

Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation

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Called to the Waters of Baptism

“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” (Matthew 28: 19). This is Jesus’ command recounted at the end of the Gospel according to Matthew. For two millennia the Catholic Church has been baptizing people of all ages—newborns, older folks, and everyone in between. Participation in the body of Christ and the mission of the Church knows no age restrictions.

All are called to the waters of Baptism. The ritual actions and prayers that we use to initiate vary somewhat according to age and circumstance, but the central symbolic action always involves water.

Water of Life, Water of Death

Water is a necessity of life. Without hydration we face certain death. Water is also a source of pleasure. It refreshes and renews us and gives us wonderful recreational opportunities. Just think of the fun times you may have had swimming or running through the sprinkler on a hot summer day, or sledding or skating on wintry days. Water is also important because it cleanses. Animal and plant life also depend on water, so we depend on it for our food. When we use water in the Sacrament of Baptism, all these images that associate water with life tell us something about what it means to be Christian.

Water, however, evokes images of danger and death too. When water is out of our control it can be harmful and destructive. Think of the tsunami which devastated so many coastal areas in Asia at Christmastime in 2004, or even an unattended wading pool, hazardous for inquisitive toddlers. Severe weather systems can produce torrential rains and dangerous snow storms. The very same rivers, lakes, and oceans that can be such a source of fun and refreshment can also prove dangerous.

What does it mean to be immersed in something that evokes images of both life and death? What is this ambiguous symbol telling us about being Christian? The prayer the Church uses to bless the water for Baptism sheds light on these questions. It alludes to three significant Old Testament stories in which water plays a central role—creation, the great flood, and the exodus.

The Genesis account of Creation tells of God bringing order to a chaotic, watery, and dark abyss. Once the waters are ordered, dry land appears and the earth is able to sustain life (See

Genesis 1:1-19). The flood story tells of Noah and his family making a safe passage through raging flood waters, which devastated the earth and destroyed every living thing except for the people and animals in Noah's ark (See Genesis 7:1 – 8:19). The account of the Exodus tells of the Israelites escaping from the Egyptians through the parted waters of the Red Sea (See Exodus 14).

These three stories each depict a similar pattern. The waters associated with death give way to waters that sustain life. The Exodus and flood stories describe people being led by God on a journey through waters of death and destruction to new life and a new relationship with God.

The Blessing of the Water in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) makes clear that the waters of Baptism have something in common with the waters in the Old Testament stories. In Baptism the action of being immersed in water symbolizes a passage through death to a new life in Christ. The design of baptismal fonts built by Christians during the early centuries of the Church accentuates this meaning. The fonts resembled tombs. Those being initiated took three steps down into a dark pool and, then after being immersed three times, climbed up three steps on the other side. The descent into the dark waters was a dying with Christ; the ascent, a rising and the beginning of a new life.

Many parishes today do not have Baptismal pools that allow for immersion, so the central symbolic action involves infusion or the pouring of water over the forehead. This action is also meant to evoke the idea of passing from death to new life.

In the Blessing of the Water, the community prays to God on behalf of those being baptized: "may all who are buried with Christ in the death of Baptism rise also with him to newness of life" (RCIA, 222). We also pray that they "may be cleansed from sin and rise to a new birth." Our prayer expresses faith that through the power of the Holy Spirit all those being initiated will be joined to Christ's Paschal Mystery—that they too will pass through the death of sin and alienation to new life of love lived in communion with God and the community. By being associated with death and life, water is well-suited to evoke these deep meanings underlying the Christian practices of Baptism.

The Baptism of Young Children

The majority of Catholics are baptized as very young children, long before they are capable of expressing faith. Since they are unable to speak for themselves or grasp the meaning of the ritual, the celebration of Baptism focuses more attention on the parents, godparents, and the local community, and the responsibility of all of these people to foster the child's faith in the years to come and help prepare them for First Eucharist and Confirmation when they are older.

The role the parents play is the most important because of their unique relationship with their child. They have the most potential and therefore the greatest responsibility to pass on the faith of the Church to the child. The Sacrament of Baptism begins with the reception of the

child, which puts the spotlight on the parents. The presider questions the parents: “What name do you give your child?” (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, 37). In response, they state the name. This seemingly simple exchange carries deep meaning. If you have ever named something, think about the nature of your relationship with that which you named. In all likelihood your reflection points to this insight: we are responsible for what we name.

