

RCIA CLASS 13: BAPTISM AND CONFIRMATION

I. Baptism is the sacrament that begins one's life as a Christian. Baptism into the Catholic Church also makes one a member of this Church.

A. At the time of Jesus, St. John the Baptist, and probably other religious figures, were performing a rite called baptism, which would be the prelude to this sacrament. This baptism signified repentance, but did not itself confer forgiveness of sins or adopted sonship with God, for only Jesus Christ could give those gifts.

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

2. Despite the initial reluctance of St. John the Baptist, Jesus received this baptism from him "to fulfill all righteousness." See Matt. 3:13-16.

- 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; Catechism 535-36.

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 beginning on our new path to heaven. See Catechism 1257-74.

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 struggle often associated with 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 healing from them.

2. Baptism makes us temples of the Holy Spirit. See 1 Cor. 3:16-17, 6:19. In particular, at baptism, one receives the beginnings of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which give us the ability to act at an elevated even inspired level, the level of holiness to which we are called. Confirmation will bring these gifts more to

fulfillment.

3. Baptism makes us adopted sons and daughters of God through Jesus Christ. See, e.g., John 1:12; Rom. 8:14-17; Gal. 3:27, 4:1-6; 1 John 3:1. Because we are adopted sons and daughters of God, we are all called to be in the family of God. Catholic baptism in particular brings one into membership with the Church as the family of God. (If one was baptized in a non-Catholic Christian church or denomination, the profession of faith, generally accompanied by Confirmation and First Communion, makes one a member of the Catholic Church. The baptism is not repeated unless there is doubt about it.)

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 of this sacrament.

- In Bible, water was associated with central times and themes of history including: (1) the Spirit at the first creation, see Gen. 1:2; (2) renewal and restoration with new creation after the flood, see 1 Pet. 3:20-22; (3) freedom from slavery in the Land of Egypt, which was accomplished through the Red Sea, 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.

- Among all people, water is also associated with life, cleansing, and mystery, as with the mysterious waters of the ocean.

2. The essential words refer to baptism and to the Trinity. In the Latin rite, the words that must be spoken are "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." See Matt. 28:19. The one performing the baptism also gives the name of the person being baptized just before those crucial words.

- 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 with the Almighty God that the newly baptized person is receiving. At baptism, the new Christian receives the gifts of faith, hope and charity (even if an infant is not conscious of them yet), all of which are ways of being children of God.

E. In the Catholic Church, and with most branches of Christianity, 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 because God calls each of us by name. For an adult, the new Christian states his name and also generally takes a new name for Confirmation. See John 10:3. Ideally, the baptismal name is connected to a saint or a virtue, as the Confirmation name must be.

- 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. For the written word of God prepares the way for the divine Person, the Word of God, Jesus Christ, to bring His grace to those who receive His sacraments.

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

4. There can be a pre-baptismal 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 cleric blesses the water, if it has not been blessed already, and thus made into holy water. Holy water is also commonly available at the entrance to church to remind us of our own baptism.

6. After the baptism, there is the anointing with chrism. (For an adult who is to be confirmed, this anointing is not used because the sacrament of Confirmation will take its place.) In ancient Israel, priests, kings and (at least in some cases) prophets were anointed. See, e.g., 1 Sam. 10:1, 15:1, 16:13; Ex. 28:41; 1 Kings 19:16; Is. 61:1-3. Each new Christian is given a special mission by God, and the anointing here reflects this commissioning to a glorious role in the kingdom of God.

- Messiah and Christos are terms meaning "the anointed one" in Hebrew and Greek respectively. 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 for the newly baptized Christian, 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, asking God to give the newly baptized person joy and wisdom in hearing the word of God and being a 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 in growing in the ways of the faith. And if the new Christian is a child, the godparents should help his parents raise the child in the faith. At least one godparent, either a godfather or godmother, is required for a Catholic baptism. But it is preferable for an infant or child who is baptized to have both a godfather and a godmother. See Code of Canon Law 872-74

1. The godparents must 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. See Code of Canon Law 872, section 5.

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. See Catechism 1255.

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 people 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. See Catechism 1258-59.

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. 2:3-4.

3. In the case of unbaptized infants, the Church has no specific teaching, but entrusts them to God's mercy and love. See Catechism 1261. If the parents intended to baptize a child, but the child dies before such a baptism takes place, there is a Mass of Christian burial for him, 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. While the Bible does not directly address the issue of infant baptism, there were whole households baptized in Acts of the Apostles, and that would likely imply young children. See Acts 16:15, 33, 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16. This baptism does not limit their freedom because, as they grow, they will have the full ability to choose whether to continue the life of faith or not. Failing to give them the opportunity to grow from an early age in the ways of grace, like failing to give children an education, would limit their freedom, not enhance it.

II. Confirmation is the sacrament of full union in the Holy Spirit and of the ability thus to be a better witness of the faith before the world. It completes the gifts of the Holy Spirit and gives the new Christian the fullness of membership in the Church. See Catechism 1303.

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 and in general will Jesus' commission to bring the faith to all the world. See, e.g., Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46-49; Acts 1:7-8, 2:1-42.

- 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 Acts 8, 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. In Acts 19, St. Paul baptized new Christians and then laid hands on them that they would receive the power of the Holy Spirit.

- The sacrament of Confirmation deepens and strengthens our Baptismal gifts and callings by confirming and increasing 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, and 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 to help people understand both the connection and distinction between the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. 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 with Confirmation.

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. This prophecy in Isaiah refers to the Anointed One (Messiah in Hebrew) receiving these gifts through the Spirit. Thus, Jesus Christ is the center of the work of the Holy Spirit in the world. But Jesus Christ promised to send His Spirit upon all the faithful. See, e.g., Luke 11:13; John 14:16-17, 25-26, 15:26-27, 16:13-15; Acts 1:4-5, 8. And thus, all Christians are called to share in these gifts of the Holy Spirit.

- The gifts of the Holy Spirit are distinct 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; Catechism 799-801. Confirmation also supports these charismatic gifts, although the effects will be different in each person.

D. In the Latin rite, Confirmation is ordinarily conferred by the bishop (in the line of the Apostles), although a bishop can delegate a priest to confer this sacrament. And, when an adult enters the Catholic Church, whether through baptism or a profession of faith, that person usually receives Confirmation at the same time, generally from a priest.

1. In the Latin rite, Confirmation is generally given significantly later than baptism, at the age of reason (about 7) or a later time, largely to allow the bishop more easily to confer it. See Catechism 1307. In the Eastern rites, Confirmation is usually conferred by a priest right after Baptism to emphasize the connection between the two sacraments.

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 if that person has not already received this sacrament. As with baptism, consciousness is not required, although for one above the age of reason, there must be an openness to receiving 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 consecrate him) 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 is an essential part of the 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 enable the recipient 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 possibly 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. A Confirmation candidate would also have a sponsor, who helps him grow further in the ways of the faith. As with the godparents at baptism, the sponsor must be a Confirmed and practicing Catholic, and should be a particular friend and assistant to person who is confirmed, both before and after the sacrament, accompanying him in the pilgrimage of faith. It is preferable, although not required, that a candidate's sponsor be one of his baptismal godparents. See Catechism 1311.