

**W**E HAVE BEEN LOOKING

at the sacramental actions of the Church, visible signs of God's saving love. Christ acting through the Church performs these signs; and a faith-filled response to them and participation in them are an important means of holiness and salvation for individuals and for the whole Christian community.

In this chapter we are going to look more closely at two of the three sacraments which are known as the sacraments of initiation into the Church: Baptism and Confirmation – the other being Eucharist.

### The Catechumenate

The Bishops at the Second Vatican Council called for the restoration of the Catechumenate in the Church. The restored Catechumenate, or to give it its full title, *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) has been hailed as one of the most important results of the Second Vatican Council for the life of the Church. This is because it is designed to bring home to both catechumens and to 'born and bred Christians' the full implications of what it means to be born into Christ. It reminds all that the only possible way of approaching the Christian life is to see it as a process of total, lifelong, deepening 'conversion'.

The process, which comprises several stages, reaches a climax at the Easter Vigil. At this ceremony the catechumens, now known as the elect, receive the sacrament of Baptism.

On the same occasion, all members of the community are invited to renew their baptismal promises. These solemn actions cannot fail to move the 'born Catholics' to reflect on what it means to be a baptised Christian, and on what commitment to Christ really involves.



### Biblical images of Baptism

We can use different images to describe what it means to be a baptised Christian. Paul spoke of being grafted onto the vine who is Christ, and thus empowered to bear fruit (Romans 11:17). The new Christian begins an entirely new life, is a *new creation* (2 Corinthians 5:17), called to put aside the old self, and becomes a member of the Body of Christ. By Baptism, we become living members through which the life of the risen Christ flows and acts.

The word 'christening' has been somewhat weakened and deprived of its force. Radically, though, it is a beautiful expression: 'being christened' means being made one with Christ, or conformed to Christ. At Baptism, a person enters into the life of the Trinity, being baptised 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. In the ancient Hebrew language, the word 'name' was practically synonymous

with 'person', for one's name conferred identity.

All of these images contribute to express the wonderful effects produced in us by the sacrament of Baptism: grafted into Christ the vine; made a new creation; incorporated into the Body of Christ; conformed to the likeness of Christ; and entering into the life of the Trinity. Paul, whose imagery is so rich and diverse, also speaks of becoming a temple of the Holy Spirit, because it is by Baptism that the Spirit comes and makes a home in us.

We become adopted children, sons and daughters, of the Father, given a share in the divine life. The newly baptised can now call God 'Abba, Father'. Jesus Christ is their brother (see Romans 8:14-17), and all other baptised Christians are their brothers and sisters in Christ. The author of the first letter of John cried out in admiration: *See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are* (1 John 3:1).

The state of the baptised Christian is summed up by Paul in a phrase which could hardly be more simple but is so profound as to defy human understanding: we are 'in Christ'. And this makes every other mark or identification tag (racial, social, or sexual) of quite secondary importance: *As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus* (Galatians 3:27-28).

### A spiritual re-birth

The New Testament emphasises the importance of Baptism in receiving God's gift of salvation. We have already seen Jesus' reply to Nicodemus when Jesus said it was necessary to be 'born again', and Nicodemus (foolishly or facetiously?) asked if that meant he should enter his mother's womb again. Jesus' reply to this odd question was: *no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit* (John 3:5).

The author of the letter to Titus, a disciple of Paul, also stresses the importance of Baptism: *God saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit* (Titus 3:5). This is a clear reference to Baptism.

And the author of 1 Peter, a disciple of Peter, emphasises the same point: *when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in*

**In Baptism, the Church uses water, which is richly symbolic. It suggests cleansing, satisfying thirst, but in a special way, life. Life cannot exist without water. It is the ideal element for the celebration of a sacrament which brings about a new birth into a new family of faith, and a sharing in the life of God.**

*which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you* (1 Peter 3:20-21).

