

CHAPTER TWENTY

BAPTISM

(Catechism nn. 1210-1284)

Jesus' Baptism

To begin to understand the wonderful gift of Christian Baptism (Catechism 1213-1284) we must focus our attention on Jesus' Baptism, for our baptism is a sharing in his. We begin our reflections, therefore, with Mark's account of this very significant event in Jesus' life:

'Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased"' (Mark 1:9-11).

To read this as a straightforward description of an event that could have been videoed had such recording devices existed in the first century will not help, for your baptism – which may well have been videoed – would not have looked or sounded like this. The Gospel narratives are, of course, based on events, for the Gospel writers are telling us about the real Jesus and what really happened to him. However, they are not composed with a view to providing an accurate description of observable data. They are written by people who have penetrated below the surface and who wish to describe what really happened, and they do so in the symbolic language of their sacred literature, the Bible.

The word 'baptise' (Greek: *baptizein*) means to be 'plunged into', to be 'overwhelmed by'. On the physical level Jesus is plunged into and overwhelmed by water. This is symbolic of a more profound reality: he is plunged into and overwhelmed by God's love.

When Mark tells us that Jesus sees the 'heavens torn apart', he is alluding to the following prayer, uttered by the temple singers, who, on their return to Jerusalem, pleaded with God:

'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down ... We sinned. Because you hid yourself we transgressed. We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away ... Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand ... will you restrain yourself, O Lord? Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?' (Isaiah 64:1-12).

At his Baptism, Jesus had a profound experience of God answering this plea, by breaking the silence, assuring Jesus of his love and commissioning Jesus to take that love to others.

Mark's narrative goes on to say that Jesus saw 'the Spirit descending like a dove on him'. Two Old Testament texts come to mind. The first is from the Creation account which speaks of God's Spirit hovering over the waters of chaos (Genesis 1:2). From that chaos the first Adam emerged. From the chaos of first century Palestine emerges the second Adam, Jesus himself. The second text is from the Song of Songs (2:8-14). As we read it we can see Jesus' prayer being answered: his prayer that the gentle God, who loved him so, would, like a dove, come to announce the new life of Spring for a world lost in the cold darkness of winter:

'The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag ... My beloved speaks and says to me: Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.'

The words 'heard' by Jesus are the first words of the following song. They speak of intimacy. They also outline the agenda of Jesus' mission – the mission that began on the day of his baptism:

'Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching ... I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness' (Isaiah 42:1-7).

Jesus is a servant of God committed to do God's will in everything. But he is more: he is God's Son. Everything he is – his very being – comes from God. Jesus knew that this overwhelming experience of being loved was not meant for him alone. God was asking him to take this 'Good News' (this 'Gospel') to everyone, for only when we are convinced that we are loved by God can we be free to live our lives to the full.

There is one other scene that we must contemplate as we reflect on Jesus' baptism. Luke records a saying of Jesus: 'I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!' (Luke 12:50). It is in relation to this other baptism that Jesus asked his disciples: 'Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' (Mark 10:38). Jesus was referring in both cases to his death on Calvary, when he would be plunged into and overwhelmed by suffering. When John describes Jesus' death, he notes that when the soldier pierced Jesus' side with a spear 'blood and water flowed out' (John 19:37). The water has been understood as a symbol of the waters of Baptism; the blood as a symbol of the Eucharist; and Jesus' final breath as a symbol of the Holy Spirit given in Confirmation. These are the three primary sacraments of initiation into the Christian community.

Our Baptism

All of the above is relevant to what happens when a person is baptised: the heavens are broken open, the Spirit of God's love descends upon us and God assures us, as he assured Jesus, that we are God's son/daughter whom God loves. The communion in love given us at baptism is a communion that, once given, is never taken back. We are free to accept or reject this love, for love does not force itself upon us, but from God's side the love is unconditionally offered, and never withdrawn. This is why the sacrament of Baptism is not repeated (Catechism n. 1272). If we turn our back on God's love, God does not stop loving us. All we have to do is turn back and the embrace of our loving Father is there, awaiting us.

Baptised into Christ

Let us look first at some New Testament texts that speak of our being taken into the intimate love-communion between Jesus and God. The first few texts come from Jesus' words at the last supper:

'I will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also' (John 14:3).

'The Spirit dwells with you and is in you' (John 14:17).

'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you' (John 14:18-20).

'I pray, Father, that even as you are in me and I am in you, they also will be in us' (John 17:21).

We would do well to spend time exploring the riches of the following statements from Saint Paul:

'You who live according to the Spirit set your minds on the things of the Spirit ... If Christ is in you your spirits are alive' (Romans 8:5, 10).

