

10. Baptism and Confirmation

Usually babies are baptized on Sunday, the day on which the Church celebrates our redemption through the death and resurrection of Christ. It takes place in the church of the parish community to which the family belongs.

It is a community celebration in the presence of relatives, friends and neighbours and other representatives of the local Christian community.

The baby's parents, accompanied by godparents, bring the child to the Church for baptism.

The priest or deacon, who celebrates the baptism explains briefly the meaning of this sacrament of initiation into the Christian community.

The prayers and questions in the ceremony are directed more to the parents and godparents than to the child. The child is sanctified by the Sacrament and receives the new life of sanctifying grace for the first time, but the responsibility to teach the child later to understand and live that life, rests primarily on the parents, assisted by the godparents.

There are two main parts in the ceremony:

(a) The Liturgy of the word.

This consists of a selection of readings from the Bible, expressing the meaning of baptism, and some carefully chosen prayers for the child and its parents.

The structure of this first part of the ceremony is much the same as the first part of the Mass. If the baptism takes place during Mass, this first part is replaced by the first part of the Mass itself.

(b) The Celebration of the Sacrament.

The priest blesses the water to be used for the baptism. He asks the parents and godparents if they reject Satan, and sin, and evil. He asks them if they really believe in God, and in his Son Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit and in the Catholic Church. They profess their belief both on their own behalf and on behalf of the child, to whom they will carefully teach this faith.

The baptism may be performed either by immersing the child in the water or pouring water upon it. While doing so the priest says:

"I baptize you, in the name of the Father, and of

the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

To complete the ceremony the priest makes the sign of the cross on the baby's head with chrism (i.e. oil that has been blessed).

A white garment (sign of Christian dignity) is put on the child.

A candle is lighted and held by the father or godfather as a symbol that the child now belongs to Christ, the light of the world.

The priest touches the ears and lips of the baby, praying that it may grow up to listen to and proclaim the teachings of Christ.

He blesses the mother and father and godparents asking God to help them bring up the baby in the knowledge and love of Christ.

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Baptism

To baptize means, literally, to plunge in water. The Israelites, before the coming of Christ, used a form of baptism. John the Baptist, the prophet who prepared the people for the coming of the Saviour, invited them to give a sign of their repentance by going into the river Jordan and being baptized by him. God forgave them because of their sincere repentance.

Christ told his Apostles to baptize. But his baptism is more than a sign of sorrow and the desire to be cleansed from sin. Through it he sends the Holy Spirit to dwell in the one baptized.

Supernatural Life

Jesus makes a distinction between life ‘of the flesh’ and life “of the Spirit”. The first is natural life, the second supernatural. Man's natural life, both of mind and body, has many aspects. He eats, drinks, sleeps, grows old, remembers, thinks, decides. But Christ promised to give a higher life through his Spirit. This is a sharing in the life of God. It is above nature and therefore called supernatural.

God gave this life to the first human beings, Adam and Eve, but it was forfeited when they disobeyed him. This disobedience was the *Original Sin*. As a result of it, all the members of the human race are created without supernatural life and have an inherited inclination towards evil. Christ came to make amends for all the sins of men and give them divine life. He said: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10, 10). He showed himself to be the life-giver

when he cured the sick and raised the dead, but these deeds were signs of the supernatural life which he was to give. Men were to be "born anew of water and the Spirit".

Born again

Some might ask: "How on earth can a person be born again?" Nicodemus once asked the same question. Jesus had said:

"Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3, 3-6).

The Body

The Christian at baptism begins to live in the Body of Christ. In lesson seven it was explained how the Church is the Body of Christ. In chapter twelve of his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul says:

"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body---Jews or Greeks, slaves or free---and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12, 12-13).

Christ sent his Apostles out to preach in his name and to make men members of his Church by baptizing them. He said:

"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" (Matt. 28, 19-20).

The Acts of the Apostles tells how they obeyed him. They insisted that all who wished to become followers of Christ must be baptized in his name. Even those who had been baptized with the baptism of John the Baptist had to be baptized again in the name of Jesus.

The Action of the Spirit

As a result of the first sin, and the generations of sins which have followed, men are inclined towards evil. The Spirit give them strength to go against this inclination, but does not remove it entirely. Man's nature after baptism is like twisted metal which has been straightened. It is more easily bent a second time, and there remains a slight curve in its straightness. Man after baptism remains inclined towards evil, but the Spirit gives him strength to resist. He does so by three kinds of activity called the virtues of faith, hope and charity.

Faith. In everyday human relations faith means accepting something on the word of another. Men believe what they are told by a man they know to be well-informed and truthful. But religious faith is more than that. It is a power given by the Holy Spirit which enables the Christian to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and readily to believe what he taught and continues to teach through his Church. The Christian tries to understand this teaching in so far as he can. But he must be ready to accept it even when he cannot understand it, because he knows it is taught by God. Once a man is satisfied that Christ is God, and that he founded the Church and guaranteed that it would always preserve the truth he taught, it is reasonable for him to accept the Church's teaching, because it comes from God who can neither deceive nor be deceived.

