

RCIA CLASS 12: BAPTISM AND CONFIRMATION

I. Baptism is the sacrament that begins one's life as a Christian, and in Catholic baptism, one's life as a Catholic.

A. At the time of Jesus, there was the baptism of John the Baptizer, which was also likely done by others. This baptism signified repentance, but did not itself confer forgiveness of sins or adopted sonship with God.

1. John the Baptist said that he was only baptizing with water, which was a symbol of repentance. He told of one who would come to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. See Matt. 3:11-12; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:3, 15-17; John 1:25-27, 33.

2. Despite the protests of John the Baptist, Jesus received this baptism from him "to fulfill all righteousness."

- Theologians explain that Jesus did so: (1) to confer upon the symbol of water His holiness, grace, and forgiveness so that that symbol may now be the channel of such gifts in the future; (2) to represent the human race, who needed to be cleansed of sins; and (3) to show the rest of humanity an example for the future. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica Part III, question 39, article 1.

B. Jesus then commanded His disciples to baptize, both before and after His resurrection. See John 3:22-24; Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:16. After Pentecost, the Apostles recognized the importance of baptism, and immediately considered it crucial at the beginning of the life of faith. See Acts. 2:38, 41, 8:12-16, 38, 9:18, 10:48, 16:15, 33; Rom. 6:3-4, 1 Cor. 1:13-16, 12:13; Gal. 3:27.

C. Baptism has several related effects, all of which center around being on our path to heaven.

1. First, baptism eliminates original sins from the new Christian. Original sin is that flaw, stain, and break from God caused by the fall of our first parents. It is like a spiritual genetic defect, not our personal fault, but still damaging our relationship with God. See, e.g., Catechism 402-406; Rom. 5:12-21. For those beyond infancy, baptism also confers forgiveness of all personal sins.

- Original sin in turn caused several other effects, including concupiscence (i.e. the difficulty in doing what is right and avoiding evil), the difficulty at prayer and even thinking clearly, the susceptibility to decay and death, and the

disharmony between humanity and nature. These effects still remain after baptism, although the curing of original sin begins the process of eliminating them.

2. Baptism makes us temples of the Holy Spirit. See 1 Cor. 3:16-18, 6:19. In particular, at baptism, one receives the beginnings of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the ability to act at an elevated level, the level of holiness.

3. Baptism makes us adopted sons and daughters of God through Jesus Christ. See, e.g., Rom. 8:14-17; Gal. 3:27, 4:1-6. By being adopted sons and daughters of God, we are all called to be in the family of God. Catholic baptism (or Confirmation) brings one into membership with the Church as the family of God.

4. These effects were shown at the baptism of Jesus: (1) the heavens were opened, reflecting the end of the division between heaven and earth; (2) the Spirit descended upon Jesus reflecting the fact that, through baptism, we become dwelling places of the Spirit; and (3) a voice came from the heavens, saying, "You are My beloved son, in whom I am well pleased," reflecting the adoption into the family of God. See Matt. 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22.

5. We can sense the physical waters of baptism as the channel through which the invisible waters of heaven flow down to cleanse and sanctify the new Christian. See Is. 44:3-5; Ez. 36:25-27; John 3:5.

D. The essential rite of Baptism involves either an immersion with water or pouring water over the head of the one being baptized, with the appropriate words reflecting baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

1. Water has always been the essential material in this sacrament.

- In Bible, water symbolized: (1) the Spirit at the first creation, see Gen. 1:2; (2) renewal and restoration with new creation after the flood, see 1 Pet. 3:20; (3) freedom from slavery in the Land of Egypt, see Ex. 14:10-31; (4) the entrance into the Promised Land through the waters of the Jordan, see Josh. 3:14-17; (5) the cleansing from impurities, as in the prophesy of Ezekiel and Psalm 51, see Ez. 36:25-27. Ps. 51:1, 9; and (6) the waters of repentance, as with the baptism of John, see Matt. 3:1-12.

- Naturally, water is associated with life, cleansing, and mystery, as with the waters of the ocean.

2. The words must refer to baptism and to the Trinity. In the Latin rite, the words are "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." See Matt. 28:19.

- In Greek, baptizein, means to immerse, and the sacrament, through the natural waters, gives one immersion into the supernatural water of cleanness and life, and into the mystery and power of the Spirit.

- As with the other sacraments, we invoke the name of the Trinity, indicating the personal relationship that the newly baptized person in receiving. At baptism, the new Christian receives the gifts of faith, hope and charity (even if an infant cannot use them yet), all of which are ways of being children of God.

