

Of the seven sacraments, there is one that is required before any other sacrament can be received. Baptism is the gateway into the Christian life. Through the waters of Baptism our lives take on new meaning and our place in this world takes shape. In the gift of Baptism, so much happens that we cannot see, as we experience God in a very real way. But because of our limited senses we are unable to truly grasp the immensity of the reality of God in that moment.

If you have been to a Baptism, you know that like all church liturgies, there is a format that priests and deacons follow. There are prayers, a Gospel reading, a short homily, pouring of water, anointing with oil, a white garment, a Baptismal candle, and blessings over the parents. To the average person, this process can seem quite mundane, which leads people to ask questions such as: why does the Church baptize? and if God is all loving why is it necessary?

God provides us with natural things in this world so that He can work in supernatural ways. What we see and hear in the symbols used and the words spoken give us an indication of what we cannot see or hear, that are the things of God. How do we know that God is working supernaturally in the sacrament of Baptism? The answers are provided in the words of Scripture.

We read in the Gospel of Matthew, “In those days, John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea [and] saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!’” (Mt 3:1:2). God sent John into the world to prepare it for the coming of the messiah as it was foretold by the prophet Isaiah. In response, people went to be baptized by John in the Jordan River and acknowledge their sins. The Baptism by John did not have the same effect as Baptism since his time, but more on that later. It is enough to know that John’s ministry of calling people to repentance was ordained by God.

At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus approached John to be baptized by him. But “John tried to prevent him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?’ [but] Jesus said to him in reply, ‘Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness’” (Mt 3:14-15). John recognized Jesus as the messiah who had no need of repentance. He was surprised that Jesus came to him to be baptized. So why would Jesus do this?

The people who were baptized by John were “tax collectors and soldiers, Pharisees and Sadducees, and prostitutes” (CCC 535). All were sinners and, in many cases, were outcasts of society. Jesus lowered himself from his divinity to become one of us in all ways except sin, even to the point of making himself as low as the lowliest sinner and showed us that there is no one who is not welcomed for Baptism; and in submitting himself for Baptism, he submits himself to the will of the Father.

“After Jesus was baptized, he came up from the water and behold, the heavens were opened [for him], and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove [and] coming upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, saying, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’” (Mt 3:16:17). The Holy Spirit, the love between God the Father and God the Son, made manifest in the third person of God, descends from the heavens and rests on Jesus. The voice of God the Father is heard, claiming Jesus as His own, and declaring His love for him. Just as in this scripture passage, we know that for each one of us at our Baptism, God claims us as His own child and declares His love for us. Jesus is our model for Baptism so that in doing what he showed us, we also become children of God. But if we are made by God and known by him even before we were in our mother’s womb, why do we need to be baptized to become His children? To understand why, we need to go back to the beginning.

In the beginning, when God created man and woman, Adam and Eve, they lived in holiness with God and everything was good. But when they ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they disobeyed God. Sin entered the world and they lost the original holiness that they had from creation. They were cast out of the garden and from that point on they and their descendants were separated from God. Even so, God continued to love mankind and involved Himself in human existence and made Himself known to their descendants.

In time, God appeared to Abraham and made a covenant with him. God said:

For my part, here is my covenant with you: you are to become the father of a multitude of nations . . . I will maintain my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout the ages as an everlasting covenant, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you . . . For your part, you and your descendants after you must keep my covenant throughout the ages. This is the covenant between me and you and your descendants after you that you must keep: every male among you shall be circumcised (Gen 17:4,9-10).

From that time on, circumcision became the sign of the covenant. In this way all the descendants of Abraham were set apart in the world from those who are not. The descendants would be marked in their flesh that would be a sign of those who belonged to God. Even Jesus was circumcised as the Gospel of St. Luke tells us that, “When eight days were completed for his circumcision, he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel before he was conceived in the womb” (Lk 2:21). Jesus shares in the same covenant, being marked for God and belonging to him. So, when Jesus approached John to be baptized it was not for repentance but for a purpose greater than anyone could imagine.

