

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Continuing our reflections on the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, I invite you to take this opportunity to reflect on the deeper meaning of the Church's Ritual for this sacrament and to attempt to look with new eyes at the symbols that are integral to that ritual. Each of the seven sacraments is celebrated as part of the Liturgy or public worship of the Church. In the ritual of each sacrament we celebrate the invisible reality of God's presence and outpouring of grace. We express that encounter with words, with visible symbols and with ritual gestures particular to each sacrament.

It is clear that the essential and primary symbol of Baptism is water. As mentioned in our first reflection, the verb *to baptize* in its original Greek means to dip, immerse, or plunge into water. In last week's reflection we visited the Baptism of Our Lord by John in the Jordan River to highlight the fact that each Christian shares in the Baptism of Christ by way of our own Baptism.

Some seventy per cent of the earth is covered by water. The adult human body is around sixty percent water. To say that water is essential to human life is an understatement. Water is life itself for humans. It is no wonder why water is held as sacred in all religious traditions, even those of primal origin. Those of us who have lived in a "post-consumer world" have finally begun to understand how much we have wasted water and abused the supply we have. Thanks to recent Catholic teaching on respect for the planet, the gifts of nature, and the environment, and our need to understand these things as gifts from God, perhaps those of us who have seen ourselves as having unlimited water at our disposal have, hopefully, begun to appreciate what we have and to acknowledge that water needs to be shared more with those for whom it is scarce.

The Blessing which the celebrant prays over the water of the Baptismal font in the Roman Ritual calls to mind the creation narrative in the book of Genesis: "At the very dawn of creation, your Spirit breathed on the waters, making them the wellspring of all holiness." Those of us who have been privileged to enjoy summer recreation at the beaches or lakes of New England, have known the exhilarating sensation of diving or plunging into the ocean or being carried by a wave into shore at high tide. We may have known the feeling of swimming in a fresh water lake or stream in the mountains of New Hampshire or Vermont. Could we not go so far as to say that those experiences could be described as *sacramental* or *holy*? I think that an experience such as this can be a communion with God through the gift of water. Among my Irish elders, there was a tradition that on August 15, the feast of Our Lady's Assumption into heaven, the ocean waters are imbued with a divine healing. This would bring them to the beaches of the Greater Boston area on this day in large numbers. Likewise, in Italy, *Ferragosto* is an August festival leading to a special Holiday and Holy Day on August 15 which, likewise draws crowds of people to the seacoast to recreate, celebrate and honor the Mother of God as well. These two examples are only small indication of how the gift of water is celebrated by those who inhabit the planet.

The same prayer of blessing over the water calls to mind the Hebrew Scriptural narratives of the Great Flood and the parting of the Red Sea:

"The waters of the great flood you made a sign of the waters of baptism, that make an end of sin and  
A new beginning of goodness.  
Through the waters of the Red Sea you led Israel out of slavery, to be an image of God's holy people,  
set free from sin by baptism."

Finally we hear in this prayer, the reference to that in which we have all shared by those baptismal waters: “In the waters of the Jordan your Son was baptized by John and anointed with the Spirit.”

To understand the outcome of being immersed in this water or having it poured over the one to be baptized, we have only to listen for the end of the prayer:

“We ask you, Father, with your Son to send the Holy Spirit upon the water of this font. May all who are buried with Christ in the death of baptism rise also with him to newness of life....”

Even if we have witnessed a number of baptisms in our lives, it may well be that we have not really heard this prayer with deep understanding. The parents and godparents who stand about the baptismal font with their infant daughters and sons, dressed in beautiful white clothing, are, no doubt happy to bring their child to church for this special sacramental celebration. All the same, we might wonder have they or any of us really paused to think about our belief related to this sacrament. Perhaps it is more often those adults who have completed the RCIA or other Catechetical preparation and desired to be in “full communion” with the church for whom the words are more meaningful. If the Holy Spirit is invoked by the Church to come upon the water of the parish baptismal font in the same way that the Holy Spirit hovered over the waters at the beginning of creation and then at the Baptism of Our Lord in the Jordan River, then the infant or child or young person or adult who is to be baptized by the pouring of water or immersion into the water is being immersed into the life of that very Holy Spirit of God. Thus begins the “new life” of the one who comes on their own or who is brought by their parents and godparents to experience a rebirth into the grace of God. Thus begins the life of the Christian disciple. The voice of God the Father, once more speaks the words spoken at the Baptism of Jesus: “This is my beloved daughter.” Or “This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.”

Having considered the powerful symbol of water in the ritual of Baptism, next week we will look at the other important visible symbols used to express the invisible reality of the encounter with the Holy Trinity at Baptism. Sincerely yours in Christ, Fr. Jim Morris ([stjnsalem624@gmail.com](mailto:stjnsalem624@gmail.com))