The dialogue between the presider and the parents includes a subsequent question that spells out their duty: “You have asked to have your children baptized. In doing so you are accepting the responsibility of training them in the practice of the faith. It will be your duty to bring them up to keep God’s commandments as Christ taught us, by loving God and our neighbor. Do you clearly understand what you are undertaking?” (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, 39). This is so important that if the parents are not in a position to respond with an authentic “I do” or “we do,” pastoral leaders may encourage the parents to delay the Baptism.

The presider also queries the godparents about their role: “Are you ready to help these parents in their duty as Christian mothers and fathers?” (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, 40). After they respond affirmatively, the presider tells the child, “I claim you for Christ” (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, 41). Then he traces the sign of the cross on the child’s forehead and invites the parents and godparents to do the same. This signing ritual expresses the child’s new identity as a Christian as well as the parents and godparents acceptance of their roles.

The water ritual, carried out either through immersion or pouring, takes place after the liturgy of the word. This is the heart of the sacrament. The presider says “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (*Rite of Baptism*, 60). The child is incorporated in the Body of Christ and takes on a new identity. Several additional ritual elements follow the immersion in or pouring of water including an optional an optional blessing of the ears and mouth. These are called explanatory rites because they help to explain the meaning of the central symbolic action.

In addition to water, there are several other important symbols used to celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism.

Chrism. Signifying the gift of the Holy Spirit, this perfumed oil, consecrated by the bishop, is rubbed onto the head of the person being baptized. Chrism is also used in the sacraments of Confirmation, Holy Orders, and Anointing of the Sick.

White garment. The person baptized is clothed in a white garment as a sign of Christian dignity, and all pray that he or she will bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven. White also symbolized purity and hope.

Lighted candle. Representing the light of Christ, the newly baptized—or the parents and godparents of the young child—are entrusted to keep this light burning brightly. They are also challenged to keep the flame of faith alive in all our hearts by their example of love and charity.

Full initiation into the Catholic Church includes the celebration of Eucharist and Confirmation. These are delayed until the child is old enough to express his or her own faith in God and commitment to the Church. The whole community, including the parents and godparents, share responsibility for nurturing the child's faith during his or her years of growing and maturing. In time the newly initiated come to understand that by virtue of their Baptism, they have a responsibility to participate in the Church's mission.

Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults

When adults who are not Christian seek membership in the Catholic Church, they are invited into a process called the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) or the catechumenate. *RCIA* refers to the whole process of preparation and initiation, as well as to the book that guides the process and provides the texts for all the rituals that are part of the process.

Unbaptized children who have reached the age of reason, commonly understood to be the age of seven, usually participate in a similar process that has been adapted to their age level. Since they are old enough to express faith and to speak for themselves, the Rite of Baptism with its focus on the parents' faith is not well-suited to the initiation of these older children.

The catechumenate is a gradual process of initiation that is punctuated by a series of liturgical celebrations. It is a flexible process that responds to the individual's experience of Christian conversion and the pace of his or her faith development.

The first celebration is the rite of acceptance into the order of the catechumenate. This ritual is similar to the rite of reception at the beginning of a young child's Baptism, except that the focus is on the one being initiated rather than the parents. This rite marks the beginning of a period of preparation called the catechumenate.

At the beginning of Lent the catechumens who are ready for full initiation celebrate the rite of election. This marks the beginning of a period of more intense preparation called the period of purification and enlightenment. The high point of the entire process is the celebration of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil.

Easter is not the end, however. It is followed by a period called mystagogy, during which the newly initiated reflect on the meaning of their initiation. Mystagogy is often thought of as period of relatively short duration such as a few weeks or months.

The term has a broader meaning as well. Since we are called to live out the meaning of Baptism every day of our lives, the whole of Christian life is enhanced if it has a mystagogical dimension. This entails a routine of periodically thinking about the meanings embodied in our initiation rituals so that we may live more authentic Christian lives. This reflection can take many forms.

Promises, Promises

One way to deepen the significance of Baptism for our lives is to renew our Baptismal promises. Several times during the year when we are gathered for liturgy, the Church invites us to do this. We publicly re-state our commitment to the Church's beliefs and to Christian living by renouncing sin and making a profession of faith.

Together with the entire assembly we respond "I do" to the following series of questions:

- Do you reject sin 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?
- 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 Spirit,
 the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints,
 the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body,
 and life everlasting? (RCIA 224-225; RBC 57-58; RC 23)

The parents of young Baptismal candidates make these promises initially for their children when they are baptized. As the children learn to talk they begin to say the "I do" along with everyone else. Eventually they grow into an understanding of the meaning of what they are saying. Those baptized as older children or in adulthood make these promises for themselves.