John baptized the people who came to him with a Baptism of repentance, calling them to a change of heart to turn back to God in obedience to Him. But Jesus had not turned away from God. In fact, Jesus was fully human, and fully divine, so he was unable to sin because God cannot sin as this would go against his nature. For Jesus, his “Baptism anticipates his death and resurrection” (CCC 537) that we experience in our own Baptism. We go into the waters of Baptism with humility and repentance and die to our sinful self as Jesus died upon the cross. We come out of the water rising with him to new life in the spirit. When Jesus went into the water, it was “sanctified by the descent of Jesus and the Spirit” (CCC 536). The water did not change Jesus inasmuch as Jesus changed the water, so that at our Baptism, the sanctified water washes over us and removes all our sins, whether original sin, venial or mortal. After the sacred waters wash over us, we become adopted children of God. We also become members of the body of Christ, and we receive and become temples of the Holy Spirit who descends from heaven and dwells within us just as He descended from heaven and came to rest upon Jesus at his Baptism.

Jesus established a new covenant between God and his people. But instead of circumcision being the mark of the covenant, we are marked through Baptism. The spiritual mark of Baptism that we receive is indelible, meaning that it cannot be changed or removed, not even by sin. Unlike circumcision, it is not a visible mark but to God and the angels it is very visible.

Just as God established his covenant with Abraham to become the father of a multitude of nations, Jesus desired that all nations would come to God through Baptism. After his resurrection, Jesus gathered the eleven and commanded them, “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, teaching them to observe all that I have

commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Mt 28:19-20). That is why the Church baptizes. God has commanded that it be done. What more is necessary? “The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude” (CCC 1257). There is no other command or example given to say otherwise. So, for the last two thousand years, the Church has baptized each new member and welcomed them into the family of God. But of those who are members of the Church, there is more required.

After the pouring of water in Baptism, we are anointed on the top of our head with the Chrism of Salvation, or what we commonly call Sacred Chrism. This anointing signifies the Holy Spirit filling the newly baptized, and “signifies the participation of the one baptized in the prophetic, priestly, and kingly offices of Christ” (CCC 1291). By virtue of our Baptism, by the grace of God and the help of the Holy Spirit, we are called to participate in the ministry of Jesus, to care for the poor, to help those in need and to spread the Good News of the kingdom. We are commissioned to go out into the world to follow the will of God, living in the world, but not being of the world. God and the Church do not leave us unprepared for this mission either. Just as Jesus provided the example of Baptism, we also have an example of Confirmation.

When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim (Acts 2:1-4).

Jesus sent the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles so that they could go out into the world and continue his mission as he commanded them, to baptize all nations, and to teach them to observe all that he commanded them. Before the descent of the Holy Spirit, they were afraid and hid themselves lest they too be arrested and killed. But by the power of the Spirit, they were strengthened with confidence and with the gifts of the Spirit were able to go out into the world to proclaim the Good News.

In the Church today we celebrate and receive the Sacrament of Confirmation in which we also receive the Holy Spirit. This sacrament completes the grace that we received in Baptism. Once again, we are anointed with Sacred Chrism, but this time on our foreheads to seal us with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In Confirmation we are strengthened by the Spirit and become Christ’s witnesses in the world. The Catechism tells us that, “it is evident from its celebration that the effect of the sacrament of Confirmation is the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit as once granted to the apostles on the day of Pentecost” (CCC 1302). We are empowered today just as the apostles were so long ago, to move from fear to confidence in the Spirit who grants special gifts to us when necessary. We are called to use these gifts to build up the Church in words and in actions. Like Baptism, Confirmation “imprints a spiritual mark or indelible character on the Christian’s soul” (CCC 1317). We cannot separate ourselves from it. Once marked, we are conformed for life to the Church and her mission and to Christ himself.

Through the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation we experience God through simple things of our world such as water and oil in ways that we can understand. God uses them in very real and powerful ways to draw us back to him in ways that we cannot comprehend. And yet we do these things because of Jesus’ example and his command. These sacraments prepare us for our journey as Christian men and women in a world that wants nothing to do with God. It is our responsibility to continue the mission of

the Church and to always look to God for all that we need to do His will. With God as our Father, Jesus as our brother and the Holy Spirit as our guide and protector, there is nothing that this world can offer us in comparison.

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