It is on the basis of such texts of Scripture that Catholic Christians



view Baptism as the first step in accepting God's salvation. We also have the last words attributed to the risen Christ at the end of Matthew's Gospel: *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* (Matthew 28:19). Although on the evidence of the Acts of the Apostles, Baptism was first conferred in the name of Jesus, as a sign of union with the person of Jesus himself, by the time the Gospel of Matthew was written (50 years later), Baptism was into the name (person) of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

**Conversion, turning away from sin, is a life-long process. Baptism is not a once-for-all completion of our union with God. Like every birth, it is a beginning, and needs to be lived out daily for the rest of our life. There are no 'converts', only people in the process of being converted.**

According to Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, the Twelve began to fulfil their commission on the day of Pentecost, just seven weeks after Jesus' death and resurrection. Peter exhorted the crowd of Jews who had gathered: *Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit* (Acts 2:38). There are several other passages in Acts which emphasise that in the early Church Baptism was seen as the first step in becoming a Christian (see also Acts 8:12-13; 8:36-38; 9:18; 10:47; 16:15; 19:5).

The first effect of Baptism mentioned by Peter is the forgiveness of sins. The water of Baptism retains the symbolic effect of washing and cleansing, the symbolic value of the Baptism practised by John the Baptist who saw the external washing as a symbol of an interior conversion. The primary symbolism however of the water of Baptism is that of new life brought about by a re-birth.

### Original sin

Original sin is not an easy concept. We are not specifically searching for the 'first' sin (and therefore, the very first sinner) as if involved in a moral archaeological quest. Original Sin is best understood as a generic and universal human reality and condition of sin. The idea of 'original sin' comes to our attention firstly, not as a moment from human history but as a question about our everyday human experience. As we reflect on who we are,

we come to the same realisation as Paul, *For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me* (Romans 7:19-20). As we think about who we are and how we live, we realise that, despite our best intentions, something goes awry. As much as we desire God, we do, in small and large ways, reject God's goodness in our life. We only need to look at the world to realise that for all this world's beauty and joy, there also lurks a terrible darkness and despair. Where does this come from?

That is the question that the people of Israel attempted to answer in the Book of Genesis. The first eleven chapters of Genesis describe in story form the coming of sin into the world and its effects. It tells Israel's version (with the help of ideas borrowed from other near-by cultures) of how, in the beginning of time, the human race became estranged from God by the deliberate sin of our first ancestors. As a consequence of their sin, alienation from God quickly multiplied so that the whole human environment became corrupted and contaminated. The world became alienated from God as a result of human sin. As a result, we are all born in the condition which is called 'original sin'.

Paul speaks of the whole of creation waiting for redemption (Romans 8:22). Everyone born into this sinful world is somehow touched and spoiled by the climate and the power of sin. Prior to any decisions we make as human beings, there is an inclination active within us to make choices away from what is ultimately good and true and beautiful. We live with the incapacity to fully embrace what is of God. We have a longing for God, for the Infinite, but we live in a world which requires finite choices. This necessity to make decisions and choices about who we are and how we live is hindered and mired by this incapacity to fully reach for the Love which calls to us. Our fear of finitude and death narrows our response to the Infinite. We turn away from Love and seek fulfilment in the 'here and now' and we frequently turn that which is positive in our lives into means of destruction. Respect can become envy, passion can become violence, desire can become obsession, pleasure can become addiction, and self-esteem can become self-centredness. History

teaches us that human beings and human societies can swing wildly out of control and commit the most horrendous crimes and cruelties. There is no clearer example of 'original sin' than the damage that human beings have wreaked on one another in both spontaneous and calculated ways throughout the course of time.

However, this Infinite Love (God) which we can reject is infinitely greater than our lack. Baptism frees us from this sinful environment, as well as from personal sin in the case of adults, so that we can enjoy the freedom of the sons and daughters of God (Romans 8:18-25). This does not mean that the baptised are free from the influences of evil, but they are assured that they need no longer be enslaved by these influences because they can call on God's power which is in them. Sin need no longer be their master.

Conversion, turning away from sin, is a life-long process. Baptism is not a once-for-all completion of our union with God. Like every birth, it is a beginning, and needs to be lived out daily for the rest of our life. There are no 'converts', only people in the process of being converted.

Although original sin is mentioned only once in the new baptismal rite, it remains a doctrine of the Church. It receives less attention only because the baptismal liturgy concentrates on the more positive aspect of new life.

As well as mentioning the need for repentance, and the consequent forgiveness of sins, Peter in his first sermon also spoke of the baptised receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). Paul developed this idea when he said *for in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body ... and we were all made to drink of one Spirit* (1 Corinthians 12:13).



## *Dying and rising with Christ*

Paul also compared Baptism to being buried with Christ, a burial that results in death to sin and the 'old nature', resurrection to life with God, and putting on a completely new nature. He wrote: *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life ... The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus* (Romans 6:3-4, 10-11).

