth. Washing the head of the new candidate is part of the ritual to initiate a new Buddhist monk. Muslims use ablutions to cleanse themselves for prayer. The Hindus take ritual baths in the sacred Ganges River and many have their ashes placed in these waters.

In Judaism, the religion of Jesus, water is used in creation stories to symbolize new life; the great flood symbolizes how sinners bring death upon themselves and how God saves the faithful. The Hebrews are saved crossing the Red Sea, while their enemies are destroyed by the same waters. They find freedom and their own land crossing over the Jordan into the Promised Land. Ritual washing plays a large part in Jewish practice and ceremony, and bathing is the rite practiced to bring a Gentile into the Jewish faith.

Christian baptism seems to find its roots in the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptizer. Mark, the earliest gospel, tells his story in highly symbolic fashion. Mark begins his gospel with Jesus' baptism. John, who seems to have been a teacher and mentor to Jesus, was a rugged desert hermit. He came to the Jordan to call his people to repent their sins and lead them into the river to receive a ritual cleansing. John is portrayed as one who is preparing the way for Jesus by using his unique rite of



baptism. Jesus comes to the river, stands in solidarity with those who want to change their lives, and accepts baptism. Suddenly, the Spirit of God comes to Jesus, and a voice from above is heard to say: “You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased” (Mk 1:11).

This historic, yet highly symbolic, story is written in the light of resurrection faith and reveals much about the early Christian beliefs regarding Jesus and his baptism. First, John’s testimony shows that Jesus will baptize with the Spirit of God. When Jesus comes, he enters the water as a genuine human person, in solidarity with those coming for repentance. Jesus’ baptism is an occasion where he realizes more than ever that he is loved by his God and, like every person, has a unique calling in life. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus withdraws to the desert where he is tempted like all of us. When he hears that John has been executed, he now knows it is time to begin his own mission to preach repentance, to heal, and to proclaim the presence of the kingdom of God. Immediately after that, Mark has Jesus begin to choose his followers and promise them that they will be “fishers” of people.

In this brief biblical story, Mark presents in miniature the main meanings of baptism. At the center is Jesus, the beloved Son of God. Baptism is a summons to repent for sin—literally to “retrace our steps” and return to the right path. Baptism is the free and gracious gift of God’s grace and love. It is God’s invitation to join the kingdom where love, mercy, and compassion reign and to join the Church, the people who promote the kingdom. Baptism is all about our own personal mission in life, where each of us uniquely spreads the gospel message in word and action. Let’s examine each element of baptism in more detail.

**JESUS. Often when I talk with students about being a practicing Catholic, we get into topics like going to church, learning doctrines, agreeing or disagreeing with the official church, even whether or not they like their pastor. While these are all issues connected to Catholicism, none of them is at its center. The center is a person, Jesus Christ. It all started when people answered Jesus’ call to follow him, to relate to him as a close friend, to accept his gospel teachings, and to follow his way. They came to believe that Jesus was their God and Savior.**

Of course, everyone is born as a child of God and receives life and being from God. But baptism is a new offer: to intimately relate to God through Jesus, God’s Son. Baptism is a powerful symbol of God’s power to shape the life we have received into a new life, a life with Jesus as friend, teacher, and healer. Baptism links us to Jesus and his community. So walking with Jesus of Nazareth, and enjoying his presence and power in our lives, is at the heart of what it means to be Catholic. Early Christians spoke of their new sect as “the Way.” They were committed to a new way of life, one that was loving, merciful, forgiving, with a passion for peace and justice. So if we want to discuss practicing Catholicism, these areas are first and foremost.

**Repentance. The word *repentance* is often a turnoff. It usually conjures up images of revival tent meetings or TV evangelists urging their listeners to turn away from their sins—and send money. But we can’t dismiss the word that easily, because *repent* was one of the first words out of Jesus’ mouth. The word comes from the Greek word *metanoia*, which literally means “beyond the mind,” or we might say “getting a new outlook on life.” It means changing our perspective, our direction, and goals. It means stopping, and going in a new and more positive direction. It is not about beating our breasts, guilt trips of wearing sackcloth and ashes. Repentance calls us to turn ourselves around and look for new horizons where we will find true happiness.**

The most recent example of repentance for me was one of my students (we’ll call her “Annie”), who experimented with crystal meth over the Christmas break. She began hanging out with a drug



crowd, and when they partied they got high on meth. Annie immediately got hooked and meth took over her life. She couldn't sleep, ate little, and began to look like a different person. She finally ended up in a homeless shelter and had it not been for one of the staff persuading her to get in a program, she probably would have died.

Annie spent three months in a recovery program, which was extremely difficult for her. Now she is out and for the time being is clean, but has tremendous urges to go back to her friends and get high again. Annie says that her twelve-step program is what keeps her going. She had to admit that she couldn't do this on her own, but had to turn herself over to the care of a Higher Power. She had to admit her addiction to herself, her God, and others and ask God to remove the defects in her that led her to drugs. She had to make amends with the people she had harmed and spend time in prayer and meditation to get closer to God and discover God's will for her and seek the power to carry that out.

Annie shows us what repentance is all about: turning to our God as the only way to overcome our defects and resolving with the help of God to take a new path in life. Baptism, similarly, is a symbol that a person recognizes his or her wrongdoings and sins and wants to "be made clean" by the power of God.

