

BAPTISM



“Baptism” means immersion. As spiritual birth, it is the first sacrament. It is the doorway into the life of Christ and the Church. It is also the doorway to the other sacraments. It is the entrance into covenant with God and the beginning of a journey that leads to eternal life.

What is the origin of Baptism?

While we find various kinds of washings of parts of the body or physical items in the Old Testament, baptism as a one-time washing of the whole person is found nowhere therein. The first time we hear of baptism in this sense is with John the Baptist, at the beginning of the New Testament. John the Baptist called people to be immersed in water while confessing their sins as an act of repentance. It was supposed to be a break from the old life (symbolically washed away with the descent into the waters), and an embracing of a new life seeking the kingdom of God (symbolized when one came up from the waters). It was also a way of preparing for the coming of the Messiah, the “Anointed One.” John the Baptist foretold that the Coming One would baptize, not just with water (as he had done), but “with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Mt 3:11; Lk 3:16).

At a certain point, Jesus also came to be baptized by John. This was the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus. Before this, Jesus led a hidden life. After this point, He begins manifesting the kingdom of God through preaching, teaching, healing, and gathering and forming disciples, which activities would lead to His suffering, death, and Resurrection.

If Jesus was sinless, why was He baptized?

It is true that the whole point of baptism, as John the Baptist practiced it, was for turning away from sin and living a new life. And it is true that Jesus was baptized like everyone else. However, unlike everyone else, Jesus did not confess any sins, since He had none (Mt 11:6; Jn 6:18, 8:46; 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15, 1 Jn 3:5). Further, three things happened to Him at His Baptism which happened for no one else, which things give us the key to understanding the significance

of His Baptism: the “heavens were opened,” the Father’s voice was heard, saying “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased,” and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him “in bodily form, as a dove” (Mt 3:13-17; Mk 1:9-11; Lk 3:21-22; Jn 1:32). These things show why Jesus was baptized to “fulfill all righteousness” (Mt 3:15).

What does the Baptism of Jesus tell us about Who He is and what He has come to do?

The phrase, “the heavens were opened” literally means that the sky was parted or opened in some way. But this is a symbol that, with the coming of Jesus, Heaven itself is opened for us. This is truly momentous, since Heaven was closed to us after the sin of our first parents. Genesis tells us that Adam and Eve were banished from the garden and a Cherubim angel was set up at the entrance “to guard the way to the tree of life” (Gen 3:24). In this way, Heaven—symbolized by the tree of life—was closed to humanity. That Heaven is opened at the Baptism and arrival of Jesus illustrates that something truly groundbreaking is happening. Jesus is thus revealed as the Savior—as the pathway to Heaven (Jn 14:6).

Second, God’s voice was heard. The last time that the people as a whole heard God’s voice was at Mount Sinai, well over a thousand years before Christ. Since the people at that time were so frightened by that voice, they insisted that God would speak to Moses, and then that Moses would relay the message to the people (Ex 20:18-26). From that time on, the people would no longer hear God’s voice directly, but only through a prophet or messenger. Now, with the Baptism of Christ, the people hear God’s voice once again. The long silence has been broken. And, whereas before, the voice spoke the “words of God,” namely, the Ten Commandments, now the voice reveals *the Word of God Himself*, Jesus. In this event, God the Father reveals His Son to the world, at the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus.

Third, the Holy Spirit came down upon Jesus in the form of a dove. In the Old Testament, we find a dove having an important place in the story of Noah and the Ark (Gen 8:6-12). Noah sends out a dove. The dove returns with an olive branch in its mouth. This is significant, since it is a sign of life, and that the flood is subsiding, since somewhere on the earth, green plants are now on dry land above the waters. Thus, it is a symbol that the old world is passing away, and that a new world—a new creation—is emerging. Also, olives come from olive trees, and olive oil comes from olives, and it was with olive oil that priests, prophets, and kings were often anointed in the Old Testament. In the Baptism of Jesus, then, we see the Holy Spirit coming specifically in the form of a dove, now not with an olive branch in its mouth, but pointing out the *True Olive Branch*, the “Anointed One,” Jesus, the Messiah and Christ (both words meaning “the Anointed One” in Aramaic and Greek, respectively). The dove also symbolizes that, through Christ, an old world is passing away, and a new world—a new creation—is emerging.

