

BAPTISM & CONFIRMATION: Sacraments of Initiation

(C 1212-1321, USC Chs. 15 & 16)

In this article, we will look at the first two sacraments of initiation: Baptism and Confirmation.

The Sacraments of Christian Initiation (C 1212, USC p. 183). The *Catechism* (1285) states that *Baptism, the Eucharist and Confirmation together constitute the “sacraments of Christian initiation,”* whose unity must be safe-guarded. The three sacraments of initiation are closely related. Baptism brings the new life of Christ; Confirmation strengthens the new life of Christ; and the Eucharist nourishes the new life of Christ. Together they make us full members of the Church and they bestow the fullness of the Holy Spirit so that we can live more like Christ.

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM (C 1213-1284 USC Ch 15)

In what may have been a baptismal homily, St. Paul writes: “*Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through Baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life*” (Rom 6:3-4).

The word baptism is from a Greek word which means to “plunge” or “immerse.” In Baptism, the recipient is plunged or immersed into Christ’s death and Resurrection. In Baptism, we symbolically go into the tomb with Christ, dying to sin and self, and we rise to new life in the Spirit of Christ.

Biblical Roots of the Sacrament (C 1217-1225). Many events in Israel’s salvation history point to the saving grace received in the waters of baptism, e.g., the Great Flood, Israel Crossing the Red Sea, Israel crossing the River Jordan into the Promised Land.

At the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, he was baptized by John in the River Jordan. In and through this event, Jesus, the sinless One, identified himself with sinful humanity whom he came to liberate from the slavery and power of sin. In stepping into the River Jordan, Jesus filled the waters with his divine presence just as he does when the water is blessed during the sacrament of Baptism.

Before he returned to his Father, Jesus issued the Great Commission: to preach in his name, make disciples and baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Mt 28:16-20). Since the day of Pentecost, when about 3000 adults were baptized, the Church has initiated

new members into her midst through the sacrament of Baptism.

Four Effects of Baptism (C 1262-1274, USC 192). The *Catechism* lists the following four effects of the sacrament of Baptism on those who receive it.

- *All sin is wiped away.* For the infant, this means original sin. For children over the “age of reason” (seven years) and adults, this means both original and personal sin. In the early church, adults removed all clothing prior to entering the waters of Baptism, symbolizing their intention to shed a sinful or old way of life. They went down into the tomb with Christ, signaling their intention to die to sin and to all that is not of Christ. Hence, the decision to seek Baptism was a very radical one. It involved a radical conversion of heart and mind, a decision to turn away from all that was not of Christ.

While the waters of Baptism wash away all sin, original and personal, it does not remove the tendency or inclination toward sin that all of us struggle with. This wound of original sin causes us to be sometimes confused about what is and isn’t sin, and it leaves us with a weakened will when it comes to resisting the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil. But through the grace received in this sacrament and other sacraments, and through prayer and spiritual direction, we can grow in our ability to deal with the wounds of original sin which afflict our soul and mind.

- *We become adopted children of God.* Through Baptism we become royalty; we are transformed into children of God. We are taken into the household of God and share in God’s divine life. We become temples of the Holy Spirit. Whenever we suffer from self-image problems, all we need do is spend time meditating on who we are because of the sacrament of Baptism.

- *We are initiated into the Church.* Through Baptism, we become members of the Church, the Body of Christ. We share in the priesthood of Christ as well as in his prophetic and royal mission. “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praise of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1Pet 2:9).

- *We bond with other Christians.* Through Baptism, we share a common bond with all who have been baptized into the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Pause: What struck you most about what we have just read? What did you underline, or what might you have underlined?

Baptismal Character of Seal. Baptism seals the Christian with an indelible spiritual mark or character. Baptism marks us permanently as belonging to Christ, whose image we bear. We can only be baptized once.

Necessity of Baptism (C 1257-1261). Jesus taught the necessity of Baptism when he said “unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:3). Also, before he ascended into heaven, he commanded his disciples to “go forth and teach all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19). Therefore, Baptism with water is the necessary first step to eternal salvation for all who believe in Jesus and know the importance of Baptism. But what of those who have never heard of Christ? For people in this situation, the *Catechism* (1260) makes this crucial distinction: “*God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound to the sacraments.*” While salvation in water and the Spirit is the normal way to salvation (which of course assumes faith and conversion of heart for the adult), the Church believes that God in his infinite mercy may save unbaptized persons.

Traditionally, the Church recognizes other forms of Baptism.

Baptism of Desire. The *Catechism* (1259) states: “For catechumens who die before their Baptism, their explicit desire to receive it, together with repentance for their sins, and charity, assures them the salvation that they were not able to receive through the sacrament.”

Baptism of Blood. The *Catechism* (1258) states: “The Church has always held the firm conviction that those who suffer death for the sake of the faith without having received Baptism are baptized by their death for and with Christ. This Baptism of blood, like the desire for Baptism, brings about the fruits of Baptism without being a sacrament.”

