

Topic 21: Baptism and Confirmation

Baptism incorporates the person who receives it into the Life, Death and Resurrection of Christ and into his saving action. This sacrament leaves in the Christian an indelible spiritual seal of belonging to Christ. Through Confirmation, Christians participate more fully in Christ's mission and in the fullness of the Holy Spirit. A baptised and confirmed Christian is destined to take part in the Church's mission of evangelising by virtue of these two sacraments.

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Baptism: biblical foundations and institution

Among the many Old Testament pre-figurations of Baptism, three stand out, since the New Testament explicitly describes them as alluding to this sacrament. These three scriptural images are the universal flood, the crossing of the Red Sea, and circumcision (cf. 1 Pet 3:20-21; 1 Cor 10:1; Col 2:11-12). In the ministry of John the Baptist, the rite of water is linked to doctrinal preparation, conversion and the desire for grace. Thus the baptism of John, while lacking salvific effectiveness, reveals some of the pillars of the future Christian catechumenate.

Jesus is baptised in the waters of the Jordan River at the beginning of his

public ministry (cf. Mt 3:13-17), not out of necessity, but out of redemptive solidarity. There water is definitively shown to be the material element of the sacramental sign for Baptism. The heavens are opened, the Spirit descends in the form of a dove, and the voice of God the Father confirms Christ's divine filiation. These events, which take place in the Head of the future Church, reveal to us the mystery of what will later be sacramentally brought about in the Church's members.

Later, in his meeting with Nicodemus, Jesus points to the spiritual link between baptismal water and salvation, from which the necessity of Baptism stems: "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God" (Jn 3:5).

Christ's Paschal Mystery gives Baptism its salvific value. Jesus, in

fact, “had already spoken of his Passion, which he was about to suffer in Jerusalem, as a ‘Baptism’ with which he had to be baptized. The blood and water that flowed from the pierced side of the crucified Jesus are types of Baptism and the Eucharist, the sacraments of new life” (*Catechism*, 1225).

Before ascending into heaven, the Lord Jesus said to the apostles: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19-20). The disciples faithfully follow this commandment from Pentecost onwards. This mandate points to the primary goal of evangelisation and is still relevant today.

Commenting on these texts, St. Thomas Aquinas says that the

institution of Baptism has various parts. With regard to the matter of the sacrament, the institution occurred at the Baptism of Christ; the necessity of Baptism was affirmed in John 3:5; the practice of this sacrament began when Jesus sent his disciples to preach and baptise; its effectiveness comes from Christ's Passion; finally, the fact that it is meant for all men and women is proclaimed in Matthew 28:19.

Justification and the effects of baptism

We read in Romans 6:3-4: "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." Baptism, by incorporating the faithful into

Christ's Life, Death and Resurrection and his saving action, brings with it the gift of justification. This truth is stated in Colossians 2:12: "You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead." This text, in comparison with the aforementioned text from the Letter to the Romans, adds a reference to the role of faith. By this theological virtue, together with the rite of water, we "put on Christ," as Galatians 3:26-27 confirms: "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."

The justification that occurs in Baptism leads to specific effects in the Christian's soul. In describing these, theology distinguishes between the healing and elevating effects. The former type of effect

refers to the forgiveness of sins, as St. Peter's preaching emphasises: "Peter said to them, '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). This healing effect includes the remission of original sin and, in adults, of all personal sins. All the temporal and eternal punishment due for sin is also taken away. However, "temporal consequences of sin remain in the baptized, such as suffering, illness, death, and such frailties inherent in life as weaknesses of character, and so on, as well as an inclination to sin that Tradition calls *concupiscence*, or metaphorically, 'the tinder for sin' (*fomes peccati*)" (Catechism, 1264).

The elevating effect of Baptism consists in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit; indeed, "by one Spirit we were all baptized" (1 Cor 12:13). Because

the Spirit is the “Spirit of Christ” (Rom 8:9), we receive “the spirit of sonship” (Rom 8:15) as sons in the Son. Along with the gift of divine sonship, God bestows on the baptised person sanctifying grace, the theological and moral virtues, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Along with this reality of grace, Baptism “seals the Christian with the indelible spiritual mark (*character*) of his belonging to Christ. No sin can erase this mark, even if sin prevents Baptism from bearing the fruits of salvation” (*Catechism*,1272).

Since “by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor 12:13), incorporation into Christ is at the same time incorporation into the Church. Thus, by means of Baptism we are united with all Christians, also with those who are not in full communion with the Catholic Church.

