



## The Baptism of the Lord January 10, 2010 C

### THE CHURCH'S TEACHING ON THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

Today we close out the Christmas Season with the Baptism of Jesus, that moment in time when Jesus began his Public Ministry and was anointed by the Spirit to do God's work.

#### Sessions on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

Beginning the first week of February, I will facilitate discussion sessions on the teachings of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The Catechism is divided into four parts.

- Part One: The Creed—The Faith Professed
- Part Two: The Sacraments—The Faith Celebrated
- Part Three: The Christian Morality—The Faith Lived
- Part Four: Prayer—The Faith Prayed

Our focus will be the Creed which we recite every Sunday. As a lead into the Creed, the Catechism has sections on Divine Revelation and its Transmission: how our unseen God has revealed himself to us and how the contents of divinely revealed truth is transmitted from one generation to another.

These two introductory sessions are very important in that they deal with one key distinction between Catholicism and Protestantism. Catholics believe Divine Revelation is transmitted by Scripture *and* Tradition and authentically guarded and interpreted by the Magisterium—the Church's official teaching authority. Protestants believe Divine Revelation is found in Scripture *alone* ('sola scriptura' was a famous phrase of Martin Luther).

After these two introductory sessions, we will look at the articles of the Creed beginning with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

- *How did Christian belief in the Trinity develop*; a brief summary of Thomas Aquinas' five proofs of the existence of God
- *Creator of all that is seen and unseen*. Can Christians believe in evolution, creation of angels and demons, original sin, suffering (why a good God permits suffering and evil)
- Jesus, human and divine; key teachings; miracles and their purpose; Jesus' death, resurrection and

ascension—their meaning for our lives; how belief in Jesus' humanity and divinity developed

- The *Holy Spirit*—his key role in the life of the Church
- The Church—one, holy, catholic and apostolic; its purpose and hierarchical structure; papal infallibility; why we believe the Catholic Church is the one true Church founded by Christ
- This first series on the Catechism will also include sessions on *Mary* (doctrines and devotions); *what happens after death*

#### Format

We will read articles I have written on the Catechism, stopping along the way to discuss and talk about issues raised by the participants. It has been well said that adults learn best when they gather together to talk about issues that are important to them. Even though the Creed in itself is a dry topic, participants have found that the articles of the Creed allow them to get into discussions about various aspects of Catholic belief.

Next weekend in church, you will have an opportunity to sign up to join one of the groups on the Catechism. Right now we are planning on forming two groups to meet on:

- Tuesday evenings starting February 2, 7-8:30 PM
- Friday afternoons starting February 5, 1:30-3PM

#### The Sacrament of Baptism

The following are excerpts from my Catechism article on Baptism. (Each article references the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* by the letter C, followed by the paragraph number/s, and the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* by the letters USC, followed by the page number/s.)

The word baptism is from the Greek word meaning to "plunge" or "immerse." In Baptism, the recipient is plunged or immersed into Christ's death and resurrection. In Baptism, we symbolically go into the tomb with Christ, dying to sin and self, and we rise to new life in the Spirit of Christ.

#### *Biblical roots of the sacrament (C 1217-1225)*

Many events in Israel's salvation history point to the saving grace received in the waters of baptism, e.g., the Great Flood, Israelites crossing the Red Sea, Israelites crossing the River Jordan into the Promised Land.

At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, he was baptized by John in the River Jordan. In and through this event, Jesus, the sinless One, identified himself with sinful humanity whom he came to liberate from the slavery and power of sin. In stepping into the River Jordan, Jesus filled the waters with his divine presence just as he does when the water is blessed during the sacrament of Baptism.

Before returning to his Father, Jesus issued the Great Commission: to preach in his name, make disciples and baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Mt 28:16-20). Since the day of Pentecost, when about 3000 adults were baptized, the Church has initiated new members into her midst through the sacrament of Baptism.

***The effects of Baptism. What happens to one who receives the sacrament of Baptism?***  
(C 1262-1274, USC 192)

The *Catechism* names the following four effects of the sacrament of Baptism on those who receive it.

- *All sin is wiped away.* For the infant, this means original sin. For children over the "age of reason" (7 years) and adults, this means both original and personal sin. In the early church, adults removed all clothing prior to entering the waters of baptism, symbolizing their intention to shed a sinful or old way of life. They went down into the tomb with Christ, signaling their intention to die to sin and to all that is not of Christ. Hence, the decision to seek baptism was a very radical one. It involved a radical conversion of heart and mind, a decision to turn away from all that was not of Christ.

While the waters of baptism wash away all sin, original and personal, it does not remove the tendency or inclination toward sin that all of us struggle with. This wound of original sin causes us to be sometimes confused about what is and isn't sin, and it leaves us with a weakened will when it comes to resisting the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil. But through the grace received in this sacrament and other sacraments, and through prayer and spiritual direction, we can grow in our ability to deal with the wounds of original sin which afflict our soul and mind.

- *Adopted children of God.* Through Baptism, we become royalty; we become children of God. We are taken into the household of God and we become sharers in God's divine life. We become temples of the Holy Spirit. Whenever we suffer from self-image problems, all we need do is spend time meditating on who we are because of the sacrament of Baptism.

- *Initiated into the Church.* By Baptism, we become members of the Church, the Body of Christ. We share in the priesthood of Christ as well as in his prophetic and

royal mission. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praise of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9).

- *Bonded with other Christians.* Through Baptism, we share a common bond with all who have been baptized into the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

***Baptismal character of seal.*** Baptism seals the Christian with an indelible spiritual mark or character. Baptism marks us permanently as belonging to Christ, whose image we bear. We can only be baptized once.