E. In the Catholic Church, the baptismal rite also uses other symbols that help bring out the full meaning of baptism.

1. In the case of infant baptism, the parents formally name their child, or the new Christian takes a name because God calls each of us by name. See John 10:3. Ideally, the name is connected to a saint or a virtue.

- The parents make a promise to uphold their roles as Christian parents, including raising their child in the ways of the faith.

2. There are readings from Scripture, giving the wisdom of God.

3. There are intercessions and prayers with the saints, showing the power of the Christians life and the communion with the Church in heaven.

4. There can be a prebaptismal anointing with the Oil of Catechumens. Olive or similar oils were used in ancient times to heal wounds and to prepare for battles or athletic contests. Likewise, the Oil of Catechumens, blessed by the Bishop, symbolizes healing and preparation for the contest for earthly life.

5. The water is blessed, if it has not been so already, and thus made into holy water. Holy water, commonly at the entrance to churches, is meant among other things to remind us of our own baptism.

6. After the baptism, there is the anointing with chrism. In ancient Israel, priests, kings and (in some cases) prophets were

anointed. Each new Christian is given a special mission by God, and that anointing reflects the commissioning.

- Messiah and Christos in Greek are terms meaning "the anointed one" in Hebrew and Greek. Jesus is called Messiah and Christ because He fulfilled these roles completely as the Anointed One of God. We are meant to share in the mission of Christ, and so all the newly baptized are anointed.

7. There is usually also the white garment, reflecting the newness of life with Christ. See Matt. 22:12, Rev. 6:11.

8. There can be a blessing of the mouth and ears, reflecting the ability to hear the word of God and witness to it. The blessing is called the Ephphatha rite, from the word in Aramaic meaning, "Be opened," the word Christ used when healing the mute and deaf man. See Mark 7:31-17.

F. Godparents are meant to help the new Christian (and if the new Christian is a child, help his parents) in growing in the ways of the faith. At least one godparent, either a godfather or godmother, is required, but two godparents, a man and woman, is preferable.

1. The godparents need to be baptized and confirmed practicing Catholics, for they are meant to be models of the Catholic life.

2. If there is one godparent, another non-Catholic Christian may be a "Christian witness" if he is a practicing member of another Christian communion.

3. Being a godparent is an office in the Church, not merely an honor, and godparents thus must be qualified and willing to take on that office. A godparent is called to help the new Christian to grow in the ways of the faith.

G. Baptism is the ordinary means that God intended for a person to come into sanctifying grace and friendship with God. However, if the sacrament is not available due to early death or a lack of access to the faith, God may save in other ways. For, as the Catechism says, God has bound the Church to the sacraments, but is not bound to them. See Catechism 1257.

1. It is clear that a person who intends to be baptized, but dies before baptism is credited with the merits of baptism.
2. If a person has no access to the sacraments or the faith, either because no one is there to proclaim it or because of an intellectual misunderstanding, we trust that God provides access to salvation in some way, but we do not know how. See 1 Tim. 2:4.
3. In the case of unbaptized infants, the Church has no specific teaching, but entrusts them to God's mercy. See Catechism 1261. If the parents intended to baptize children, there is a Mass of Christian burial for them, which could imply that the merits of the faith are given to them by that intention.
4. In any case, parents should have their children baptized shortly after birth, for the graces of holiness and friendship with God should work from an early age onward. We give children citizenship in a country and training in education, morals and good manners without asking their consent, and we should also give them the benefits of the faith from an early age, for Christ said, "Let the little ones come to me." Mark 10:14. And there were whole households baptized in Acts of the Apostles. See Acts 16:15, 33, 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16. This baptism does not limit their freedom for, as they grow, they will have the full ability to choose whether to continue the life of faith or not.

II. Confirmation is the sacrament of Christian witness, which complete the gifts of the Holy Spirit and gives the new Christian the fullness of membership in the Church.

A. Baptism is more associated with Christ's first calling of His disciples, saying such words as "Come, follow Me." See Matt. 4:18-22, 9:9; Mark 1:16-28, 3:13-14; Luke 5:1-11; John 1:35-51. Confirmation is more associated with Pentecost, in which the disciples began their mission to all the world. See Acts 2.

- Baptism deals more with one's own conversion as a disciple of Christ and a new son or daughter of God, although there

is certainly a call to be a witness. Confirmation completes this internal transformation, and emphasizes more the call to be a witness to the faith before the world. The transformation is associated with receiving the fullness of the Spirit, and in particular the completion of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

- At Pentecost, Mary, the Apostles and the other early Christians received the full power of the Holy Spirit and, with that power, began converting people from all over the world. Confirmation likewise gives great power to live a Spirit-filled life and thus transform the world.

