

## “Why Catholic?” session #3: BAPTISM

Before we begin our exploration of the Sacrament of Baptism, let us resituate a few things we said last week about the Sacraments in general. I think the comparison that best helps us to understand what a Sacrament is, is that of a gesture.

We stated that each Sacrament is a gesture of Christ.

In other words,

- In each Sacrament, Jesus touches us
- In each Sacrament, beyond words, Jesus takes hold of us

The Sacrament is like a loving embrace.

In the embrace, Jesus communicates his love.

The best context, therefore, for understanding of the Sacraments, is always that of an *encounter* with Christ.

Baptism, in this context, is then understood as an *initial encounter*, the *initial embrace*.

In this way, we see how real the Sacraments are.

Otherwise, they remain vague and become somewhat generic.

We even end thinking in quantitative terms:

“How much blessing I get in this or that Sacrament?”

We can easily fall into such thinking, especially with such practices as indulgences, etc.

Love, however, is never quantitative.

One cannot say “I have 722 lbs. of love in my heart for you”.

There *is* more or less in the Sacraments, more or less *intimacy*.

The Sacraments are always intimate, but some Sacraments are *more* intimate.

If Reconciliation prepares Eucharist, it suggests that Eucharist is more intimate.

If Confirmation completes Baptism, then Confirmation is more intimate.

As you may have noticed, with each Sacrament there is something tangible and very real which engages us in our senses.

This something tangible and very real suggests and signifies the hidden reality, i.e. the communication of God, this divine sharing, beyond words.

St. Thomas Aquinas (+1274) to whom I will refer *much* in our exploration (and whom the Catechism often quotes)

says that a Sacrament is “a sign of a holy thing that makes us holy.”

He also says a Sacrament is “a sacred secret.”

And so, amazingly, each Sacrament suggests and points to a hidden something that Jesus actually does.

In other words, what the Sacrament symbolizes actually happens.

Consequently, the Sacrament is more than just a symbol.

For example, in Baptism, the water signifies cleansing and Jesus actually cleanses the soul.

We believe that Jesus instituted the Sacraments

and in so doing makes a promise always to embrace us when they are celebrated.

We must always look to Jesus, the author of the Sacraments.

They make no sense outside of Him.

They are not divine outside of Him.

They are simply interesting (more or less!) human rituals outside of Him.

They are not outside of Him, and thus are always *more* than rituals

– whether people realize it or not.

Why? Because Jesus always keeps his promises.

When a Sacrament is celebrated Jesus comes, Jesus is present.

When we fulfill His commandment, that is to say, do what He says and celebrate these rites or actions, Jesus comes, Jesus is present.

Consequently, each time a Sacrament is celebrated divine love is communicated

- not because the Sacraments are automatic or magical, but
- because Jesus is faithful, Jesus keeps His promises

In each Sacrament, we will see there are

- two necessary aspects
- two things that Jesus designed and asks that we include and do

for there to be a Sacrament.

And this is what, viewed from the outside, without faith, can appear to be superstitious or “magic”.

Think about it: if you were to try to explain the Eucharist, for example, to a non believer, i.e. someone never exposed to Christianity, or even to some Christians (!).

“Well, we take some bread and wine. The priest says these words.

And “poof” we have the body of God.”

“Oh, now that’s a new one! That’s fancy.”

And yet, this is what we believe.

The Church articulated the following at the Council of Trent (Canon 8):

“If any one says that by the said Sacraments of the New Law grace is not conferred through the act performed, but that faith alone in the divine promise suffices for the obtaining of grace, let him be – to use the sweet terminology of old – anathema.

“Anathema” can be paraphrased, “Good Luck out in left field”.

So much do we believe this promise of Jesus that the Sacraments are valid, even when the minister is *out to lunch*.

Thomas Aquinas goes so far as to say the minister can even not be sure he believes in the Sacrament, and that “even an unbeliever can confer a true Sacrament, provided the other essentials be there.” (III Q 64 article 9).