Finally, we should remember that the baptised are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9). This text reveals to us how the baptised share in the common priesthood of the faithful. By this priestly identity, “reborn as sons of God, [the baptized] must profess before men the faith they have received from God through the Church’ (*Lumen Gentium* 11) and participate in the apostolic and missionary activity of the People of God” (*Catechism*, 1270).

Necessity of Baptism

The teaching of the New Testament categorically affirms, with regard to Christ, that “there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). St. Paul states that being “baptised

into Christ” is equivalent to having “put on Christ” (Gal 3:27). Hence, Jesus’ statement that “he who believes and is baptised will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mk 16:16) must be understood in its full force. The Church’s belief in the necessity of Baptism for salvation arises from this scriptural foundation.

We need to understand such necessity according to the careful formulation of the Magisterium: “The Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation. He also commands his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to all nations and to baptize them. Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament. The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude; this is why she

takes care not to neglect the mission she has received from the Lord to see that all who can be baptized are ‘reborn of water and the Spirit.’ *God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments*” (Catechism, 1257).

There are, indeed, special situations in which the principal fruits of Baptism can be received without the mediation of the sacrament. But precisely because there is no sacramental sign in such cases, there is no certainty that grace has been conferred. What the ecclesial tradition has called Baptism of blood and Baptism of desire are not actions that are received by a person. Rather, such terms indicate a set of circumstances that are present in a particular person, and which determine the conditions for salvation. Within this perspective we can appreciate “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” (*Catechism*, 1258). Similarly, the Church affirms that “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” (*Catechism*, 1260).

The situations of children who have died without Baptism does not fall under the category of Baptism of blood or of desire. For such children, “the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them” (*Catechism*, 1261). The Church does so with faith in divine mercy, knowing that God wills that all men should be saved (cf.

1 Tim 2:4). With this awareness, the Church trusts that there is a path of salvation for children who die without Baptism (cf. *Catechism*, 1261).

Liturgical celebration

The rite of Baptism begins with the “rites of reception,” where the Church seeks to properly discern the willingness of the candidates for Baptism, or of their parents, to receive this sacrament and to assume its consequences. The biblical readings follow, which illuminate the baptismal mystery, and are commented on in the homily. Then comes the invocation of the saints, into whose communion the candidate will be incorporated. With the prayer of exorcism, as well as the anointing with the oil of catechumens, the Church prays for divine protection against the wiles of the evil one. Immediately after these

prayers, the water is blessed with a formula rich in catechetical meaning, which gives liturgical expression to the water-Spirit connection. The importance of faith and conversion are made present through the Trinitarian profession of faith and the renunciation of Satan and sin.

After these rites, the liturgy now enters the sacramental moment: “the washing of water with the word” (Eph 5:26). The ablution with water, whether by pouring or immersion, is carried out in such a way that the water runs over the head, thus signifying the true washing of the soul. The valid matter of the sacrament is water, considered as such according to the common judgment of men. As the minister pours water three times over the candidate’s head, or immerses it, he pronounces the words: “[Name of candidate], I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of

the Holy Spirit.” In Eastern liturgies the following formula is used: “The servant of God, [name of candidate], is baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

The post-baptismal or explanatory rites illustrate the mystery which has been accomplished with the baptismal formula and the washing with water. The newly baptized person's head is anointed (if Confirmation does not immediately follow), to signify his or her participation in the common priesthood and to evoke the future anointing with sacred chrism during Confirmation. A white vestment is given to exhort the newly baptized to preserve baptismal innocence and as a symbol of the new life which has been given. The candle which is lit in the Paschal candle and is given to the newly baptized Christian symbolises the light of Christ; it serves as a

reminder to live as children of the light by the gift of faith. The rite of the *Ephphetha*, in which the minister touches the candidate's ears and mouth with his thumb, signifies the attitude of listening to and proclaiming the word of God. Finally, the recitation of the Lord's Prayer before the altar – in adults, in the Eucharistic liturgy – shows the candidate's new status as a child of God.

Minister and candidate for Baptism. Baptism in a Christian's life

The ordinary ministers of Baptism are the bishop and the priest and, in the Latin Church, also the deacon. In case of necessity, any man or woman and even a non-Christian can baptise, provided that he or she has the intention of carrying out what the Church believes.