***The necessity of Baptism (C1257-1261).*** Jesus taught the necessity of Baptism when he said "unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:3). Also, before he ascended into heaven, Jesus commanded his disciples to "go forth and teach all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19). Therefore, Baptism with water is the necessary first step to eternal salvation for all who believe in Jesus and know the importance of Baptism. But what of those who have never heard of Christ? For people in this situation, the *Catechism* makes this crucial distinction: "God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound to the sacraments" (C1260). While baptism of water and the Spirit is the normal way to salvation (which of course assumes faith and conversion of heart for the adult), the Church believes that God in his infinite mercy may save unbaptized persons.

Traditionally, the Church recognizes other forms of baptism.

***Baptism of desire.*** The *Catechism* states: "For *catechumens* who die before their Baptism, their explicit desire to receive it, together with repentance for their sins, and charity, assures them the salvation that they were not able to receive through the sacrament" (C1259).

***Baptism of blood.*** The *Catechism* states: "The Church has always held the firm conviction that those who suffer death for the sake of the faith without having received Baptism are baptized by their death for and with Christ. This *Baptism of blood*, like the *desire for Baptism*, brings about the fruits of Baptism without being a sacrament" (C1258).

***Baptism of implicit desire.*** The *Catechism* states: "Every man who is ignorant of the Gospel of Christ and of his Church, but seeks the truth and does the will of God in accordance with his understanding of it, can be saved. It may be supposed that such persons would have *desired Baptism explicitly* if they had known its necessity" (C1260).

**Unbaptized infants.** The *Catechism* states: “As regards children who have died without Baptism, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all should be saved, and Jesus’ tenderness toward children which caused him to say: ‘Let the children come to me, do not hinder them’ (Mk 10:14 cf. I Tim 2:4), allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism” (C1261).

**Who can baptize?** The ordinary ministers of Baptism are bishops, priests and deacons. In cases of emergency, when an ordained minister is not available, the *Catechism* states that “any person, even someone not baptized, can baptize, if he has the required intention. The required intention is to will to do what the Church does when she baptizes, and to apply the Trinitarian baptismal formula. The Church finds the reason for this possibility in the universal saving will of God and the necessity of Baptism for salvation” (C1256).

#### **Why does the Church baptize infants (C 1250-1252)**

In the very early days of Christianity, adults were normally the only ones to be baptized. The practice of infant baptism developed spontaneously in the early church, and adults who had adopted the Christian way of life wanted the same for their children. There is explicit testimony that infant baptism took place in the second century. It is possible that it occurred earlier when “whole households” received baptism (Acts 16:15). In 215 AD, the writer Hippolytus stated: “*When they come to the water, let the water be pure and flowing. And they shall put off their clothes. And they shall baptize the little children first. And if they can answer for themselves, let them answer. But if they cannot, let their parents answer or someone from their family.*”

But shouldn't the person being baptized have explicit faith in Jesus and have repented of sin? Infant baptism reminds us that we cannot “earn” or “merit” salvation, even through our faith. The *Catechism* states: “The sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant baptism” (C1250). At the baptism of an infant, faith is supplied by the parents, godparents and the community. It is a bit like the healing of the paralytic in the Gospel. It seems that this poor wounded man did not have faith to be healed yet Jesus healed him because of the obvious faith of his friends. “Seeing *their* faith...Jesus healed him” (Mk 2:1-7). Needless to say, in the case of infant baptism, the assumption is that the child will receive post-baptismal catechesis and be led to come to know and practice the ways of Jesus and his Church. The Church also teaches that the baptism of an infant may be postponed if there is not a “well-founded hope” that the child will be raised in the Catholic faith (USC p. 191).

#### **The principal symbols of Baptism (C 1234-1245, USC p. 184)**

The principal symbols of Baptism tell us much about the meaning of this sacrament.

**Water.** Water can both destroy and save life. In the sacrament of Baptism, the pouring of the consecrated water is the outward visible sign of the interior transformation being brought about in the soul. All sin, original and personal, is washed away and the soul is filled with the grace presence of Christ. The recipient becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit. The pouring of the water on the recipient's head or his/her immersion in water, accompanied by the Trinitarian formula, is the central rite of this sacrament.

**Oil.** In the Old Testament, kings and queens were anointed to symbolize the coming of God's Spirit to enable them to be godly leaders of God's people. The anointing of the candidate at Baptism with sacred chrism, blessed by the bishop, symbolizes an interior anointing in the soul. The recipient receives the Holy Spirit to empower him/her to live out his/her baptismal promises to say ‘no’ to the world, the flesh and the devil and to say ‘yes’ to Jesus and his Gospel.

**White garment and candle.** In the early church, adults, prior to entering the waters of baptism, shed all their clothes to symbolize leaving behind the old way of life and shedding their sinful ways. After they emerged from the baptismal waters, they were clothed with a white garment to symbolize that they were clothing themselves with Christ (Gal 3:27).

**Candle.** The reception of a baptismal candle, lit from the Easter candle, signifies that the newly baptized has been *enlightened* by Christ and is now called to live as a child of the light.

The famous king and saint, Louis IX of France, knew that his life began when he was baptized. The saintly king used to sign his documents “Louis of Poissy,” not Louis IX, King.” His reason was that Poissy was the place of his baptism. He held it in higher regard than Rheims Cathedral, the site of his coronation. “It is . . . greater . . . to be a child of God than to be the ruler of a kingdom: this last I shall lose at death, but the other will be my passport to an everlasting destiny.”

Have a blessed week,

*Le Saran*