Baptism is a participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is commonly administered by the pouring of water over the head of the candidate but the sign is most meaningful when the candidate is immersed in water, as was done in the early days of Christianity. The candidates were led down the steps of the baptismal pool, often in the shape of a tomb, and immersed or 'buried' beneath the surface of the water. They were then raised up, and led up the steps on the other side of the pool – to share the life of the risen Christ.

Baptism is thus seen as a sign of dying and rising with Jesus himself. With him we are raised to new life: we already begin to live the risen life. When Paul wrote, *I have been crucified with Christ*, he was thinking not only of the physical suffering he had to endure for Christ's sake, but of his death to his old self, and to all the values and attitudes of that former existence which were not Christ-minded. And so he would exclaim in joy and wonder: *it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me* (Galatians 2:20).

## **THE BAPTISM OF INFANTS**

The first converts to Christianity were adults. The New Testament does not explicitly state whether infants or children were also baptised, but there are some indications that they were. Immediately after Peter urges his listeners to be baptised (Acts 2:38), he adds the words: *For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him* (2:39). The New Testament also speaks on several occasions of the baptisms of whole households, which in normal circumstances would include children.

It has been convincingly argued that the attitude of Jesus to the children who were brought to him for his blessing was probably preserved as part of an early Christian liturgy for the Baptism of infants and children.

*People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.'* And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. (Mark 10:13-16)

The fact that Jesus did not refuse to bless children, and taught that the kingdom of God belongs to the likes of them, influenced the Church in its practice of baptising infants and children.

At least from the third century on, there is conclusive evidence that infants were baptised, and by the fifth century this was a universally accepted practice throughout the



Church. Nor is there any evidence of any important Church leader denying the validity of infant Baptism during the first few centuries of Christianity.

In Christian countries the great majority of candidates for Baptism continue to be infants. While infants have no need to have personal sins forgiven and are not able to offer a personal response of faith, the practice of infant Baptism is a recognition of Jesus' particular nearness to children. It also emerges from the wisdom of the Church that recognises that families (and the Church) are enriched when faith is a tangible feature of the earliest memories and experiences of childhood. However, there are some Christian communities which demand that Baptism be deferred until the person is able to make his or her own decision for Christ. For this reason,

infant Baptism is not universally practised among Christians today.

The Catholic Church, like all the mainline Christian churches, understands Baptism as an action of Christ welcoming a new member into his family. At that moment, it is true that the one being welcomed is too young to take a conscious part in the proceedings, but nevertheless Baptism marks the beginning of the life-long process of conversion. The coming to faith and the growth in faith which accompanies conversion are a gradual on-going process. The presentation of an infant for Baptism should presuppose the kind of environment in which the child will receive the education and example that will lead him or her to become more aware of the value of God's gifts and of Christ's call to follow him.



## ***Community and parental responsibility***

The Rite of Baptism makes clear where the opportunities and responsibilities lie. There is a sense in which the whole local church community has a part to play in bringing the child to God. Within the community, of course, it is the child's parents and godparents who are specially called to share their faith with the child and to do all they can to encourage and support the child's growth in faith. Parents and godparents are required to renew their *own* baptismal promises. They profess *their* belief and commit themselves to being living examples of faith and leading their child into the mystery and wonder of God. It is through this relationship that one day a child might come to voice his or her own faith.

In the Gospels, there are a number of examples of Jesus responding to the faith of parents when petitioning on behalf of their children. When Jairus, the synagogue leader, asked Jesus to raise his young daughter from death to life (Mark 5:22-23, 35-43), and when another father asked Jesus to expel an evil spirit from his son (Mark 9:17-27), Jesus acted with power because of their faith, not the faith of their children.

The Church believes that Christ responds in the same way when infants and children are baptised. For how much more would he not desire to free children from the far worse bondage of sin and eternal death, in response to the faith of their parents and of the whole Christian community?

But the Church also teaches that the parents of the baptised child must commit themselves to providing an environment for the child to grow in faith. This will prepare the child to make a personal commitment to Jesus Christ upon reaching maturity.

Such a personal faith commitment is absolutely necessary for the mature Christian. One way the Church stresses the necessity for this commitment to the Lord is by calling on each person to renew his or her baptismal covenant every year at the Easter Liturgy.

