

The Sacrament of Baptism

Holy Baptism, one of the Church's two major sacraments, is the full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's body, the Church (*The Book of Common Prayer, (BCP)*, p. 298). Through baptism, a person enters into the Christian community and is recognized as a child of God, marked as Christ's own forever. It is not repeatable and not denominational.

Baptism evokes images of cleansing, new life, death and resurrection. It recalls biblical themes of Israel's exodus through the sea, John the Baptist's call for repentance, Christ's burial and resurrection. It enacts theological concepts such as repentance, forgiveness, adoption and new life empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Ancient Baptism

The baptismal ritual has its roots in ancient practice. A convert to Judaism was immersed in water to signify that person's crossing of the Red Sea and accepting the heritage of the Jewish people. John the Baptist preached repentance and baptized Jews to prepare them for the coming of the Messiah. When he baptized Jesus, the Holy Spirit, symbolized by the dove, descended upon Jesus and God proclaimed him a beloved Son.

Thus early Christian baptism imitated Jewish initiation of converts but reinterpreted it to link repentance, cleansing, new birth, adoption, death and resurrection with deliverance through the waters. Christian converts were immersed in water, signifying death to old ways and new life with Christ (Romans 6:3-11).

Baptism in the Early Church

The early Church referred to the practices of baptism and eucharist as *mysteria* (Greek, *mysterion*), a term later replaced in the western Church by *sacraments* (Latin, *sacramentum*). A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace (*BCP*, p. 857).

In New Testament times, baptism was often immediate upon confession of faith. Over the next 200 years, a more complex process developed because most converts were unaware of the traditions from which Christianity came, or perhaps because Christians were persecuted and hoped to avoid spies in their midst.

The Apostolic Tradition by Hippolytus, written in Rome about the year 200, describes the evolving initiatory process. Usually, the candidates for baptism were adults, though children of professing adults were also baptized. Before a person could begin the process, a sponsor testified as to the person's character and receptiveness. Those who passed the "scrutiny" were called *catechumens* (hearers) and began a three-year period of study of the heritage of Hebrew scriptures and, later, the gospels.

Catechumens were permitted to attend only the first part of Sunday services where they heard scriptures and the sermon, but were dismissed before the eucharist. Upon successful completion of the period of instruction, they became candidates for baptism, which occurred at the all-night vigil on the night before Easter. As Easter day dawned, candidates removed their clothing to signify that nothing of the old life remained, renounced the devil and all his works, were anointed with oil of exorcism, then submerged into the water.

Persons being baptized were immersed three times as they responded, "I believe" to each of three questions. "Do you believe in God, the Father almighty?...in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?...in the Holy Spirit, the holy church, and the resurrection of the flesh?" Indeed the Christian creeds grew out of these early baptismal affirmations of faith.

As they emerged from the water, the newly baptized received new white robes and were presented to the bishop who anointed them with the sign of the cross on their foreheads. Then, for the first time, they participated in the eucharist.

Baptism Through the Centuries

When Constantine made Christianity an established religion, changes occurred. Christianity became popular and the need for secrecy ended. The period of preparation was reduced to several weeks. The Pelagian controversy over the nature of humanity and the necessity of grace brought about an increased emphasis on original sin along with an increase in baptism of young children.

By the Middle Ages, baptism was understood primarily as a washing away of original sin, with much of the rich imagery of the early Church lost. Infant baptism became



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the norm. Confirmation, previously part of the baptismal rite, became a separate rite, a public anointing by a bishop, postponed until a child had learned certain texts.

The 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* restored baptism as a public act (except in emergencies) and directed the service to begin at the entrance to the church. The 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* restored the centrality of initiation into the community with admission to the eucharist as the climax, the public nature of the rite, and congregational involvement in it. The rubric lists four occasions as especially appropriate for baptisms: the Easter Vigil, Pentecost, First Sunday of Epiphany (Baptism of Jesus) and All Saints' Day (or the Sunday following).

