



October 2004 Gathering

# Baptism

## Historical and Biblical References

### **Who Instituted The Sacrament Of Baptism?**

As with all the sacraments, baptism has a foundation in the life and ministry of Jesus. It is founded in the stories and teachings of Jesus. To Nicodemus, Jesus told of the need of rebirth of water and the Spirit (John 3:5). To the Samaritan woman he promised "living water" so that she will never thirst (John 4:11-13). In his farewell speech to his followers Jesus clearly combines the need for both belief and baptism for salvation. If there is no belief, there is no relationship in which the salvation can occur (Mark 16:16). In Matthew 28:19 we see baptism firmly placed as the central mission of the followers of Jesus, "make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them..." At one point in the gospel of John (3:22-23) there is an allusion to Jesus baptizing, although it is unclear whether it was he or his disciples. At another place (4:2) there is a parenthetical clarification that it was not he, but his disciples, who was baptizing.

### **Pre-Christian Ablutions and Baptism:**

Bodily ablutions or washings have been an important rite in religious worship since the very beginning of the human race. The ancient Greeks and Romans had ceremonial ablutions. There were many different kinds of abluion ritual acts in Judaism, including those practiced by the Qumran sect, or Essenes. There were purification rites associated with food preparation and diet, and the purification of the body, and there were initiatory rites associated with water. This practice of "proselyte baptism (by which Gentiles became Jews) seems to have developed with the expansion of Judaism outside Palestine.

This is not to suggest that Christian baptism was derived from proselyte baptism. What evidence there is leads us to conclude, on the contrary, that Christian baptism was initially patterned after the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the Jordan river. This is a baptism of conversion (change of heart) not initiation. There is no hint of a death-resurrection theme, no initiatory motif, no notion of admission to a new community. The emphasis is instead upon repentance as a preparation for messianic work. John's baptism was also a baptism in water. It would give way to another baptism in water and the Holy Spirit (Mt 3:11; Lk 3:16). John himself regarded his baptism as a temporary rite. In submitting to it, Jesus established his solidarity with those who were objects of John's preaching, the faithful remnant of Israel.

## **Baptism in Transition: From Judaism to Christianity**

Baptism continued to be practiced outside Jesus' circle, and it eventually widened the rift between his disciples and the followers of John. The pre-paschal baptisms were no longer Jewish, but neither were they, as yet, fully Christian. Not until the gathering at Pentecost is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit associated with baptism (Acts 2:1-39).

There can be little doubt that the Pentecost occurrence influenced the ways in which the evangelists later interpreted the baptism of Jesus by John and the subsequent initiatory practice of the Church. Both water baptism and the outpouring of the Spirit are necessary as a follow-up to the proclamation of Jesus' resurrection and exaltation. Thus, the normal sequence: proclamation of the Gospel, pre-baptismal teaching, conversion in faith, water bath, post baptismal teaching, fellowship in the Spirit, breaking of the bread, and prayers (Acts 2:42).

## **The Fruit of Baptism**

The fruit of Baptism, or baptismal grace, is a rich reality that includes forgiveness of original sin and all personal sins, birth into the new life by which man becomes an adoptive son of the Father, a member of Christ and a temple of the Holy Spirit. By this very fact the person baptized is incorporated into the Church, the Body of Christ, and made a sharer in the priesthood of Christ.

(Catechism of the Catholic Church 1279)

## **The Symbols of Baptism**

The sacrament of Baptism is full of wonderful symbols that speak of its multi-faceted content.

- **Naming** as both the unique person that we each are, and as a recognized member of this Catholic Christian community – “Your Name is Christian.”
- **Water** speaks of cleansing and the ending of old life and beginning of new.
- **Oil** denotes the responsibility that comes with this new identity as “Christian”.
- **New White Garment** that is life in Christ. We will wear it forever, even as it will need mending and cleaning along the journey.
- **Light** is Christ’s constant presence in every moment of our life. We will long for this warming guide at times, only to uncover it in the least likely person or place.
- **Assembly** are those in the faith community who gather to witness the baptism. They both nurture and challenge our faith beliefs.
- **Baptismal Promises** are at the core of this sacrament. We allude to them every week in the Creed proclaimed at Mass. We renew them annually at the Vigil Mass of Easter and during the season of Easter; and we proclaim them as our own whenever we witness to the baptism of a new member entering our Catholic way of life.

1. **Did anything you read surprise you? Does having historical and biblical references about this sacrament help you better understand and/or appreciate its value in our Catholic identity?**

## Reflecting on Our Baptismal Promises

*Because the promises are at the core of the sacrament, we'll spend some time reflecting on them.*

**The promises have two parts.**

**The first addresses the rejection of sin:**

*Do you reject so as to live in the freedom of God's children?*

*Do you reject the glamour of evil, and refuse to be mastered by sin?*

*Do you reject Satan, father of sin and prince of darkness?*

- 2. How would you re-state the promises of rejection in contemporary language? In your day-to-day life what promises are you making with these statements?**

**The second part contains the Profession of Faith:**

*Do you believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth?*

*Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, died, and was buried, rose from the dead, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father?*

*Do you believe in the Holy, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting?*

- 3. In the Latin form, the formal response is called "Credo", which is often translated as "I believe..." A more literal translation is "I set my heart on..." How would you restate these profession of faith statements in contemporary language using the prefix "I set my heart on..."?**
- 4. Promises can have a powerful impact on both those making the promises and those benefiting from promise making.** Think back over the recent past remembering promises you have participated in; either at the maker or as the recipient. Now consider these questions in relationship to one of these promises events. Has the promise been kept? What has been the effect(s) of the keeping, or breaking, of the promise? How were you affected?
- 5. Imagine that you have "set your heart on" just one part of this beautiful, but demanding, faith statement; e.g. "I set my heart on God, my father and the father of all, who is the creator of all that is and all that is unimaginable, beyond this existence in time and place." If this were the promise you hold yourself to everyday, how would it change things in how you live?**

- 6. How does your life reflect what it means to be a baptized person?**

For yourself, complete this statement: "To more fully live out my baptism, I will....."

## Salvation and Baptism

Finally, those who have not yet received the Gospel are related to the People of God in various ways. There is, first, that people (The Jewish People) to which the covenants and promises were made, and from which Christ was born according to the flesh (cf. Rom 9:4-5): in view of the divine choice, they are a people most dear for the sake of the fathers, for the gifts of God are without repentance (cf. Rom 11:29-29).

But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Moslems: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind's judge on the last day.

Nor is God remote from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, since he gives to all men life and breath and all things (cf. Acts 17:25-28), and since the Savior wills all men to be saved (cf. 1 Tim 2:4). Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience — those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life.

Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the Church to be a preparation for the Gospel and given by him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life. But very often, deceived by the Evil One, men have become vain in their reasonings, have exchanged the truth of God for a lie and served the world rather than the Creator (cf. Rom. 1:21 and 25). Or else, living and dying in this world without God, they are exposed to ultimate despair. Hence to procure the glory of God and the salvation of all these, the Church, mindful of the Lord's command, "preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mk. 16:16) takes zealous care to foster the missions.