'In the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body ... and we were all made to drink of one Spirit' (1Corinthians 12:13; quoted Catechism n. 1267).

'God has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts' (2Corinthians 1:21-22).

'The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. You are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, your spirit is alive' (Romans 8:2, 9-10).

'All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ' (Galatians 3:27; quoted Catechism n. 1227).

In the Letter to the Hebrews we read:

'You have been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come' (Hebrews 6:4-5; see Catechism n. 1272).

Embraced by the community, the Body of Christ, we are one with him

Saint Paul assures us: 'all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). The Catechism (n. 1213) states: 'In baptism we are ... reborn as "sons" of God; we become "members" of Christ; we are incorporated into the Church, and made sharers in Jesus' mission.'

Saint Paul reminds us: 'we are members of one another' (Ephesians 4:25). The Catechism (n. 1271) states: 'Baptism constitutes the foundation of communion among all Christians, including those who are not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church.' It goes on to quote from the Decree on Ecumenism from the Second Vatican Council (UR 3):

'For those who believe in Christ and have been properly baptised are put in communion with the Catholic Church, however imperfectly ... Incorporated into Christ, they are rightly called Christians and are accepted as brothers and sisters by the children of the Catholic Church.'

Living a holy life

Through the grace of Baptism we are empowered by Jesus' Spirit to live with Jesus a life of holiness. Let us turn again to the Newer Testament:

'We constantly give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you for salvation through the gift of his Spirit who makes you holy' (2Thessalonians 2:13).

'You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God ... your bodies are members of Christ ... your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God. You are not your own' (1Corinthians 6:11, 15, 19; quoted n. 1227).

'My little children, I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you' (Galatians 4:19).

Sharing Jesus' mission

Through baptism we share Jesus' mission (Catechism n. 1213 and 1270). Saint Paul writes: 'You belong to Christ to bear fruit for God in the new life of the Spirit' (Romans 7:4-6). In the sacrament we are anointed with chrism: 'We are the aroma of Christ to God' (2Corinthians 2:15). We are living the life of Jesus the priest: mediators of grace to the world (Catechism n. 784). We are living the life of Jesus the prophet: revealing to the world God's word of salvation (Catechism n. 785). We are living the life of Jesus the king: God's instruments in bringing about the reign of God on the earth (Catechism n. 786). The Catechism (n. 1268) quotes from the First Letter of Peter (2: 5, 9):

'Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.'

Baptism and 'dying' to sin

We have noted Jesus' reference to his suffering as a 'baptism'. As is powerfully symbolised in the baptismal 'pits' that are found in many ancient and some modern churches, when we are 'plunged' into the water we go down into the 'tomb' with Christ, to rise again to a new life with him as a 'new creature' (2Corinthians 5:17; Catechism n. 1214). In baptism we are cleansed from sin; we die to sin. The Catechism speaks of Noah's ark (n. 1219) in which life is preserved from the rising waters of chaos. It speaks of the crossing of the Red Sea (n. 1221), whereby God's people were saved from slavery by passing through the water. It speaks of the Israelites crossing the Jordan to enter the Promised Land (n. 1222).

Dying to Sin

Baptism is seen as the fulfilment of the promise made through the prophet Ezekiel (36:25-26):

‘I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.’

Let us reflect on other texts from the Newer Testament:

‘Peter said to them: Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 2:38).

‘I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me’ (Galatians 2:19-20).

‘You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God’ (1Corinthians 6:11).

‘Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word’ (Ephesians 5:25-26).

In baptism we ‘die’ to a way of ‘living’ dominated by sin, and we rise to share Jesus’ life. Freed from ‘Original Sin’ (the sin of our origins), we are offered a choice. We are no longer overwhelmed by hereditary and environmental ‘sin’. Let us listen to Paul:

‘Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life’ (Romans 6:3-4; quoted n. 1227).

‘My friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit’ (Romans 7:4, 6).

‘When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour’ (Titus 3:4-6; quoted n. 1215).

In baptism, in response to God’s overwhelming love (God’s Spirit), we “die” to a way of living that is self-centred, dysfunctional and destructive. Tradition speaks of “seven” sources from which all sin is said to spring.

- pride – thinking, judging and acting in a self-reliant, self-focused way, disdainful of others and inattentive to God and to God’s will.