Symbols of Baptism

Water

"...the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage...In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John...In it we are buried with Christ... By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit..." (BCP, p. 306).

These words of the thanksgiving over the water from the current baptismal rite recap the history and meaning of the sacrament. Water, the primary symbol of baptism, is the outward and visible sign of this sacrament. Water evokes many powerful images—cleansing, new life, refreshment. It was an especially meaningful symbol of life-giving power to people in arid countries.

Liturgist Marion Hatchett tells us that "The early church fathers compared the water of baptism to the primordial waters, the water of the grave, the Red Sea waters, the water from the rock, the water in which Naaman was immersed, the water of Mary's womb, the Jordan River, the living water promised the woman at the well in Samaria, the healing pool of Bethsaida, the water from the side of Christ, and the waters of Paradise."

Baptismal Confession of Faith

The six questions that come after the presentation of the candidates express the reorientation of life that baptism requires—the renunciation of the power of evil and the acceptance of the power of Christ. The questions follow the traditional three-fold form in which candidates

renounced "the world, the flesh, and the devil." The old terms can be easily misunderstood as implying all material things are evil in and of themselves (the Manichean heresy), whereas Christian doctrine holds "everything created by God is good" (1 Timothy 4:4).

Yet evil remains one of our most fundamental problems. The present wording of the renunciations seeks to understand evil as distortion of God's purposes. Theologians sometimes speak of three forms in which we experience evil: in the cosmos or nature, in human social systems, and in personal life. At baptism then, the candidates reject all the spiritual forces that rebel against God (cosmic evil), evil powers of this world (systemic evil) and individual desires that draw us away from God (personal evil).

In some old rites, candidates faced west while making the renunciations, then turned to the east while stating the adherences. Thus the wording of the next question, "Do you turn to Jesus Christ...?" This second set of three questions summarizes what it means to be a Christian.

First we turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as the one whose saving action on the cross saves us from captivity to the power of evil. We acknowledge that we are now free and responsible persons, not victims. Secondly, we put our trust in God's transforming power and love. God is present and active in our lives and history. We are not alone. And third, we promise to follow and obey Jesus, to model our lives on Jesus' life.

Oil

In the ancient world, oil was nearly as important to daily life as water. It was a basic element of the diet, an essential component to bread making. It had cleansing, cosmetic and medicinal uses, and was fuel for lamps.

Oil was also associated with royalty and religious anointing. Old Testament priests, kings and prophets were anointed. In the New Testament, oil becomes a symbol of baptism. In fact, the title *Christ* means "the anointed one." In baptism, we too receive an anointing signifying our membership in Christ's royal priesthood.

By the end of the fourth century, an anointing with *chrism* (oil blessed by the bishop) after the immersion was



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customary. Later, this anointing became separated from baptism and became part of the rite of confirmation.

The baptismal anointing depicts the bond between the one being baptized and Christ the Anointed One. The laying on of hands at the prayer for the newly baptized ritually symbolizes the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Symbols of Baptism: Light

In most religions and cultures, light is a symbol for the divine. Images of light and darkness are plentiful in the Bible. "Let there be light," says God in the beginning of creation (Genesis 1:3). Jesus calls disciples "the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14), and John calls Christ "the light of the world" (John 8:12). God calls people "out of darkness into God's marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

As an appropriate symbol for baptism, light suggests enlightenment, direction and illumination as well as the divine presence as new Christians begin their journeys in faith. We bear the light of Christ to illuminate whatever darkness we confront.

In many churches, the paschal candle (lit with new fire during the Easter Vigil) stands near the baptismal font except during the fifty days of Easter. A custom dating to the eleventh century is the giving of a burning candle lighted from the paschal candle to the newly baptized or to a godparent.

The Baptismal Font

Throughout history baptismal fonts (receptacles for the water of baptism) have had many shapes, representing bath, womb, tomb, cross, hexagon or octagon. Each shape emphasizes a different aspect of Christian initiation. Often a shell is used to pour the water.