It is Jesus who is faithfully at work.

But there is a mysterious cooperation.

We, the Church, must

- bring something to the table.
- perform what Jesus has asked.

in order for Jesus to touch us in these special ways.

There are words and “matter” required – according to Jesus’ institution – for there to be a Sacrament.

There are words and some “element” required for there to be a Sacrament.

There are words and a “sensible sign” (i.e. something that can be grasped by the senses, e.g. water, that serves as a sign) required for there to be a Sacrament.

St. Augustine says in his commentary on the gospel of John,

“The word is added to the element and this becomes a Sacrament.”

Here we see the mystery of the church at work, the body of Christ acting in concert with Christ, the church doing what Jesus commands, and Christ responding faithfully.

In the end, the Sacraments testify to the faithfulness of Jesus.

Thomas Aquinas (again!) finds an interesting parallel which I mention in passing.

He acknowledges how the Church discerns these two aspects,

first accepts them as a given, and then tries to discern how they make sense.

He says that words being added to “sensible signs” is fitting in different ways.

One way that it makes sense is given who Jesus is: God become human.

Thomas Aquinas says that words are joined to the sensible sign

much like the Word (i.e. the second person of the Trinity) was joined to sensible flesh.

*words – sensible sign*

*Word – sensible flesh*

Chew on that one!

And so we believe that Jesus says to the church, (if I may take liberties and paraphrase):  
“You will take this element, you will bring to the table this specific ‘matter’  
(water, bread, your sins, human love in a choice) and, with the element, you will utter  
words that I will give you, and I will be at work at that moment. And in one of these  
celebrations, one of these Sacraments, the Eucharist, I will remain, there will be an  
abiding presence”.

We take an element that is naturally symbolic and fittingly lends itself  
and the words that are added articulate the significance/meaning.

The Sacraments also testify to the mercy of Jesus.

He takes that which is closest to us, that whereby we know  
(we always come to know through the sensible).

Human experience is always the alliance of the senses and the mind.

Jesus makes use of something that we can sense (i.e. see touch taste etc),  
so that our minds – ennobled by faith – can touch Him,  
who comes to us beneath the veil of the sensible sign.

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Now, let us reiterate the source of the power of the Sacraments: *Jesus!*

Indeed.

Thomas Aquinas is a little more specific.

The Sacraments, being encounters with Christ, communicate divine love.

Again, gestures communicate love better than words.

Where did Christ pour fourth his love most magnificently? At the Cross.

Because that the love poured forth is eternal, the hidden face of the Cross is eternal.

Although no longer a reality including pain and blood,  
the Cross remains a source of love.

Thomas Aquinas says (III Q62 article 5 response),

“The Sacraments of the church derive their power especially from Christ’s passion.”  
And he says “It was in sign of this that from the side of Christ hanging on the cross there flowed water and blood. The former of which belongs to Baptism, the latter of which belongs to the Eucharist, which are the principle Sacraments.”  
Further on, he says, regarding our side of this encounter with Christ,  
“The power of the Sacraments is derived principally from *faith* in Christ’s passion.”

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Now, we believe there are 7 Sacraments.

If I may again appeal to Thomas Aquinas,

He interestingly tries to understand how *seven* Sacraments make sense.

His reference is not that of gestures.

His reference is the reality of human maturation.

He discerns a parallel, a similarity between divine life and human life.

He draws a parallel between

each of the Sacraments and an aspect of the process of maturation of a person

either within him/herself or in relation to the community

(being the social animals that we are).

Let us look at a simple chart, to see how the parallel indeed sheds some light.

We always observe in human life a movement from

- imperfection to perfection
- potentiality to actuality.

We observe the phenomenon of growth towards fullness.

There is increasing perfection – which is either directly or indirectly promoted.

For example,

- Eating directly promotes growth.
- Dressing a wound *indirectly* promotes growth.