This might be helpful in the case of adult baptism, but what about the baptism of infants who have nothing to repent? Traditionally, infants were thought to have original sin and had to be washed clean of this if they were to be saved. Today original sin is explained as the human inclination to sin. The baby is certainly born with human weakness and will in time give in to temptation. Baptism, of course, does not take this away, but it does act as a symbol that when the child eventually does need the help of God in facing evil, that help will be there—guaranteed. Baptism also demonstrates that the child is (we hope) surrounded by family and friends who will show up when the child is in need and will serve as role models.

**Amazing Grace. Sacraments are a source of God's grace and blessings. Grace is the life and energy of God, which is shared with every child that is born. And we know that grace is abundantly available to everyone. The teen who tells his parents that he does not have to go to church because he can pray for God's blessing in the woods is right. The person who says that she does not have to tell a priest her sins in order to be forgiven is correct. God's life and blessings are available in many ways other than in the sacraments. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he says: "They are justified freely by his grace" (Rom 3:24).**

And yet, for Christians, the sacraments have always been valuable because they symbolically promise an abundance of God's grace. The celebration of sacraments provide unique experiences of God's blessings at key moments of our lives. Of course, we can be one with God and Jesus as we pray at a family meal, but gathering with our family around the table of the Lord for Mass and communion can be a much more intense experience of communion with God. Yes, we can confess something we are sorry we did to a friend and be forgiven. But to celebrate the sacrament of penance with a priest that we trust and who listens, counsels, and prays with us can be a deeper connection to God's forgiveness. And we can take our beloved to the beach and exchange vows, but if we solemnly join our faith and vows before God in the sacrament, the experience can be much more profound.

In the sacraments, it is God who acts, enlivens, and gives. The word *grace* means "gift," and in the sacraments, God's life and power is given freely, gratuitously (if you will), and in abundance. All we need do is open our hearts in faith to it all.

Baptism is the beginning of this new, graced life in Jesus and his community. This way of life has its diverse attractions. In the case of Dorothy Day, she was drawn to the faith by those she saw in churches on her way home from the bars at night: they sat silently in the dark communicating with their



God. She wanted that in her life. Gandhi, although he never became a Christian, was attracted to Jesus because of his teachings on nonviolence. Thomas Merton, one of the leading spiritual writers of our time, left a party-going life and joined a monastery because he was attracted to the Catholic ways of prayer and service to poor people.

**Thy Kingdom Come. As we saw earlier, the kingdom or reign of God was central to Jesus' teaching. Baptism is the sign of being a part of the kingdom, the place where love, compassion, and justice reign supreme. Baptism symbolizes becoming a part of the community of people, the Church, which is committed to those values. The Church should be a living and active symbol (sacrament) of these values. As a young woman who was raped and killed for helping Archbishop Romero in El Salvador once said, "The Kingdom of God is not in the sky somewhere. It is here among our people. We help God strengthen the kingdom when we struggle for peace and justice."**

Not everyone chooses to be a part of a church or organized religion. In the United States, only about half of the population is so affiliated, and yet more than 90 percent say they believe in God and pray on their own. In some countries in Europe, the numbers of people who belong to a religion are quite low: 10 percent in France, 15 percent in Spain and the Czech Republic, 30 percent in Germany. Only Poland, with 85 percent, has a high percentage of participation in religion. Many people today say they are spiritual, but not religious. They choose to be on their own where religion is concerned.

But baptism does not symbolize going it alone. Baptism is about community. It's about belonging to a movement of disciples, accepting their tradition, learning from their Scriptures, celebrating their rituals, and living a specific way of life with others and for others. By definition, the baptized are an *ecclesia*, a specific gathering of God's people who live and act as a living symbol of God's power and presence.

And Church is much more than the hierarchy, the clergy, or the Vatican. The Church is a people. Church "happens" because, as Jesus promised: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in their midst" (Mt 18:20). My most recent experience of this was during a late night discussion with some of my students about how difficult it is today for young people to belong to a church. Suddenly we realized that in fact this *was* church happening right here in our midst. One of the students suggested that we join in prayer. Church can happen with your friends, in your family, at school, in your parish, and even worldwide as you reach out to help those in other countries. Baptism is about becoming a part of that community that celebrates the presence of Jesus and his power.

**Mission. "What is your purpose in life? Why were you put here and what are you to accomplish?" Anytime I ask this, people look up and get quite serious. From time to time throughout our lives, we ask this ultimate question. No matter what job or career we have pursued, no matter how successful or not we have been, the question constantly returns. We all struggle to somehow get it right before we pass on.**

Baptism helps us shape our answer. We are called to live lives for others, lives of love and caring. That is the purpose of life deep down. We are called to lives intimately caught up with our Creator and with others. Baptism provides a role model and friend to accompany us in Jesus. It gives us a road map for the journey in the Gospels. And it offers us a supportive community. Now that doesn't mean our question about what we should do with our lives is fully answered. We still have to search for our individual calling, our destiny. But baptism does give us a framework, a blueprint, a context in which we can work out how to best use the few moments in time that we have to make a difference.



(This article is excerpted from *The Ongoing Renewal of Catholicism*, by Brennan R. Hill [Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2008]. Copyright © 2008 by Brennan R. Hill. Used with permission of Anselm Academic.)