Faith is absolutely necessary to live the Christian life. It is a gift of the Spirit without which a man cannot do anything to gain eternal life. He can prepare himself for this gift. He should use the powers of his mind to examine the Gospels and the claims of the Church. But he cannot have true religious belief unless he receives the gift of faith. All should pray earnestly for this gift. The main theme of St. Paul's letter to the Romans is that good works by themselves are not enough. "We are justified by faith," he says Nor is faith by itself sufficient. It must be enlivened by hope and charity, which are also gifts of the Spirit.

Hope. This is a power which enables a Christian, in spite of difficulties, dangers and disappointments, to be confident that God will give all the help necessary to serve him and the neighbour well, and will finally bring him to eternal happiness in heaven if he remains true to Christ's teaching.

Charity. The Spirit gives the power to love God and love one's neighbour for God's sake. Love, or charity, is the greatest of all the virtues. Without it the others are of no avail. It is the chief activity of the Spirit. St. Paul says:

"God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Rom. 5, 5).

Love is proved by deeds, that is, by service of the one loved. Man proves his love of god by worship and obedience and good deeds. The thirteenth chapter of St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is a hymn in praise of charity. It ends with the words:

"So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13, 13).

Infant Baptism

God gives natural life without consulting the child, knowing that it will want it. The child cannot exercise the natural powers of memory, understanding and will, but they are there, waiting to be developed. When the child grows up it deliberately accepts and preserves the gift of life and develops its natural powers. The same applies to the supernatural life. When the child comes to the use of reason and responsibility it is required to accept the life of Christ and develop it.

Although there is no explicit mention of the baptizing of infants in the New Testament, it nowhere says that they were not baptized, but rather implicitly demands that they should be. The sixteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles tells of the baptism of two complete households by St. Paul. I Cor. 1, 16, tells of another, the household of Stephanas. There is no indication that baptism in these cases was restricted only to adults. Baptism of infants (i.e. those who have not yet come to the use of reason) is really necessary because they have contracted the guilt of original sin (Rom. 5, 12-19) which baptism alone can remit (John 3, 5).

No man, young or old, can enter god's kingdom without being born anew through baptism. Therefore the Church instructs that infants should be baptized as soon as possible, lest they die without the gift of the Spirit. Devout Catholics have their children baptized within, at most, a month after birth. The child's natural and supernatural life develop together. The Spirit begins to act more and more strongly, developing the supernatural powers.

There are some who come late to the Faith and are baptized as adults, unless it is certain that they are already validly baptized. If there is some doubt about a previous baptism or its validity, the priest will baptize conditionally, the condition being "If you are not already baptized, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". Before the ceremony they are called upon to make a profession of faith in the teachings of the Catholic Church. They must also, of course, have true repentance for their sins (Acts 2, 38).

Baptism by Immersion and Pouring

Baptism is validly administered either by immersion or by pouring. Early Christians saw in baptism by immersion a fuller sign of what this sacrament did for them. Christians went down into the water at baptism and they saw in this a sign of Christ's death. His earthly body, that is, his body 'of the flesh,' went down into the tomb after his death. He rose with a glorified body, leaving behind the weakness of fallen nature. The Christian goes down into the water in his sinful state but leaves his sinfulness behind and rises with new and glorious life. He begins to live in Christ and, if he is united to him at death, will eventually rise with him in glory to live happy for ever.

There is no doubt that baptism by pouring was also used in the early Church and regarded as equally valid, e.g., a book entitled the *Didache* (or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles) written about 90-100 A.D. mentions both as being correct methods of baptizing. Baptism by immersion was not always possible. In places where deep water was not available, such as sick rooms, prisons, private homes and desert places, water was poured over the head. The one baptized went under the water, in the sense that it was poured over him.

The eminent archaeologist and historian, Monsignor Duchesne, is of the opinion that there were many more baptisms by pouring than by immersion in the early days of Christianity. He says: "We constantly see representations of the celebrations of baptism. But do we ever see total immersion, the neophyte plunged into the water so as to disappear completely? Such a thing is never seen". Catholics nowadays may be baptized either by immersion or by pouring, but most baptisms are by pouring.

Baptism of Desire

There are some people who love God with deep sincerity, but are not aware of the need to be baptized. They get no opportunity to learn the Christian teachings. We say that these people receive *baptism of desire*. If they were aware of the necessity of baptism, they would receive it immediately. Because of their perfect love for God, Jesus gives the new life of grace directly to them. It was of these that he spoke when he said, "He who loves me, shall be loved by my Father, and I will love him and will manifest myself to him" (John 14, 21).

Some unbaptised people have given their lives rather than offend God. This is martyrdom. They too receive baptism of desire. Sometimes it is called *baptism of blood*, because they show their love of God in the most perfect way, i.e. by accepting martyrdom. Jesus said, "He that shall lose his life for me, shall find it". (Mt. 10, 39).

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CONFIRMATION

The visitation of the bishop is an important event in the life of the parish. Usually he comes to administer the Sacrament of Confirmation. When the number of people to be confirmed is large the bishop invites some priests to administer the Sacrament with him. Very often the ceremony takes place during Mass, though this is not essential.