- covetousness – never satisfied with who we are or what we have but grasping for possessions, prestige, reputation, and whatever gratifies our self-centred desires.
- lust – using our sexual energy either for our own self-gratification or to exercise power over others without regard to their true happiness.
- anger – not the anger which is an appropriate protection of self against unjust aggression, but the anger that resents anyone who crosses our ideas, our preferences, our comfort zones, even when they are right and we are wrong.
- gluttony – living so superficial a life that bodily gratification is more important to us than the aspirations of our spirit, or the needs of others.
- envy – when we see someone doing well, instead of experiencing joy we feel ourselves devalued and in overt or subtle ways we find ourselves putting others down, feeling miserable that we do not have their beauty or their possessions or their success.
- sloth – unwilling to commit ourselves and our energy to the noble tasks of life, preferring to hang around waiting for life to deal out fortune to us.

Life experience teaches us that ways of behaving that have their source in such poisoned springs are decidedly dysfunctional and destructive. In baptism we die to these false values, even if they are the values of our mother or father or the social group with which we have been identifying. We have found something, or rather someone, in whom we experience God, and we have discovered a love that is true and liberating. In Jesus we have found a meaning that awakens the energy of our soul. To follow him we have to embrace him on the cross, but we choose to do that and we go down into the tomb with him to renounce behaviour that does not lead to life.

To welcome God's offer of love, we need faith. The Catechism (n. 1257) quotes from the Appendix to Mark's Gospel where we read: 'The person who believes and is baptized will be saved' (Mark 16:16).

This raises two questions. The first is in relation to the baptizing of infants, who are too young to have personal faith. The second is in relation to the necessity of baptism, since so many people are beyond being able to have an explicit personal faith in Jesus, which would lead them to baptism into the Church .

Faith and Baptism of Infants

The Catechism (n. 1250) writes:

'The sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant Baptism. The Church and the parents would deny a child a priceless grace were they not to confer Baptism shortly after birth.'

Obviously, it is the faith of the parents and the Church community. Equally obviously, infants will one day have to own for themselves the gift offered to them. But just as their human life is a sheer gift of love, so is the embrace of Jesus in baptism. Did not Jesus say: 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs' (Mark 10:14).

The necessity of Baptism for Salvation

Our reflections here are guided by an overriding belief that

‘God our Saviour desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth’(1Timothy 2:4).

We reflected on this earlier (see pages 150-154).

How, then, are we to understand Jesus’ statement:

‘No one can enter the kingdom of God without being reborn of water and the Spirit’(John 3:5; quoted Catechism n. 1257)?

Firstly, the Church recognizes that a person who explicitly desires baptism but who dies without actually being baptised is considered to have ‘baptism of desire’(Catechism n. 1259). One example of this is a Catechumen: a person who is journeying towards baptism but who dies prior to receiving it (see Catechism n. 1249): ‘Catechumens are already joined to the Church ... and frequently living a life of faith, hope and love’(Vatican II AG 14). ‘With loving care mother Church already embraces them as her own’(Vatican II LG 14). Another example is a person who is martyred for the faith but has not yet been actually baptised (see Catechism n. 1258). They are considered to have received ‘Baptism of blood’.

What about those who have never heard of Jesus, or for whom their understanding of Jesus is so distorted that they could never think of being baptized into a Christian community? There was a time when it was assumed that everyone in the world had heard about Jesus and that anyone who failed to embrace Christianity was in bad will. The discovery of the New World by European explorers demanded a rethink of such assumptions, as did a deeper penetration into the psychology of conversion. We now know that people can fail to be baptized, and even reject baptism, without willfully rejecting God’s offer of love inviting them to be in communion with his Son through baptism into the ‘Body of Christ’. It is now assumed that openness to God and sincerely wanting to do God’s will implies a desire for baptism, even though this is not at all obvious to those who have these qualities. If they knew who it is who is loving them, and if they knew what he, the risen Jesus, is calling them into, they would embrace it. It is their ignorance, and perhaps also the failure of Christians to communicate clearly and in an attractive way, that is the barrier.

The Catechism (n. 1281) states:

‘All those who, without knowing of the Church but acting under the inspiration of grace, seek God sincerely and strive to do God’s will, are saved even if they have not been baptised.’(see also n. 1260).

In other words, baptism is not an option we are free to take up or reject. If – and this is the important word – if a person knows that he or she is being attracted by grace to baptism, then he or she is not free to reject it. However, for many people in this world, the choices that they make imply that if they had known of Jesus and of the grace of entering into the Church through baptism, they would have done so.

Perhaps they never heard of Jesus. Perhaps the 'Jesus' presented to them was so distorted that though they thought they were rejecting Christianity, they were in fact rejecting only a pseudo-Christianity and a distorted Jesus. God sees the heart. Jesus is drawing everyone to himself and to communion with God. This overrides everything.