Two other points are worth mentioning. First, there is a constant theme in the Old Testament of *salvation through water*. At creation, the Spirit of God hovers over the waters, bringing forth life from them (Gen 1:2). In the story of Noah’s Ark and the Flood (Gen 6-9), in the crossing

of the Israelites through Red Sea (Ex 14), in the crossing of the Jordan into the Promised Land (Jos 3), and in the curing of Namaan, the Syrian, in the waters of the Jordan (2 Kgs 5), we see this same motif of *salvation through water*. All this is imported into the Baptism of Jesus, in which ultimate salvation comes to us through water.

Lastly, the Baptism of Jesus reveals Jesus as the “servant” about whom Isaiah prophesied: “Behold, 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 fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the islands wait for his law . . . 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 . . . Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them” (Is 42:1-9; see also 49:5-6, 50:4-11, 52:13-53:12, 61:1-4). The Baptism of Jesus is a sign of His humility in taking on our condition, and of His future death and Resurrection: His going down into the waters symbolizing His future death; His rising again from the waters symbolizing His victorious Resurrection.

What does the Baptism of Jesus tell us about the meaning of our baptism?

As in the Baptism of Jesus, when we are baptized, the heavens are opened to us. Indeed, baptism is the beginning of a journey that leads to eternal life.

As in the Baptism of Jesus, when we are baptized, God the Father says to us, silently yet truly in our souls, “You are my beloved son,” or “You are my beloved daughter.” In effect, God tells us, “You are my adopted children. You are now my sons and daughters in my Son. You are mine. You belong to me. I claim you as my own. I affirm you with my love in the depths of your being.” We “get in on” the intimate relationship that the Son had with the Father in eternity and which He expresses in and through His humanity since He became man. God invites us into the intimate relationship that His Son has with Him, so that the Spirit might cause us to cry out “Abba, Father” to God, as Jesus did (Mk 14:36; Rom 8:15-17; Gal 4:4-7).

As in the Baptism of Jesus, when we are baptized, the Holy Spirit descends upon us, filling our souls with His presence and grace. We thereby become temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16-17; 6:12-20). The Holy Spirit comes in order to heal and forgive us, make us holy, give us spiritual gifts for the building up of the Church, work through us to touch the lives of others, and lead us to eternal life (Rom 8).

Finally, in our baptism, salvation comes to us through water; our mission in life and in the Church begins; and we are called to live in the image of Him Who came “not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). We are, thus, called into the humility, servanthood, and mission of Jesus.

What else does the New Testament teach us about Baptism?

Jesus tells Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:5). At the end of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus commands His apostles, “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, to the close of the age” (Mt 28:19-20). Likewise, at the end of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mk 16:15-16). In baptism, Jesus gives us to drink of the spring of water welling up to eternal life, which spring He makes mention of to the Samaritan woman (Jn 3:13-14; Jn 6:25). The water that flowed from the pierced side of Jesus on the Cross is also a symbol of Baptism, just as the blood is a symbol of the Eucharist (Jn 19:24-27; Jn 7:37-39). Through Baptism, Jesus washes us in the font of mercy that flows from His side.

The following passages about Baptism are from later on in the New Testament:

- “God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, namely eight persons, were saved through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...”
—1 Peter 3:20-21
- “For in Him (Christ) the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness of life in Him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In Him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised from the dead.” —Col 2:9
- “For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” —Gal 3:26
- “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 12:13
- “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” —Rom 6:3
- “He saved us... in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which He poured upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.”
—Titus 3:5-6

- “Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.” —Eph 5:25-28
- “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”
—Acts 2:38
- “And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.” —Acts 22:16

It is very clear from these passages that baptism is not simply a symbolic action, but God really effects something in us in Baptism: He washes away our sins, He adopts us as His children in Christ, He gifts us with the Holy Spirit, He clothes us with Christ, He makes us a “new creation,” and we die and rise with Christ in order to live in the holiness and new life He bestows upon us. In this way, as St. Peter says, baptism saves us.

