

UNDERSTANDING CATHOLICISM 8: THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

I. Introduction

- A. In an intriguing passage Jesus identified himself as a source of “*living water*” that will flow from his heart:

“If any one thirsts, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water’” (Jn 7:37-38).
- B. Jesus, whose body is the true temple of God (Jn 2:19-21), is interpreting passages from Ezekiel and Zechariah.
 1. *Ezekiel* saw a vision of water flowing from the side of the idealized temple, which foreshadowed the body of Christ. This flow of water grew into a great river that made “everything live” (Ezek 47:9).
 2. *Zechariah* connected the river of living water with the Messiah’s death:

“And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on *him whom they have pierced*, they shall mourn for him, ... On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem *to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness*. ... On that day *living waters* shall flow out from Jerusalem” (Zech 12:10, 13:1; 14:8).
- C. Living Water.
 1. Jesus woos the Samaritan woman.

“Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink,” you would have asked him and he would have given you *living water*.’ ... Jesus said to her, ‘Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water swelling up to eternal life’” (Jn 4:10, 13-14).
 2. Jesus on the cross.

“After this Jesus, knowing that all was not finished, said (to fulfill the scripture), ‘*I thirst*.’ A bowl full of common wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the wine on hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, ‘It is finished’, and he bowed his head and *gave up his spirit*. ... But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and *at once there came out blood and water*” (Jn 19:28-30, 34).
- D. Jesus’ thirst.
 1. Jesus’ thirst for souls propelled him to reach out to the Samaritan woman. She symbolized all those estranged from God.
 2. In his death Jesus gives his bride the Holy Spirit, the “living water” that flows from his pierced side.

3. This “living water” is the *marital bath* that cleanses Jesus’ bride from sin so she can be wedded to Christ through the waters of the sacrament of Baptism.

II. Old Testament Prefigurations

- A. Noah’s ark, which saved 8 people in the flood (CCC, # 1219).
- B. The crossing of the Red Sea, freeing the Hebrew people from slavery (CCC, # 1221).
- C. Crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land (CCC, # 1222).

III. The Necessity of Baptism for Salvation

A. *The Catechism of the Catholic teaches:*

“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’.”¹

B. Jesus instructs Nicodemus on the necessity of baptism

“Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born *anew* [*anóthen*], *he cannot see the kingdom of God*” (Jn 3:3).

1. The Greek word *anóthen* has a double meaning. It can mean “again” or it can mean “above.”

2. Nicodemus thinking on a merely human level, reasons that Jesus is speaking about 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)?

3. Jesus’ reply reemphasized the necessity of baptism and clarified that he was speaking about a supernatural rebirth in baptism:

“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).

C. In the Sacrament of Baptism water is the material element, a sign of cleansing, but Jesus’ words bring the Holy Spirit who causes an internal transformation – a new birth.

D. Commissioning the apostles.

1. “He who believes *and is baptized* will be saved” (Mk 16:16).

2. When giving the great commission Jesus 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” (Mt 28:20).

¹ CCC, # 1257.

IV. Baptism in the apostolic Church.

- A. 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?’”
 - 1. Peter’s response is demonstrative. He certainly didn’t say: “Just accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior and you will be saved!”
 - 2. “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” (Acts 2:37-38, 41).
 - 3. This passage highlights:
 - a. The necessity of Baptism
 - b. That Baptism brings about a forgiveness of sins.
 - c. Shows that the Apostles were obedient to Jesus’ command (Mk 16:16; Mt 28:20).
 - d. Demonstrates that Baptism was the rite of entrance into Christ’s Church.
- B. The practice of the apostolic Church is clear. Converts were always baptized in order to have their sins removed by being reborn in the sacrament of Baptism. There is not a single biblical example of someone becoming a Christian by faith alone without receiving sacramental Baptism (See: Acts 9:18; 8:11-13, 36-38; 10:44-48; 22:16; Mt 3:11).

V. What about those who do not receive sacramental baptism?

- A. The Catholic Church teaches:

*“God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments.”*²
- B. Everyone has the obligation to be obedient to Christ’s sacramental system. However, God in his mercy can and does operate outside the sacraments.
 - 1. *Baptism of Blood* [CCC # 1258]

Those who are martyred without having received the sacrament of Baptism are baptized by their sacrificial death. Therefore, they will receive the benefits of Baptism without receiving the sacrament.
 - 2. *Baptism of Desire* [CCC # 1258]
 - a. *Explicit* – Those who desire to receive the sacrament of Baptism but are prevented by death through no fault of their own from receiving the sacrament will receive the fruits of Baptism without receiving the sacrament.
 - b. *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.
- C. What of infants who die without baptism?