Baptism is intended for all men and women who have not yet received it. The required conditions for this sacrament depend on whether the candidate is a child or an adult. The former, who have not yet attained the use of reason, should receive the sacrament during the first days of life, as soon as the child's health and that of the mother permit it. Indeed, as the doorway to the life of grace, Baptism is an absolutely gratuitous event, and for its validity it is sufficient that it not be rejected. Furthermore, the candidate's faith, which is necessarily ecclesial faith, is made present by the faith of the Church. The child will participate in this faith and in the life of the Church when he or she reaches adulthood. There are, however, certain limits to the practice of infant Baptism. It is illicit to baptize a child if the parents' consent is lacking, or if there is no sufficient guarantee that the child will be educated in the Catholic faith.

In order to ensure the latter, godparents are appointed, chosen from among persons who are mature Christians.^[1]

The adult candidates are prepared through the catechumenate, which is structured according to the various local practices. This preparation is oriented towards the reception of Baptism, as well as Confirmation and First Holy Communion, at the same ceremony. During the period of catechumenate, the Church seeks to foster the desire for grace, including the intention to receive Baptism, which is a condition for the sacrament's validity in adults. Such preparation goes hand in hand with doctrinal instruction, which, progressively imparted, solidifies the supernatural virtue of faith in the candidate. The Church also seeks to inspire a true conversion of heart, which can involve the need for

radical changes in the candidate's life.

The sacramental character given by Baptism, which we have already made mention of, is a spiritual sign which brings about a configuration with Christ. This imprints on the soul a likeness to Christ himself, to whom from that moment on the newly baptized person belongs and to whom they must become ever more closely identified with. This initial configuration to Christ thus constitutes a permanent call to the final identification with Christ, that is, "to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren" (Rom 8:29). This is the baptismal foundation of the universal call to holiness, echoed by the Second Vatican Council: "All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian

life and to the perfection of charity” (*Lumen gentium*, 40).

This baptismal character is a distinctive spiritual sign, which we can also term “disposing.” In saying that this sign is distinctive, we mean that, towards the outside world, this character distinguishes Christians from non-Christians. By “disposing,” we mean that, within the soul, the baptismal character “disposes” the soul to live the radical equality present among all the baptized. As St. Paul says, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:27-28). This fundamental equality, together with being “one” in Christ, impels us to live a fraternity that is based on more than mere human affinity. Finally, as a “disposing” sign, the baptismal character involves a

supernatural capacity which allows the person to receive and assimilate fruitfully the saving grace coming from the other sacraments. In this sense, Baptism orients our life towards the other sacraments. It would therefore be incoherent to receive Baptism and ignore the other sacraments.

Biblical and historical foundations of Confirmation

The prophecies about the Messiah had announced that “the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him” (Is 11:2), and the presence of this Spirit would be linked to his election as one who has been sent: “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” (Is 42:1). The prophetic words are even more explicit when the Messiah himself speaks: “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is

upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted” (Is 61:1).

Something similar is also announced for the entire people of God; to its members God says: “I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes” (Ezek 36:27); and in Joel 2:29 a more universal distribution of this gift is emphasised: “Even upon the menservants and maidservants in those days, I will pour out my spirit.”

With the mystery of the Incarnation, the messianic prophecy is fulfilled (cf. Lk 1:35), confirmed, completed and publicly manifested in the anointing at the Jordan River (cf. Lk 3:21-22). There the Spirit descends upon Christ in the form of a dove and the voice of the Father confirms the prophecy of divine election. Jesus presents himself at the beginning of his ministry as the anointed of

Yahweh, in whom the prophecies are fulfilled (cf. Lk 4:18-19). He allows himself to be guided by the Spirit (cf. Lk 4:1; 4:14; 10:21) until the very moment of his death (cf. Heb 9:14).

Before offering his life for us, Jesus promises to send the Spirit (cf. Jn 14:16; 15:26; 16:13), which indeed occurs at Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:1-4), in explicit reference to the prophecy of Joel (cf. Acts 2:17-18). Thus begins the universal mission of the Church.

The same Spirit poured out on the apostles in Jerusalem is communicated by them to the baptised by means of the laying on of hands and prayer (cf. Acts 8:14-17; 19:6). This practice became so well known in the early Church that it is attested to in the Letter to the Hebrews as part of the “elementary doctrine” and “foundation” of the Christian life (Heb 6:1-2). This biblical vision is completed by the

Pauline and Johannine tradition, which links the concepts of “anointing” and “seal” with the Spirit infused into Christians (cf. 2 Cor 1:21-22; Eph 1:13; 1 Jn 2:20.27). These two concepts found liturgical expression in the earliest Christian documents, which give witness to the anointing of the candidate with perfumed oil.