B. In the Acts of the Apostles, there is a distinction between baptism and the "laying on of hands," which confers the fullness of the Spirit. See Acts 8:4-17, 19:5-6; see also Heb. 6:2 (distinguishing between baptism and the "laying on of hands." In the former case, the deacon Philip could baptize, but not lay hands on the new Christians in Samaria; it was the Apostles who laid hands on the new Christians, giving them the fullness of the Spirit.

- The sacrament of Confirmation deepens and strengthens our Baptismal gifts and callings by deepening our status as sons and daughters of God, uniting us more with Christ, and completing the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It thus makes us full members of the Church and gives us greater responsibilities as soldiers, ambassadors, or representatives of the Church and, therefore, of God.

- Bishop Faustus of Riez (in modern day France) preached a Pentecost homily around 460 that presented two images used by the Church ever since. First, he said that a man may join an army at one point, but then receives arms for battle only later after receiving some training. Second, he said that a child may inherit property at one point, but only later be able to exercise control over it. Likewise, baptism truly makes us a member of the church and gives us an inheritance with Christ, but we receive the fullness of responsibilities and authority later.

C. We often refer to the effects of Confirmation in terms of completing the "gifts of the Holy Spirit," which allow one to live an inspired, or Spirit-filled, life. These gifts of wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, piety, fortitude and fear of the Lord allow one to rise above what is ordinarily called good to the level of sharing in the life of the angels and saints. The prophecies of Isaiah refer most directly to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. See Is. 11:1-3. That prophecy refers to the Anointed One receiving these gifts through the Spirit, but Jesus Christ promised to send His Spirit upon all the faithful. See, e.g., Luke 10:10-12; John 14:25-26, 15:26-27, 16:13-15; Acts 1:4-5. And thus, all Christians are called to share in these gifts of the Holy Spirit.

- The gifts of the Holy Spirit are distinguished from what are called charismatic gifts (e.g., special abilities in speaking, teaching, artistry, music, leadership etc.) that are given to specific people for the sake of the whole Church. See Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:1-11. Confirmation also supports these charismatic gifts, although the effects will be different in each person.

D. Confirmation is ordinarily conferred by the bishop (in the line of the Apostles), although a bishop can delegate a priest to confer this sacrament.

1. In the Latin rite, Confirmation is generally given significantly later than baptism, at the age of reason (about 7) or a later time, in order for the bishop more easily to confer it. In the Eastern rites, baptism is usually conferred by a priest right after baptism to connect it with baptism more.

2. Even in the Latin rite, if anyone baptized (infant, child or adult) is dying, a priest can and should confer the sacrament of confirmation. As with baptism, consciousness is not required, although for one above the age of reason, there must be an openness to the sacrament.

E. The sacrament is conferred through: (1) a laying on of hands; and (2) anointing with chrism, a special oil blessed by a bishop, usually at the Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday.

1. The laying on of hands, which seems to be the essence of the original rite, confers the fullness of the Spirit upon the newly confirmed. This symbol is also used for the Mass (calling upon the Holy Spirit to consecrate the bread and wine and make them the Eucharist), Anointing of the Sick (calling for the strength of God to come upon the sick person) and Holy Orders (calling upon the Spirit and the strength of God to come upon the cleric.) The prayer that the Bishop uses in the Latin rite refers to God conferring the fullness of the gifts of the Holy Spirit upon the confirmandi.

2. As noted above, chrism is used at infant baptism, symbolizing the priestly, kingly, and prophetic roles of the new Christian. Here, that symbol become a sacrament and confers those roles in fullness upon the confirmation candidate.

- In the Latin rite, the bishop or priest says, "Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit." The seal, or mark, permanently configures one as a witness to Christ, and goes with one into eternity. The seal confirms and increases the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which allow one to live a life of heroic virtue.

F. The Confirmation candidates also take on a new name, which must be associated with a saint or a virtue. The idea is that a new name reflects their new status, as with the change in the names of Abram to Abraham, Jacob to Israel, Peter to Simon and (at least in common use) Saul to Paul. Religious orders give a new name upon profession of the new brothers and sisters as well. See also Rev. 2:17.

G. The Confirmation candidates also have sponsors, who will help them grow further in the ways of the faith. It is preferable, although not required, that a candidate's sponsor be one of his baptismal godparents.