The community as a whole renews these promises every year at the Easter Vigil and at other times. This practice serves to unite everyone who is already initiated with the newly initiated who are making these promises for the first time. Over time, the practice of repetitive promise-making strengthens everyone's Christian identity and their commitment to the Church's mission.

The promises we make during the course of our lives are usually concerned with things that are challenging for us. We don't often think to make promises about things that come easily to us. Promise-making is a positive force in our lives when it focuses our attention on our goals and gives us the extra strength and inspiration that propels us toward achieving them.

It is customary for us to repeat some of our most important promises periodically, especially those that involve commitments to others. Married couples repeat their vows. Members of organizations such as scouts repeat their oaths together. Citizens of the U.S. pledge allegiance to their flag and country. And we repeat our baptismal promises regularly. The repetition of a

promise serves to remind us of the relationships that define our identity and to root us more deeply in our vision of how we want to live our lives.

Confirmed in the Spirit

The full process of initiation into the Catholic Church includes the Sacrament of Confirmation—it also includes the Sacrament of Eucharist. Those who are baptized as infants and receive first Eucharist around the age of reason are usually invited to celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation sometime in later childhood or adolescence. The age varies from diocese to diocese in the United States and in Canada since current practice calls for each bishop to establish a minimum age for his diocese.

In a small number of dioceses, parishes invite children to celebrate the Sacraments of Initiation in the same order as the early Christians—Baptism, Confirmation, and then eucharist. This typically involves Baptism in infancy and then the celebration of Confirmation and Eucharist at the same liturgy around the age of seven or eight.

Catechumens—unbaptized adults and older children—celebrate Confirmation along with Baptism and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil. Many parishes and campus ministry programs also celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation with baptized adults who have been participating in Eucharist for years but were never confirmed.

That’s a lot of variety in the Church’s practice of Confirmation. Perhaps you see many of these different ways of celebrating in your own community.

Regardless of circumstance, however, the central symbolic action is an anointing with blessed and perfumed olive oil, which is called chrism. The bishop or priest who presides extends his hands over the candidates for Confirmation and leads a special prayer that asks God to send the Spirit upon them. Then, in the central action, he anoints each candidate on the forehead by making the Sign of the Cross with chrism while saying his or her name and then “be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit” (*Rite of Confirmation 27*).

When the newly confirmed respond “Amen” they affirm their Christian identity, their place in the Body of Christ, and their commitment to using their God-given gifts to serve others. For some this is a first-time commitment to the work of continuing the ministry of Jesus in the world. For others it is a re-affirmation of a commitment to the Church’s mission that they embraced earlier in life.

When the celebration of Confirmation is separated from Baptism, as is often the case, it is important to maintain a clear sense of the Holy Spirit’s role in human life. The meaning of the Sacrament of Confirmation becomes distorted if people get the impression that the Holy Spirit is being given to the candidates for the very first time in Confirmation. The prayers that ask for

the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the presider's words that accompany the anointing, can unintentionally fuel this confusion.

Here are two ideas that help maintain clarity. First, any suggestion that the Holy Spirit has not been active and present during the growing up years of an adolescent or adult confirmand is contrary to Catholic belief. Second, Catholics pray for the Spirit's presence and action over and over again. In every sacramental celebration, at the beginning of every Mass, we do this, not just Confirmation.

For example, in the water blessing prayer at Baptism, we ask God to send the Spirit upon the waters in the font. In the Eucharistic Prayer at Mass we pray that the Holy Spirit come upon the bread and wine and transform them into the Body and Blood of Christ and upon all of us so that we may be united as members of the Body of Christ.

Our prayers of invocation are not meant to suggest that we think the Holy Spirit is absent. Quite the contrary. They express our belief in the presence of the Holy Spirit and the transforming power the Spirit can wield in our lives. The giving of the Spirit in Confirmation "conforms believers more fully to Christ and strengthens them so that they may bear witness to Christ for the building up of his Body in faith and love," (*Rite of Confirmation*, 2).

The Holy Spirit has already had an effect on the lives of candidates, but now, they are more closely connected to the Christian community and strengthened in their desire and readiness to witness a Christian way of life through their words and actions. Confirmed Christians take on their heightened role in the Church with the confidence that the Spirit will never leave them alone.

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