Children dying unbaptised

As regards children who die without receiving the sacrament, the same overwhelming consideration applies. The Catechism (n. 1261) states:

'The great mercy of God and the compassion of Jesus allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without baptism.'

Jesus promised: 'When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw everyone to myself' (John 12:32). Our faith is that God has always been drawing people to himself, for we are all made for love. God was doing this through his Word prior to the Incarnation of his Word in Jesus. With the Incarnation, God is now drawing everyone to the fullness of life through communion with Jesus, a communion enjoyed to the full by those who are welcomed through baptism into the community of Jesus' disciples. Those of us who are privileged to know Jesus and to belong to his Body have a mission to reach out to everyone and to welcome them to join us in love, contributing to the Body of Christ the gift of their lives, and receiving through the church the wonderful gifts of grace that are found there.

It would be wonderful if everyone belonged to the Church and lived its life to the full. While Christians are not living the life of the Church to the full, God's grace continues to draw us to the fullness of truth and love. While people continue not to be members of the Church, God's Word is still reaching out to them and drawing them to salvation.

In a mysterious way this grace from God drawing everyone to the communion of love in which salvation consists is mediated through Jesus, God's Incarnate Word. In a mysterious way this grace, coming from the heart of Jesus, links those who welcome it to the Church, the community that is one with Jesus, sharing his communion with God in the Spirit of Love. In this sense there is no salvation outside (apart from, not connected to) the Church.

The Baptism Rite

The Catechism takes us through the ritual, beginning with the sign of the cross (n. 1235), an action that is repeated when we are anointed with the chrism. Jesus signs us as his own, sharing with us his communion with God, his Spirit, and so uniting us to the Church, which is his body. In baptism, each of us, in our own unique way, shares in Jesus' mission to bring about the reign of God's love in the world, to speak his word to the world and to draw others into this communion. We speak of sharing in Jesus' kingly, prophetic and priestly mission. The sign of the cross is a mark of ownership, of belonging, of consecration. We are his and he gives himself to us in love. We are, as Paul says, 'marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit' (Ephesians 1:13).

The Baptismal Rite

Jesus gave himself in love to his Father and to us, even when his commitment brought him up against rejection and death. He did not allow anything to come between himself and God's love, even dying on a cross. The sign traced on our foreheads at baptism, and the sign we place on our bodies, is a statement of commitment to carry on the mission of Jesus, whatever the cost. When we sign our bodies with the cross we are embracing him who died on a cross and we are saying Yes to his embracing us.

As we place the sign of the cross on our bodies, we state that we are committing ourselves to act: 'in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.' The sign we are making is a statement of our total dedication to the God whom Jesus addressed as 'Father', and to Jesus, who revealed to us in everything he said and did what it means to be human. All of us have a longing for infinite love. All of us aspire to communion with the universe. Jesus did what we all long to do. In his prayer he experienced the communion for which we all long. He showed us how to open ourselves like him to the infinite, and he gives us a share in his Holy Spirit, the communion he has with God. The words we speak as we sign our bodies with the cross are a statement of total dedication to the Most Holy Trinity, into whose life we were baptised.

It is not easy to live a distracted life when everything we do is an expression of our baptismal consecration to the God who will never withdraw his embrace. Of course we have to say 'Yes', we have to welcome the grace we are offered. In making the sign of the cross we are saying this 'Yes'.

After the sign of the cross comes the proclamation of the word (n. 1236), after which we renounce sin and proclaim our faith (n. 1237). We welcome God's Spirit over the water (n. 1238). This is followed by the threefold immersion (or pouring of water) in the name of the Trinity (n. 1239), recalling Jesus' command:

'Jesus said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age"' (Matthew 28:18-20).

The baptism is followed by the anointing with Chrism (n. 1241), and the statement that the baptized person now shares in the mission of Christ the priest, prophet and king. The baptized person is then clothed in a white garment (n. 1243), recalling the words of Paul: 'Clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness'(Ephesians 4:24); 'clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience'(Colossians 3:12); 'clothe yourselves with love'(Colossians 3:14). A candle is lit from the paschal candle (n. 1243). Jesus, the light of the world, has enlightened the newly baptised. The Church prays that this light will continue to burn brightly in his/her mind and heart. The assembled community prays the 'Our Father' together (n. 1243-1244), inviting the newly baptised into communion and to the altar of the Eucharist. The rite concludes with prayers for the mother, father, godparents and all assembled, followed by a blessing.