Traditionally the font was placed near the main entrance to the church to remind us every time we enter the church that we entered into the Christian community through baptism. However, practical considerations today often dictate that the place of baptism should be at the front of the church so that the whole community can see and participate in the rite.

With renewed interest in adult baptism as the norm, contemporary church architects are designing fonts as shallow pools with the water flowing into the pool

from above. The sound of flowing water adds another dimension to the symbolism of the living water of baptism and allows for the possibility of baptism by immersion.

Sponsors or Godparents

Candidates for baptism must be sponsored by one or more persons who are baptized Christians. In the early Church, sponsors were persons well known to the congregation and able to vouch for the sincerity of those requesting baptism.

Later, when infant baptism became the norm, sponsors (or godparents) were persons who accepted responsibility for raising the child in the Christian faith. The tradition of two godparents of the same sex as the child and one of the opposite sex dates to a rubric in the 1662 prayer book. The 1979 prayer book acknowledges that it is fitting for the parents to be included among the designated godparents.

In the service, sponsors stand with the minister before the font and present their candidates. Sponsors of adults declare their intention to support their candidates by prayer and example in the Christian life. Sponsors of infants also take vows on behalf of their godchildren. Since baptisms normally take place in public services of the church, the rite reminds the whole congregation that the community shares the responsibility for the new Christian's growth in the Christian faith.

The Baptismal Covenant

"A covenant is a relationship initiated by God, to which a body of people responds in faith" (*BCP*, p. 846). The Baptismal Covenant takes the form of the three paragraphs of the Apostles' Creed given in response to questions by the celebrant, followed by questions related to living out the Christian faith. The words of the creed, or confession of faith, describe the new relationship with God that baptism initiates.

The five questions that follow define the broad areas of what is required in order to live out this covenantal relationship. First, one lives a communal life based on teaching, friendship, eucharist and prayers. There will be a continuing need to identify and resist evil, and to repent when one fails to do so. A Christian life is one that witnesses to the good news in both word and example.



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Service to others is basic to Christian life along with a commitment to work for peace and justice among all people and to respect the dignity of every person.

The rite stresses the corporate nature of covenantal living. Though we are baptized individually and uniquely by name, we are baptized into a community. Every rite of baptism is a rite of renewal for the whole congregation.

After the renunciations and adherences, the celebrant asks all present to support those being baptized in their new life in Christ and to join with them in pledging the covenant. In order to respond in faith to God's love, we need the support of the whole community. (See also "An Outline of the Faith," *BCP*, pp. 858-859 and "Articles of Religion," XXVII, *BCP*, p. 873.)

Baptism in the Life of the Church

The celebration of baptism stresses the corporate nature of covenantal living. Though we are baptized individually and uniquely by name, we are baptized into a community. Every celebration of baptism offers an opportunity for the whole congregation to renew their baptismal covenant.

The Christian community believes that it is not possible to live well in a complex world without the Christ who has triumphed over death. His death and resurrection make it possible for us to try to be like him, to overcome our limitations and to rise after our own deaths. Those who remember Jesus in the very fiber of their beings "live radically different lives, staking everything on the promise of the resurrection."

While the promise may seem bold and the response risky, for centuries it has helped Christians struggle to freedom from the burden of oppression, like their ancestors in faith who fled from Egypt through the Red Sea and are commemorated in the prayer blessing the baptismal waters. It gives them a clear direction and a secure stance when life's upheavals become especially rough.

Entering this community for baptism renews its own identity and purpose. That is why the candidates procession from the door to the font to the altar is symbolic. It represents a people who are never static but always on the move—just as were their Hebrew ancestors in the desert or the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Their actions of gathering, processing, voicing beliefs and making promises are as vital to them as they are to those baptized.

*"Holy Baptism is the sacrament
by which God adopts us
as his children
and makes us members
of Christ's Body,
the Church,
and inheritors of
the kingdom of God."*

*—The Book of Common Prayer
(p. 858)*