These same documents testify to the ritual unity in the early Church of the three sacraments of Christian initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Communion). These sacraments were conferred during the Easter celebration presided over by the bishop in the cathedral. When Christianity spread outside the cities and infant Baptism became widespread, it was no longer possible to follow this practice. In the West, Confirmation was reserved for the bishop and separated from Baptism. In the East, however, the unity of the

sacraments of initiation was preserved. These rites were conferred at the same time on the newborn child by the priest. Also in the East, the anointing with *myron* (Greek term meaning chrism oil) took on ever-greater importance. This anointing was applied to various parts of the body. In the West, the laying on of hands has become a general norm for all those receiving Confirmation. Each person confirmed also receives the anointing with chrism on the forehead.

Liturgical significance and sacramental fruits of Confirmation

The chrism used for Confirmation, composed of olive oil and balsam, is consecrated by the bishop or patriarch, and only by him, during the Chrism Mass. The anointing of the confirmand with the holy chrism is a sign of one's consecration to the

Lord. “By Confirmation Christians, that is, those who are anointed, share more completely in the mission of Jesus Christ and the fullness of the Holy Spirit with which he is filled, so that their lives may give off ‘the aroma of Christ.’ (cf. 2 Cor 2:15). By this anointing, the confirmand receives ‘the mark,’ the *seal* of the Holy Spirit” (*Catechism*, 1294-1295).

When Confirmation is performed separately from Baptism, this anointing is preceded by the renewal of the baptismal promises and the profession of faith of the confirmands. “This clearly shows that Confirmation follows Baptism” (*Catechism*, 1298). These rites are followed, in the Roman liturgy, by the bishop’s extension of his hands over all the candidates for Confirmation. At the same time, the bishop pronounces a prayer of invocation and supplication. Then comes the specifically sacramental rite, which is

performed “through the anointing with chrism on the forehead, which is done by the laying on of the hand, and through the words:... ‘Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit.’”^[2] In the Eastern Churches, the anointing is done on the most significant parts of the body, and each anointing is accompanied by the formula: ‘the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit’ (*Catechism*, 1300). The rite concludes with the sign of peace, as a manifestation of ecclesial communion with the bishop (cf. *Catechism*, 1301).

Confirmation thus has an intrinsic unity with Baptism, even if this unity is not necessarily expressed in the same rite. The sacrament of Confirmation completes the candidate’s baptismal inheritance with the supernatural gifts required for Christian maturity. Confirmation is conferred only once, since it “imprints on the soul an *indelible*

spiritual mark, the ‘character,’ which is the sign that Jesus Christ has marked a Christian with the seal of his Spirit by clothing him with power from on high so that he may be his witness” (*Catechism*, 1304). Through this sacrament, Christians receive in rich abundance the gifts of the Holy Spirit; they are more closely bound to the Church, and “are more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith, both by word and by deed” (*Lumen Gentium*, 11).

Thus, a baptised and confirmed Christian is called to participate in the evangelising mission of the Church by virtue of these sacraments, without needing to receive a special mandate from the hierarchy, at least in the area of personal relationships (family, friends, work setting...). Particularly through Confirmation, this calling includes the supernatural means to help ensure that one’s own growth in

Christian life is not abandoned in the course of the various vicissitudes in life, and to provide the strength needed to overcome the fear of boldly announcing the Christian faith, both in favourable environments as well as in others where there is indifference or hostility to Christianity or towards the Church. A confirmed person is called to bear witness to Christ with the example of their Christian life and by their words.

Minister and subject of confirmation

As successors of the apostles, the bishops alone are “the original ministers of confirmation” (*Lumen Gentium*, 26). In the Latin rite, the ordinary minister is exclusively the bishop; a priest can validly confirm only in the cases foreseen by canon law (such as adult Baptism, reception into Catholic communion, and

danger of death), when he receives this specific faculty from the bishop, or when he is temporarily given this task by the bishop. In the Eastern Churches, the ordinary minister is also the priest, who must always use the chrism consecrated by the patriarch or bishop.

As a sacrament of Christian initiation, Confirmation is intended for all Christians, and not just for a select few. In the Latin rite, it is conferred once the candidate has reached the use of reason: the specific age depends on local practices, which should respect this sacrament's character as a sacrament of initiation. Confirmation requires prior instruction, a right intention and the state of grace.

Basic bibliography

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Catholic Church, 251-270.

[1] Cf. *Catechism*, 1255.

[2] Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution,
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