Those to be confirmed renew their baptismal promises of total commitment to Christ. The bishop and priests lay hands upon all the candidates by extending their hands over them. The bishop prays for the Holy Spirit to come upon them. He then makes the sign of the cross on the forehead with chrism. To each he says:

“Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit”.

The newly confirmed replies “Amen”.

The bishop then touches their cheek saying “Peace be with you”. The newly confirmed reply “And also with you”.

As a successor of the Apostles, the bishop in confirming has done what they did. They themselves were confirmed when the Holy Spirit came down upon them at Pentecost. They baptized those who learnt to believe in Jesus Christ, and afterwards gave them confirmation. It is described thus in the Acts of the Apostles:

“Now when the Apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the Word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and *prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit: for it had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 8, 14-17).

Confirmed Christians

To confirm means to strengthen. The sacred oil used in this sacrament is a sign of the new strength which the Holy Spirit gives. He anoints the soul as the oil anoints the forehead.

Confirmation is the completion of baptism. At this baptism a man is made a Christian. At confirmation he is made a *confirmed* Christian, that is, one with the strength necessary to face with vigour the duties and dangers of adult life, take a responsible part in the work of the Church and share more fully in the priesthood of Christ. Confirmation is normally received as the age of puberty approaches, when the duties and difficulties of adult life are about to begin.

Prophets

Confirmation is the Pentecost of each Christian. When the Holy Spirit came down upon the Apostles, they were filled with energy and preached the word of God fearlessly as prophets. Each Christian is made a prophet at his confirmation. The words of Joel, quoted by St. Peter at Pentecost, are fulfilled:

"I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh, and you sons and your daughters shall prophesy" (Acts 2, 17).

To prophesy does not always mean to see into the future. The prophets of the Old testament did foretell the coming of the Saviour, but their main task was to teach the people the truth and urge them to serve God. St. Paul gives us a good understanding of prophecy when he says: "He who prophesies speaks to men for their *upbuilding* and *encouragement* and *consolation*" (1 Cor. 14, 3). Confirmation gives Christians power from the Holy Spirit to console and encourage and upbuild each other in faith. The more completely we yield ourselves in faith to Christ the more this power of the Holy Spirit will manifest itself in us, and make us instruments for good in the lives of others.

It is not necessary that every confirmed Christian should do great signs and wonders as the Apostles did at Pentecost; e.g. performing miracles or praising God in strange tongues, etc. The Holy Spirit gives these gifts to us as he wills. But on Pentecost Sunday each year we pray during Mass that God will "inspire the hearts of the faithful to perform these selfsame works which were wrought when the gospel was first preached". This assures us that it is right to desire and hope for a great outpouring of these gifts from the Holy Spirit at our Confirmation and throughout our lives.

The recent Vatican Council says:

"The Holy Spirit who sanctifies the people of God through the ministry and the sacraments, gives to the faithful special gifts as well, 'allotting to everyone according as he will' (1 Cor. 12, 11). Thus may the individual 'according to the gift that each has received, administer it to one another', and become 'good stewards of the manifold grace of God' (1 Pet. 4, 10). And build up the whole body in charity (Eph. 4, 16). From the reception of these charisms or gifts, including those which are less dramatic, there arises for each believer the right and the duty to use them in the Church and in the world for the good of mankind and for the upbuilding of the Church." (Apostolate of the Laity 3).

Every Christian is given the task of sharing in some way in the service of others and in teaching the word of God. We all have a duty to let the light of Christ shine through us by living good lives and encouraging others by word and example.

Here are some practical ways in which one who has received the sacrament of confirmation can live the life expected of an adult Christian;

(a) Praying for all men:

"First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all men" (1 Tim. 2, 1);

(b) Participating in the apostolate of suffering:

"Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort" (2 Cor. 1, 7);

(c) Giving good example:

"You are the light of the world . . . Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5, 14-16);

(d) Christian Witness:

"So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but he who ever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 10, 32-33);

(e) Service of others:

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me'" (Matt. 25, 37-40);

(f) Taking part in the work of the lay apostolate:

"But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?" (Rom. 10, 14-15).

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When we make an act of faith we commit ourselves fully and freely to God and tell him that we believe all that he has revealed to us; when we make an act of

charity we tell him that we love him and our neighbour for his sake. When we make an act of hope we tell God that we place all our trust in Him. The following is an act of hope:

*"O my God, relying on your infinite power, goodness and mercy, and on your sacred promises to which you are always faithful, I confidently hope through the merits of Jesus Christ
for the pardon of my sins,
for grace to serve you faithfully in this life by doing the good works you have commanded and which with your assistance I now resolve to perform,
and for eternal happiness in the next. Through my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,
Amen."*

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POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. Baptism is our birth into the new life of the Spirit. What does that statement mean to you personally?**
- 2. Which form of baptism would you prefer, immersion or pouring? Give reasons for you preference.**
- 3. Why baptize babies? Why not adults only?**
- 4. What is divine faith?**
- 5. Confirmation is the sacrament of Christian maturity. What does that mean to you?**
- 6. Suggest some activities through which a confirmed Christian could become a more mature witness for Christ.**