What does the Church teach about Baptism?

Based on divine revelation, the Church teaches the following things about baptism:

- Baptism removes the stain of original sin through the bestowal of God’s grace, although we still have to struggle—even with that grace—with the effects of original sin.
- In Baptism, God washes away all personal sin and punishment due to sin.
- Jesus Himself is the One who baptizes through the human minister.
- In Baptism, we become joined to Christ and His Body, the Church; we are adopted as God’s children in Christ; the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us; and we are filled with the Holy Spirit’s gifts, namely grace, infused virtues, and the gifts of the Spirit.
- We can only be baptized once, because of the sacramental *character* which Baptism bestows, which is an “indelible seal.” This seal is a sharing in Christ’s priesthood.
- Baptism is necessary for salvation. However, through an explicit or implicit “baptism of desire” God can save those who through no fault of their own did not know about the necessity of baptism or were not able to receive it before their death.
- While those in Holy Orders (bishops, priests, and deacons) are the proper ministers of Baptism, anyone can baptize in case of an emergency, as long as they have the intention of the Church in baptizing and pour water on the one to be baptized, saying, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Why does the Church baptize infants?

The Church baptizes children, because Jesus said, “Let the children come to me” (Mt 19:14). God wants us to belong to Him from the very beginning of our lives. It is not necessary to be conscious or to make an adult decision for God to bestow His grace on us. For a more in-depth explanation and defense of the Church’s ancient practice of infant baptism, you can visit www.catholic.com and search for the article on “infant baptism.”

What is the meaning of the rituals in the Rite of Baptism?

In the Rite of Baptism, many ritual actions full of symbolism are used. Everything starts at the door of the church, symbolizing that baptism is the spiritual doorway into the Church. Scriptures are read and a homily given, to help those present appreciate the meaning of Baptism. Before the actual baptism, we ask the saints to pray for the one to be baptized; there is a prayer of deliverance from evil spirits; typically, we are anointed on our upper chest, as a symbol that we are about to be clothed with the “armor of God” (Eph 6:11, 13; Rom 13:12) and the “breastplate of faith and love” (1 Th 5:8; Eph 6:14); the water is blessed and our faith professed. In the baptism, we are baptized with a name of a saint who will be a special role model and intercessor for us. After the baptism, adults are confirmed, while children are anointed with holy *Chrism* on their heads, symbolizing their participation in the priesthood of Christ; we are clothed in white to symbolize that we receive a “robe of grace” and are “clothed with our Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal 3:26); we receive a baptismal candle lit from the *Easter Candle*, a symbol that we have been enlightened by the light of Christ’s Resurrection (Mt 5:14; Jn 8:12); and, for children, the priest touches our mouth and ears, praying that we may soon hear, understand, and speak the words of God (Mk 7:31-37). The *Rite of Baptism for Children* ends before the Altar, since we look forward to the day in which the child will receive Confirmation and the Holy Eucharist. An *Our Father* is prayed, and a special blessing for the parents and for all is given at the conclusion of the rite.

Why are we only baptized once?

We are baptized only once, because of the indelible character that is given. If we fall away from the grace of our baptism, the way back is not through being baptized again, but through receiving God’s tremendous mercy in the Sacrament of Penance, or Confession.

How do we live out and renew our Baptism?

The whole Church renews our baptismal vows every Easter. It is also fitting to do this for the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. In a less solemn way, we renew our baptism every time we “bless ourselves” with holy water in our churches and homes. Above all we live out our baptism by constantly turning away from sin, growing in conversion and relationship with God, and living out our vocation in holiness in the Church and in the world.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1. What is the background to the Sacrament of Baptism?***
- 2. What is the significance of Baptism?***
- 3. How do we live out our Baptism?***