Baptism of Implicit Desire. The *Catechism* (1260) states: “Every man who is ignorant of the Gospel of Christ and of his Church, but seeks the truth and does the will of God in accordance with his understanding of it, can be saved. It may be supposed that such persons would have desired Baptism explicitly if they had known its necessity.”

Unbaptized Infants. The *Catechism* (1261) states: “As regards children who have died without Baptism, the

Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all should be saved, and Jesus’ tenderness toward children which caused him to say: ‘Let the children come to me, do not hinder them’ [Mk 10:14, 1Tim 2:4], allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism.”

Who Can Baptize? The ordinary ministers of Baptism are bishops, priests and deacons. In cases of emergency, when an ordained minister is not available, the *Catechism* (1256) states that “any person, even someone not baptized, can baptize, if he has the required intention. The required intention is to will to do what the Church does when she baptizes, and to apply the Trinitarian baptismal formula. The Church finds the reason for this possibility in the universal saving will of God and the necessity of Baptism for salvation.”

Pause: Any questions or comments on what we have just read? Were you aware of the four types of Baptisms that the article has just described?

Why Does the Church Baptize Infants (C 1250-1252). In the very early days of Christianity, only adults were normally baptized. The practice of infant baptism developed spontaneously in the early church. Adults who had adopted the Christian way of life wanted the same for their children. There is explicit testimony that infant baptism took place in the second century. It is possible that it occurred earlier when “whole households” received baptism (Acts 16:15). In 215 AD, the writer Hippolytus stated: “*When they come to the water, let the water be pure and flowing. And they shall put off their clothes. And they shall baptize the little children first. And if they can answer for themselves, let them answer. But if they cannot, let their parents answer or someone from their family.*”

But shouldn’t the person being baptized have explicit faith in Jesus and have repented of sin? Infant Baptism reminds us that we cannot “earn” or “merit” salvation, even through our faith. The *Catechism* (1250) states: “The sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant Baptism.” At the Baptism of an infant, faith is supplied by the parents, godparents and the community. It is a bit like the healing of the paralytic in the Gospel. It seems that this poor wounded man did not have faith to be healed, yet Jesus healed him because of the obvious faith of his friends. “Seeing *their* faith...Jesus healed him” (Mk 2:1-7). Needless to say, in the case of infant Baptism, the

assumption is that the child will receive post-Baptismal catechesis and be led to come to know and practice the ways of Jesus and his Church. The Church also teaches that the Baptism of an infant may be postponed if there is not a “well-founded hope” that the child will be raised in the Catholic faith (USC p.191).

The Principal Symbols of Baptism (C 1234-1245, USC p. 184). The principal symbols of Baptism tell us much about the meaning of this sacrament.

Water. Water can both destroy and save life. In the sacrament of Baptism, the pouring of the blessed water is the outward visible sign of the interior transformation being brought about in the soul. All sin, original and personal, is washed away and the soul is filled with the grace presence of Christ. The recipient becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit. The pouring of the water on the recipient’s head or his/her immersion in water, accompanied by the Trinitarian formula, is the central rite of this sacrament.

Oil. In the Old Testament, kings and queens were anointed to symbolize the coming of God’s Spirit to enable them to be godly leaders of God’s people. The anointing of the candidate at Baptism with sacred chrism, blessed by the bishop, symbolizes an interior anointing in the soul. The recipient receives the Holy Spirit to empower him/her to live out his/her Baptismal promises to say ‘no’ to the world, the flesh and the devil, and to say ‘yes’ to Jesus and his Gospel.

White Garment and Candle. In the early church, adults, prior to entering the waters of Baptism, shed all their clothes to symbolize that they were leaving behind the old way of life, that they were shedding sinful ways. After they emerged from the baptismal waters, they were draped with a white garment to symbolize that they were clothing themselves with Christ (Gal 3:27).

The reception of a *Baptismal candle*, lit from the Easter candle, signifies that the newly baptized has been *enlightened* by Christ and is now called to live as a child of the light.

Pause: What are your thoughts and feelings about infant Baptism? Have you ever wished you could have been baptized as an adult? Should the Church baptize the infants of non-practicing Catholics?

THE SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION (C 1285-1321, USC Ch. 16)

Confirmation is the second sacrament of initiation. Concerning this sacrament, the *Catechism* (1285) states: “By the sacrament of Confirmation, the baptized are perfectly bound to the Church and are enriched with a special strength of the Holy Spirit. Hence, they are as true witnesses of Christ more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed.” “Confirmation” comes from a word which means to make fast or to secure. This sacrament confirms and strengthens the gift of the Holy Spirit received in Baptism. To use a military analogy, to receive Confirmation is to be empowered and sent on active duty as a servant and witness of Christ.

Biblical Roots of the Sacrament (C 1286-1289). The biblical roots of this sacrament go back to the Old Testament when the prophets foretold that the Spirit of God would rest upon the Messiah, the future Savior of the world. During Jesus’ Baptism, the Spirit did come upon him signifying that he was the awaited Messiah, the Son of God. From the moment of his conception, the Spirit was intimately linked with Jesus, empowering him to speak with authority, cast out demons, perform healings and miracles, and embrace God’s will even unto death on the cross.

