

## *Is Baptism by Immersion only?*

Most Catholics were baptized by the pouring of water (infusion), yet we also believe that immersion (dunking) and sprinkling are valid modes to baptize. Fundamentalist Christians regard only immersion as true baptism, concluding that most Catholics are not validly baptized. *Which mode of baptism is the correct one?* Evidence from early Christian writing, art and ancient baptisteries show that both immersion and pouring (infusion) were common, accepted baptismal practices of the early Christians.

**Early Christian Art of Baptism only depict the pouring of water.** The earliest Christian paintings of baptisms are found in the Roman catacombs (underground burial chambers) dating back to the 200s A.D. All catacomb paintings of baptism depict the pouring of water over a person while standing in water. Similarly all early mosaic tile art found in ancient Churches depict baptism by the pouring of water over a person's head.



NOTE: The above frescos are within the catacombs of Callixtus, Peter and Marcellinus and readily found online.

**Early Christian Baptisteries are mostly too small for immersion.** The 2<sup>nd</sup> century baptistery found in the Christian Church located in Jesus' hometown of Nazareth is too small and narrow to immerse a person in. Although some ancient baptisteries were large, most were too small for immersion baptism. They were designed for a person to step down into the baptistery and have water poured over their head.



NOTE: The above baptisteries are described above. Images of small and large ancient baptisteries can be found online.

**Early Christian writers and documents state that pouring (infusion) is a valid form of baptism.**

The earliest instructions of Christian baptismal practice are contained in a Syrian liturgical manual called the Didache, written between 70-90 A.D. It is the oldest Christian document outside the New Testament and it gives the following instructions for baptizing:

... concerning baptism, baptize in this manner: Having said all these things beforehand, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living water [that is, in running water, as in a river]. If there is no living water, baptize in other water; and, if you are not able to use cold water, use warm. If you have neither, **pour water three times upon the head** in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (*Didache*, 7<sup>th</sup> chapter. Emphasis added.)

First century Christians were instructed to pour water as an accepted mode of baptizing.

Other early Christian writers attest to the baptismal practice of pouring water. Tertullian (203 A.D.) and Hippolytus of Rome (215 A.D.) describe baptism by the pouring or sprinkling of water. In 251 A.D., Pope Cornelius I wrote, "he received baptism in the bed where he lay, by pouring". In 255 A.D., Cyprian advised not to be "disturbed because the sick are poured upon or sprinkled when they receive the Lord's grace".

**Historical evidence shows that the early Church baptized by pouring water, sprinkling and immersion.**

**The Bible does not teach immersion only baptism.** The New Testament *does not* contain explicit instructions on how to physically administer the water of baptism. Fundamentalists argue that the Greek word *baptizo* in the New Testament can only mean “to immerse.” However, *baptizo* has numerous meanings. *Baptizo* does mean to immerse as evidenced in the Greek version of the Old Testament. At Elisha’s direction, Naaman “went down and dipped [*baptizo*] himself seven times in the Jordan” (2 Kgs. 5:14, *Septuagint*).

*Baptizo* also can mean to wash as evidenced in Luke 11:38 when Jesus ate at a Pharisee’s house, “[t]he Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash [*baptizo*] before dinner.” Further described in Mark 7:3-4, the Pharisees “do not eat unless they wash [*nipto*] their hands, observing the tradition of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they wash [*baptizo*] themselves.” Additionally, Mark 4 describes the washing (*baptizo*) of cups, pots, vessels and tables/benches. Tables or benches were ritually washed (not immersed) in Jewish ritual purifications if used by Gentiles.

*Baptizo* also can mean sprinkling as evidenced three times in the Letter to the Hebrews. “In the same way, he sprinkled [*baptizo*] also the tabernacle and all the vessels of worship with blood” (Heb 9:21). Also see Hebrews 9:13 and 9:19 where the Greek word *baptizo* is translated as sprinkling and sprinkled.

**In the Bible the Greek word *baptizo* describes washing, sprinkling and immersion.**

**Baptizo is also used metaphorically with various meanings in the New Testament.** One figurative baptism (*baptizo*) can be an immersion. Jesus describing his future suffering, “I have a baptism [*baptisma*] to be baptized [*baptizo*] with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished!” (Luke 12:50) This may suggest that Christ would be “immersed” in suffering.

A second figurative baptism (*baptizo*) can be a pouring upon. Jesus instructing his disciples, “John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized (*baptizo*) with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:4–5). This is a pouring up per Acts (2:17-18, 33) which teaches that the Holy Spirit was poured out on them at Pentecost. Additionally, Peter describes the Spirit *falling* upon them, explicitly identifying these events with the promise of being “baptized (*baptizo*) with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 11:15–17). In the New Testament, the figurative use of the Greek word *baptizo* describes immersion and pouring.

**The Early Church gave existing words new meanings to describe new Christian beliefs and practices.** As seen above, the contention that *baptizo* only can mean immersion is an oversimplification. This is further evidenced by the early Christian usage of the word which differed greatly from the term’s non-religious everyday usage. This same principle is seen with other Christian terms that were originally ordinary Greek words with no special religious significance. For example, before the Christian usage, a “trinity” (triad in Greek) was simply any group of three things.

**The Early Church theology of baptism** was to be transformed. Every use of the Greek word *baptizo* in the New Testament describes an outcome or effect of transformation regardless of the mode of sprinkling, pouring or immersion. Specifically in Christian baptism the outcome or effect is to be born again by water and the Spirit regardless of the mode of baptism. This is evidenced by early Christian baptismal practices and the multiple meanings of the Greek word *baptizo* (sprinkling, pouring, and immersion) in the New Testament.

**Summary** Jesus commanded the apostles to make disciples of all nations and to baptize them (Matthew 28:20). He was commanding the transformation of every person - to be born again by water and the Spirit. To this end, the early Church baptized by immersion, pouring or sprinkling as evidenced in their art, baptisteries and writings. The biblical use of the Greek word *baptizo* means immersion, pouring or sprinkling. Baptism continues to be validly celebrated in these same ways in the Catholic and other Christian Churches today.