*Human life:* a person

**comes to be**                      **becomes bigger and stronger**                      **is nourished to preserve life**

*Divine life:*

**Baptism**                      **Confirmation**                      **Eucharist**

Regarding the Eucharist, recall the words of Jesus in John 6:  
“Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you shall have no *life* within you.”

Interestingly, these three Sacraments that directly affect the spiritual life are called the Sacraments of *initiation*.

This means that they most *directly introduce* us into the life of God.

All of the Sacraments do, but these do with particular intimacy and directness.

Interestingly, these Sacraments would suffice were we not to experience setbacks in the spiritual life just as we experience setbacks in our bodies.

The body needs cures for infirmity. And so, maturation within self continues indirectly:

*Human life:* a person

**is restored to health**                      **is restored to former vigor**

*Divine life:*

**Reconciliation**                      **Anointing**

And maturation continues in relation to the community”

*Human life:* a person

**is empowered to lead others**                      **is joined to another person thus enriching the community and can eventually form a small community thus enlarging the community**

*Divine life:*

**Orders**                      **Matrimony**

## **Baptism:**

### **What is Baptism?**

### **What does Baptism do?**

### **Who Baptizes?**

### **Who is Baptized?**

### **What is Baptism? What does Baptism do?**

Baptism is the most fundamental Sacrament, the most necessary Sacrament, fundamentally speaking.

Baptism is the doorway to the divine life, to God's life.

Baptism is "the gateway to life in the spirit" (CCC #1213).

Baptism is the initial embrace of Christ that introduces us into God's very own life, because Baptism communicates the gift of grace.

Grace (as the Catechism says in #1996) "is a participation in the life of God.

It introduces into the intimacy of Trinitarian life."

And so, if by Baptism we participate in the life of God, at Baptism we are *reborn*.

New life follows new birth.

"Have you been born again?!?!?"

"Well actually, yes. I was Baptized.

And, in fact, every time I encounter Christ I am born again. *Thank you.*"

In Baptism, by consequence, we are cleansed.

If an infant, we are cleansed of association to the original "boo-boo" by Adam and Eve.

If an adult, we are cleansed of everything contrary to love.

Again, the use of water for Baptism suggests this eloquently.

As Thomas Aquinas says

"a Sacrament is an outward and physical sign of an inward effect."

In Baptism, by consequence, we are also enlightened. We become children of light.

Christ instituted the Sacrament of Baptism

when he himself was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan.

Jesus took John the Baptists Baptism and transformed it.

As St. Augustine says “as soon as Christ was plunged into the waters, the waters washed away the sins of all.”

Baptism, however, was not fully entrusted to the church to become an “obligation” until *after* the Resurrection when Jesus said

“Go, therefore, teach all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

(Matthew 28:19)

### **Who Baptizes?**

**The ordinary ministers of Baptism are the bishop and priest and, in the Latin Church, also the deacon. In case of necessity, any person, even someone not baptized, can baptize, if he has the required intention. The intention required 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. (CCC 1256)**

St. Thomas Aquinas says (III Q. 67 article 5, response),

“The person who baptizes offers but his outward ministry,

whereas Christ it is Who baptized inwardly,

Who can use *all persons* to whatever he wills.”

This answers one of the last week’s questions:

“If Baptism is a Sacrament in the Catholic Church,

is it recognized if it is performed outside the Catholic Church,

in a Methodist or Lutheran church for example?” The answer is a resounding YES!!!!

Any one can baptize in case of emergency.

So, if you see an accident, and stop to verify that everyone is alright, and discover that someone is gravely injured – perhaps even in risk of death – what do you do? You call 911, and then you ask the person if they want to receive the gift of God, if they want to be Baptized. I am serious! You do it with discernment and discretion, but you do it if you can. You take your bottle of Dasani, and pour it over them three times, or you gently drag them to the creek and plunge or splash them three times, and say, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Jesus keeps his promises, and He promises a special encounter.