Several times during his public ministry, Jesus promised to send the Spirit on his followers so that they would be empowered to continue his work. This promise was most dramatically fulfilled on Pentecost Day (Acts 2:1-4). Immediately, the previously fear-filled Apostles then became fearless in their proclamation of the Good News. Like Jesus, they performed healings and cast out demons (Acts 5:12-16). The presence of the Holy Spirit was so tangible that in one situation, the house where the people had gathered, rocked (Acts 4:31).

After baptizing new converts, the Apostles laid hands upon them to impart the gift of the Holy Spirit who completes the grace of Baptism (C 1288). This act of “laying on of hands” is recognized in Catholic tradition as the *essential rite* and *origin* of the sacrament of Confirmation – a ritual which perpetuates the grace of Pentecost in the Church (C 1288).

By the second century, anointing with *perfumed oil* (chrism) coupled with the “laying on of hands” became the essential or central rite of Confirmation. *Perfumed oil* was used to symbolize the fragrance of Christ which every Christian was expected to manifest.

Two Traditions Emerge (C 1290-1292). In the first centuries of Christianity, Baptism and Confirmation were

conferred in one ceremony, usually administered by a bishop. But as the Church spread to rural areas, the bishop could not be present at all the baptisms. The custom developed in which the priest baptized infants but the completion of the sacrament was reserved for the bishop—a ceremony involving a second anointing with holy chrism.

In the Eastern Catholic Church, the practice of retaining the *unity* of the two sacraments has continued—the priest who baptizes infants also confirms them, but only with oil consecrated by the bishop.

Pause: Do you have any questions or comments on what we have just read?

The Liturgy of Confirmation (C 1297-1301, USC p. 204). Confirmation is usually conferred within the Eucharist. The liturgy of Confirmation begins with a renewal of baptismal promises and a profession of faith by the *confirmandi*. This renewal of Baptismal promises within the context of the Eucharist connects all three sacraments of initiation. The bishop or his delegate then extends his hands over the *confirmandi* and prays for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Then the *essential* or central rite of the sacrament follows. The bishop lays his hands on the *confirmandi* and anoints his/her forehead with sacred chrism, invoking the words: “*Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit.*” In the Eastern church, several other parts of the body are anointed: eyes, ears, nose, breast, back, hands and feet.

Effects of Confirmation (C 1303). The reception of the sacrament of Confirmation roots us more deeply in love, unites us more closely to Christ and the Church, and increases in us the gifts of the Spirit. Because of Confirmation, we receive a special strength to live our faith more fully, to witness to what we believe, and to never be ashamed of the cross of Christ.

Sacramental Seal or Character (C 1304). As with Baptism, Confirmation can only be received once, “for it too imprints on the soul an *indelible spiritual mark*, the ‘character,’ which is the sign that Jesus Christ has marked the Christian with the seal of his Spirit by clothing him with power from on high so that he may be his witness” (C 1304). We may reject our covenant with Christ but he never stops loving us.

Who May Receive Confirmation (C 1306). Every baptized person can and should receive the sacrament of Confirmation. One is not a full member of the Church until one has been confirmed.

Preparation for Reception of the Sacrament (C 1309-1310). Since most candidates for Confirmation have been baptized as infants, it is very important that they are adequately prepared for the reception of the sacrament. It is a wonderful opportunity for parents, sponsors and the parish to help young persons to more fully “own” their Catholic faith and grow in it. The *Catechism* outlines quite concretely what preparation for the reception of the sacrament should involve:

- It should lead the candidate toward a more intimate union with Christ.
- It should also pave the way toward a more lively familiarity with the Holy Spirit, his actions, his gifts and his biddings, so that he/she may be more capable of assuming the apostolic responsibilities of the Christian life.
- Catechesis for Confirmation should seek to awaken a sense of belonging to the Church on a global and local level.
- To receive Confirmation, one must be in a state of grace.
- One should receive the sacrament of Penance in order to be cleansed for the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- More intense prayer should prepare one to receive the strength and graces of the Holy Spirit with docility and readiness to act.

Pause: What do you remember about your Confirmation? Could you have been better prepared for this sacrament? If so, in what way?

Suggested Action

Be aware that Christ is depending on you to attract others to him and his Church. Be conscious of this call. Pray that you may recognize opportunities God gives you to win souls to him.

Meditation

The famous king and saint, Louis IX of France, knew that his life began when he was baptized. The saintly king used to sign his documents “Louis of Poissy,” not Louis IX, King.” His reason was that Poissy was the place of his Baptism. He held it in higher regard than Rheims Cathedral, the site of his coronation. “It is...greater...to be a child of God than to be the ruler of a kingdom: this last I shall lose at death, but the other will be my passport to an everlasting destiny.” (Quoted in *This is Our Faith*)

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