Infant Baptism also underscores the fact that salvation is a free gift from God. When someone baptises, it is Christ who baptises. He is the one who saves. Infant Baptism reminds us that this salvation through baptism is not something the person could have earned or merited. It reminds us that the sacraments are primarily works of God, and that God's initiative in our lives is most important. The infant did not choose to be baptised, but neither did he or she choose to be born. Both birth and Baptism are God's gift, brought about through human agents: the children's parents. Just as the parents cooperate in God's plan by initiating their child's physical life, they can also cooperate with God, through their faith, in initiating the child's eternal, spiritual life by presenting the child to be baptised.

## ***The fate of the unbaptised***

Finally, what of those who through no fault of theirs remain unbaptised? Scripture tells us that God wants everyone to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). God offers salvation to every human being. It is quite wrong to think that a child who dies unbaptised will be excluded from the eternal joy of union with God. In 2007, the Church's International Theological Commission published an important document on this subject and concluded that *Christians dare to hope that God will embrace (unbaptised children) in his saving mercy. For we all live by faith and hope in the God of mercy and love.*



Similarly those who out of ignorance do not come to know Christ, or have never heard the gospel preached, will not be refused the opportunity to be saved. We may not know how, but nor may we place restrictions on God's infinite love and freedom.

The bishops at the Second Vatican Council stated this quite clearly in the *Constitution on the Church*, (no 16): *Those who through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and moved by grace, try in their actions to do God's will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary to salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life.*

## CONFIRMATION

Baptism is the first sacrament of initiation, not initiation into a club but a new beginning. There are three sacraments whereby a person is fully initiated into the Body of Christ; Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist.

The new Christian celebrates all three of these sacraments with the community at the Easter Vigil. This was the standard practice in the early centuries of Christianity. But in the Western Church, when entire communities had become Christian, and infant Baptism became the norm, it became the practice to delay Confirmation until the child was older. Both Confirmation and Eucharist became separate events to be celebrated later on, when the child had reached the so-called 'age of reason'. It is interesting to note that in the Eastern Orthodox churches, infants are still confirmed and given the Eucharist on the occasion of their Baptism.

As we have seen, the Holy Spirit is received at Baptism, and the baptised person becomes the dwelling place or 'temple' of the Spirit. When we speak of Confirmation as a fuller outpouring of the Spirit, it is not our intention to suggest that the Spirit is somehow divisible. Every sacrament is a sign from the one God of the continuing love that is given to us.

In the Western or Roman church, Confirmation came to be seen as the sacrament of Christian adulthood, or the sacrament which marks the transition



from childhood to maturity. The sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation were still seen as closely associated in terms of purpose and meaning, although separated by many years.

**Through the sacrament of Confirmation, the Holy Spirit empowers God's people to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, to live that message, and to continue Jesus' ministry and mission in the world.**

However, in recent decades there has been a strong move in the Church to restore the order of the sacraments of initiation – Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. Many parts of the Church throughout the world now celebrate Confirmation *prior* to receiving First Eucharist. The sacrament of Confirmation is properly connected to the sacrament of Baptism. Confirmation is the strengthening of the new life which began at the font. Many parents, educators and pastors would argue that there will still be a need for young Catholics to be given an opportunity to make a mature personal commitment to Christ when they become capable of it.

### **The biblical background**

Let us look at some of the biblical background to the Church's sacrament of Confirmation. The Holy Spirit comes first to a person in Baptism (see Acts 2:38), but the book of Acts also mentions a prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit accompanied by the external, visible sign of a 'laying on of hands'. Later we read that Peter and

John were sent to new converts in Samaria and *prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:15-17).*

Later again in Acts, Paul baptised some disciples in the name of the Lord Jesus, and then *when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied (Acts 19:6).* Some theologians think the reason why these people lacked the Holy Spirit was because they were initially baptised only in the name of Jesus, and not in the name of the *Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19).*

Whatever about this theological opinion, the early Church came to recognise that there was a prayer for the sending of the Holy Spirit that was distinct from baptism. Christians often received the full outpouring of the Holy Spirit through the prayer and 'laying on of hands' of the apostles or their associates. Later an anointing with oil was added to the sacrament, and this is how the sacrament of Confirmation originated. The commitment to Christ was thus 'confirmed' or strengthened in the life of the baptised Christian.