² CCC, # 1257.

It is not revealed. Therefore, “the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God” (CCC, # 1261).

VI. What Does the Sacrament of Baptism Do?

A. In Baptism Christians are reborn as *God’s sons and daughters*.

“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*” (Gal 3:26-27).

“But when the time had fully come, God sent 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*” (Gal 4:5-7).

“Born Again” in Fundamentalists and Evangelical Protestantism

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

Conversion 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 sacramental Baptism, nor does it have the effects of Baptism. Sacred Scripture never use this “born again” language as a substitute for Baptism.

B. Baptism gives us a *new life in Christ*.

“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*” (Rom 6:3).

C. Baptism *cleanses from Sin*.

“By Baptism *all sins* are forgiven: original sin and all personal sins, as well as all punishment for sin. Nothing remains on the soul that would impede 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.”³

Ananias says to Saul: “And now why do you wait. Rise and be *baptized, and wash away your sins*, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16).

³ CCC, # 1263.

“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” (1 Cor 6:11).

“*Baptism*, which corresponds to this [the saving of Noah’s family, prefigured baptism], *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” (1 Pet 3:21).

“Repent, and be *baptized every one* of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the *forgiveness of your sins*” (Acts 2:38).

“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” (Titus 3:5).

D. Baptism makes us a new creature and partakers of the divine nature.

“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.”⁴

“Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a *new creature*, the old has passed away, behold, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17).

“By which [the covenants] 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*” (2 Pet 1:4).

E. Baptism makes us Co-Heirs with Jesus

“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” (Rom 8:16-17).

F. Baptism is the Entrance Rite into the Church

“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

⁴ CCC, # 1265.

human limits of nations, cultures, races, and sexes: “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor 12:13).⁵

“So those who received his word *were baptized*, and *there were added* [to the Church] *that day about three thousand souls*” (Acts 2:41).

“For by one Spirit we were all *baptized into one body*” (1 Cor 12:13).

G. Baptism replaces the rite of circumcision, which was the entrance rite into the Old Testament Church.

“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” (Col 2:11-12).

H. Baptism confers the Gift of the Holy Spirit.

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

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

“For by *one Spirit* we were *all baptized into one body*” (1 Cor 12:13).

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).

VII. Miscellaneous Subjects

A. Infant Baptism

“The practice of infant Baptism is an ancient 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”⁶ received baptism, infants may also have been baptized.”⁷

⁵ CCC, # 1267.

⁶ Acts 11:13-14; 16:15, 30-33; 18:8; 1 Cor 1:16; 1 Cor 7:14.

⁷ CCC, # 1252.

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. For example, infant Baptism is implied in Peter's sermon given on Pentecost Sunday.

"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'" (Acts 2:38-39).

B. Baptism and Faith

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 substitutionary faith:

"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*'" (Mk 2:3-5; also Mt 8:5-13).

C. The issue of Baptism by immersion only

1. 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.
2. This idea ignores the Church's Tradition, and it is rooted in an incomplete understanding of the range of meanings for the Greek words used for Baptism in the New Testament, for example: "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.
3. 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."

D. Who can baptize (CCC, # 1246)?

1. *Ordinary minister*: bishop, priest, deacon.
2. *In an Emergency* - anyone, as long as they have the intention to do what is required and use the exact baptismal formula.

E. Baptismal formula.

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

It cannot be changed.

VIII. Summary

Baptism is necessary for salvation. This nuptial bath brings us into a wedded (covenantal) union with Christ as his bride. This marvelous gift of Jesus' love removes all sins, makes us a child of the Father, brothers and sisters to one another, an heir of heaven, partakers of his divine nature, and makes us temples of the Holy Spirit.

The sacrament of Baptism is “the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit” that symbolically buries us in Christ so we can rise with him to new life (Tit 3:5; cf. Jn 3:5; Rom 6:2-5; Col 2:12). Therefore, in his letter to the Galatians Paul makes a bold declaration, “I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal 2:19), a reality that applies to all authentic Christians. This ever-present reality in the lives of the baptized indicates that, as we live out our life on earth, Jesus' Passion is being actuated in us.⁸ Therefore, it becomes possible for us to say with St. Paul: “Yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; in so far as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself for me” (Gal 2:20). It is this death to our inflated ego that makes room for Jesus living and acting in us.

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⁸ Cardinal Albert Vanhoye and Peter S. Williamson, *Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Galatians*, p. 89.