In all cases, i.e. with whoever baptizes,

- the *principle* “actor” is the Trinity.
- the *instrumental* “actor” is the person baptizing.

Hence, the necessary words:

“I baptize you in the name of the **Father**, and of the **Son**, and of the **Holy Spirit**.”

### **Who can be baptized?**

The Catechism says (#1246),

“Every person not yet baptized and only such a person is able to be baptized.”

In other words, *anyone* can be baptized, *including children*.

So what about children?

Many churches say that you cannot Baptize children.

Regarding the latter. the Catechism states (#1252),

“The practice of infant Baptism is an immemorial tradition of the Church.

There is explicit testimony to this practice from the second century on,

and it is quite possible that, from the beginning of the apostolic preaching,

when whole “households” received Baptism, infants may also have been baptized.”

How can we baptize children?

Is it not an invasion of freedom?

Is it not without effect because the child does not consciously choose it?

There is no one more respectful of human freedom than Jesus.  
Baptism therefore does not disrespect the freedom of the infant.  
Answering the second question obliges us to acknowledge the reality of the Church,  
of the mystical body. As unaware of it as we may be, we are carried by the Church.  
Hence, one of the metaphors used for the Church: *mother*.  
It is in this perspective that we say at every Mass,  
“Look not on our sins but on the faith of your church”.  
We appeal to Her who carries us, beyond our individual selves.  
Because we are bound to one another, the faith of the Church,  
crystallized in the faith of the parents,  
is enough to open the child to the gift of grace given in Baptism.  
We, in fact, do something similar when we intercede for one another.  
We hope for those for whom we pray, and in response to our hope,  
God effectively touches them.  
This is not of course Sacramental Baptism. It is a simple blessing.  
But in both cases, Jesus, who is faithful to His promises, responds.

As the Catechism also says (#1250),  
“the sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest  
in infant Baptism.”  
To further underscore what Baptism is and, because of what it is,  
how it can be given to infants,  
let us look at the doctrine of another Christian denomination.  
The contrast will serve to highlight what the Church has come to discern.  
I came across this accidentally on the Web.  
It is a “mega-church” from Colorado Springs, Colorado: New Life Church  
([www.newlifechurch.org](http://www.newlifechurch.org))  
They pose the question of infant Baptism,  
recognizing that it has been practiced for some time.  
They came to the conclusion that it should be practiced.  
But their expose reveals how differently they understand Baptism

from the perspective we have articulated.

They essentially say that Baptism effectively does nothing.

It is a promise that God makes to do something later if there is a profession of faith.

For adults who are Baptized, Baptism is an outward expression before the community that one has accepted Jesus Christ, that one has professed faith.

Here are three points from the expose.

Infant Baptism:

1. does *not* mean the child is saved by/through Baptism (Baptismal Regeneration).

Just as the physical act of circumcision never saved anyone in and of itself, the act of infant Baptism never saves anyone. Baptism is not magic rite. It is not an assurance that if your child should die in infancy, he will go to heaven.

3. does *not* infuse them with grace or give them the Holy Spirit. Some churches teach that Baptism washes away original sin and "infuses" a child with grace and the Holy Spirit (in other words, they teach that Baptism actually gives a child the Holy Spirit and saving grace).

4. does *not* grant faith, but is God's promise to save *if* faith is later present.

Such teaching evacuates the gift of Baptism of its richness.

Such teaching follows the elimination of the Sacraments.

It is the opposite of what The Catholic Church teaches.

This is probably the type of teaching you will find in the mega-churches around here.

We believe that Jesus not only speaks but *touches, embraces*.

We believe that Jesus instituted gestures: the Sacraments.

Both His words and His gestures He entrusts to his Mystical Body and its shepherds.

It is for the fullness of love that Jesus has done so.

Jesus touches children, and his touch is effective.

It is not just so to look at them, and then say, "Oh come back when you're 18."

"Let the children come unto me".

Jesus touches *us* in the Sacraments.

His touch is effective.

His touch effectively transforms...