The sacrament is also based on the life of Jesus, on whom the Holy Spirit descended when he began his public ministry (Mark 1:9-11), who breathed upon his disciples after his resurrection with the words, *receive the Holy Spirit (John 20:22)*, and who sent the Holy Spirit upon them at Pentecost (Acts 2).



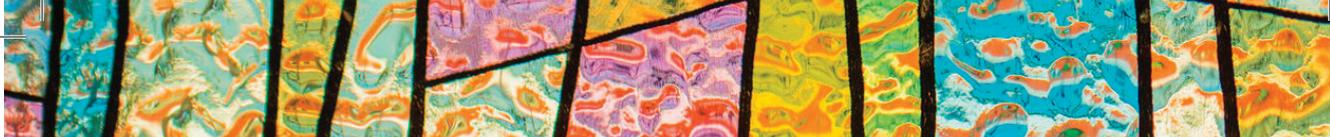
It was at Pentecost, according to the Book of Acts, that Jesus fulfilled his promise to send the Holy Spirit. Confirmation is to Baptism what Pentecost is to Easter. Just as Scripture draws a close connection between the resurrection of Jesus and the sending of the Spirit, so too the sacrament of Confirmation receives its proper emphasis when it is seen in close association with the sacrament of Baptism. The book of the Acts of the Apostles is really a record of the activity of the Holy Spirit from Pentecost on, guiding and directing the growth of the Church in its early years. The sacrament of Confirmation makes Pentecost a permanent event in the life of the Christian.

### **THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT**

It is the same gift of God's love and life which the baptised person receives at Confirmation. The candidate renews his or her baptismal promises, and the bishop (or delegated priest) anoints the candidate on the forehead with fragrant Chrism (consecrated) oil, saying the words: *Be sealed with the gift of the*

*Holy Spirit.* To be 'sealed' means to be authoritatively marked or stamped as someone's property. The oil is the sign of the strength which the sacrament gives. The 'gift of the Holy Spirit', a share in God's life and love, is of course a single gift, but it will manifest itself in a multitude of ways. A traditional list of 'gifts' of the Spirit is taken from the prophecy of Isaiah (11:2-3), where the prophet numbers seven gifts. It should be remembered that the number seven in biblical symbolism stands for fullness, completeness and perfection. In the rite of Confirmation the bishop or his delegate prays that the candidates should receive *the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and fortitude, the spirit of knowledge and piety; ... [and] the spirit of the fear of the Lord.*

Paul also speaks of a number of effects of living by the Spirit: *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control* (Galatians 5:22-23). But ultimately there is no limit to these gifts or fruits, just as there is no limit to love. The way of life proposed by Christ for his followers is a life of unlimited generosity.



### ***Call to service and witness***

Finally, through the sacrament of Confirmation, the Holy Spirit empowers God's people to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, to live that message, and to continue Jesus' ministry and mission in the world. Just as the Spirit descended on Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry and transformed the fearful disciples at Pentecost, so the Spirit equips every Christian for a life of service and witness.

To sum up, Christian initiation begins with Baptism, is sealed by Confirmation and is continued through the Eucharist. Baptism and Confirmation draw us into Christ's

life, and empower us to continue his saving work. They are signs that our lives have been radically influenced by Christ, and the demands they make as far as conversion (radical change) is concerned are constant. But these sacraments also assure us that we are never alone on our pilgrimage, and that God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is our constant companion. The whole of Christian life is not captured in singular sacramental moments but experienced and expressed throughout the life-long journey of deepening of our relationship with Jesus. Real Christian initiation continues throughout all the days of our life.

#### **READ**

When you take up the Gospel for next Sunday, remind yourself that this is God's word to you and to your daily life.

Spirit of God, help me to be attentive to your word.

#### **SHARE**

- What have been your experiences of water that have been refreshing, life-giving, frightening or renewing?

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- If the sacraments are a sign and symbol of God's love, what has been a 'sacrament' for you in your daily life?

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- 'Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit'. How have you witnessed one or more of these gifts in someone you know?

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#### **PRAY**

Christ be with me, Christ within me,  
Christ behind me, Christ before me,  
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,  
Christ to comfort and restore me,  
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,  
Christ in hearts of all that love me,  
Christ in mouth of friends and stranger.

(St Patrick, 389-461)

#### **RESEARCH**

*Catechism of the Catholic Church:*  
Nos 1210-1321