

Baptism and Confirmation

Chapter 11 of Catholicism Made Simple

The first three Sacraments of the Church together are called **the Sacraments of Initiation** because it is through them that we become full members of the Church of God. These three Sacraments are:

- ❖ Baptism
- ❖ Confirmation
- ❖ The Eucharist, also called Holy Communion.

Baptism In The Early Church

Imagine that you are living about eighteen hundred years ago, a citizen of the Roman Empire. You want to become a Christian and for a long time you have been receiving instructions about what Jesus taught and did. Now it is time for you to be admitted to the Church.

For the past forty days, during a period called "Lent", you have been fasting and receiving more intense instructions about the Way of Christ. It is now the evening of Holy Saturday, and during the service tonight you will be received into the Church.

You have not been told the exact nature of the events to come, but you know that the service is a special one of vigil with the Lord, which lasts the whole night and celebrates His rising from the dead on Easter morning.

You are brought to the church in the dark and asked to take off your clothes. Then you are led down, still in the dark, into a trough of water. Out of the darkness comes the voice of the

bishop, probably old and rather quavery: "Do you believe in God?" Perhaps you think, "What a stupid question! I wouldn't be here if I did not". But you answer firmly, "Yes, I believe in God". And then, before you know what is happening, your legs are swept away from under you and you are plunged under the water. When you come up, gasping and with water running out of your mouth and nose, the voice comes out of the dark again: "Do you believe in Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord?" Between coughs you manage to say, "Yes, I believe in Jesus". And with that your legs are swept aside and down you go again. Once more you emerge, spluttering. The voice comes a third time out of the dark. "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?" By this time you are catching on, and you say, "Yes", and take a deep breath. Sure enough, down you go under the water.

This time when you come up you are led out of the water and dried off. After this you are anointed all over with olive oil, like an athlete at the Games, and clothed in a clean, white garment. Finally you are led into the main body of the church which is now lit with the light of a candle, given a candle of your own, lit from the main candle, and welcomed with great joy into the family of the Faithful.

"Well", you may think, "This is all very nice, but surely they could have warned me about all

that business with the water. I nearly drowned in that trough".

But during the days and weeks ahead you will receive further instruction and you will learn about the symbols that were used at your baptism and what they meant.

The word "Baptism" comes from a Greek word meaning "to immerse in water". It is fairly clear then that water plays a central part in the Sacrament. There is wonderful symbolism in water. We wash in it, and without it plants and animals die. It is therefore a symbol of cleanliness and life. On the other hand, flooding and storms can be very destructive to property and life. Water is therefore also a symbol of death. Both of these elements, death and life, are present in Baptism.

The immersion in water, while professing your faith in God, and in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, was your "Baptism" and you will learn that in the trough, where the dangers of water became so clear, you really did die. Your old life of sin was ended, and when you came out of the water you rose to a new life with Jesus who rose at Easter. Just as the armies of Pharaoh were destroyed in the waters of the Red Sea (*Exodus 14:15-31*), so were your sins destroyed in the waters of baptism.

You were anointed with blessed oil, called Chrism. In the Old Testament it says that priests, prophets and kings were anointed. Even today, monarchs

are anointed with oil at their coronation, and priests are anointed at their ordination. It is a sign of setting someone apart from the rest to do a special task, and it is also a sign of giving them the strength to carry it out. As a Christian, you have been set apart to bear witness to the life of Jesus that is within you. It is not an easy task, and to help you to do it you have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Chrism Oil is a symbol of all of this.

You were clothed in a clean, white garment. This is a symbol of the new, pure life you have received in baptism.

Finally, you received a light from the Paschal Candle. This candle is lit at the Easter Vigil to symbolise the life and presence among us of the Risen Christ. By receiving a light from the Candle we can see that we have received a share in that new life of Easter.

Baptism Today

If you go to a Baptism today you should notice that there is a great similarity between the rites of Baptism as they were celebrated so many years ago and those of today.

There are some obvious differences. The first is that most often nowadays it would be a baby being baptised and not an adult. Adults may still be baptised, of course, but it is quite rare. Another slight difference may be that instead of being immersed in the water, the person being baptised has water poured over his or her head. The last difference is that the chances are that you will not see a bishop as the minister of the Sacrament.

Bishops *can* baptise, but it is more usual to see a priest or a deacon leading the ceremony. In an emergency such as danger of death, anyone who has themselves been baptised or has the right intention can baptise.

Otherwise everything is the same as it was all those years ago. There is water, oil, white garments and the Paschal Candle, and each has the same meaning as it had in the early Church. There is also the faith. Essentially baptism is a Sacrament of faith, and although the baby cannot make a profession of faith, the parents and Godparents do, and then the baby is baptised in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Most important of all, Baptism has the same effect that it had in the early Church. Through it we receive the new life of Christ, our sins (including Original Sin) are washed away, and we join the community of the Church.

Confirmation

In *Acts 8:5-8, 14-17* there is an account of how a deacon, Philip, went to a city in Samaria to preach the Gospel, and the people there believed and were baptised in the name of Jesus. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard about this, Peter and John went there to pray over them and lay their hands on them. When they did this, the Holy Spirit came to them.

The Church then has always had a separate Sacrament which in a sense "completes" baptism. It is called Confirmation.

In the early Church it was usually the bishop who baptised,

and so he would confirm at the same time. But now there are babies being baptised every week, and so the bishop leaves that to the priests and deacons and he himself visits each parish every year or so to administer the Sacrament of Confirmation.

The bishop prays over the candidates, lays his hands on them, and anoints with the Oil of Chrism with the words, "Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit". [*Not so long ago he would also hit each candidate (lightly) as a reminder that as an adult member of the Church, a soldier of Christ, they must be prepared to take the blows and challenges that it will bring.*]

It is a common mistake to think that Confirmation is a ceremony in which we commit ourselves to God and His Church. That idea is present, of course, but it overlooks the fact that Confirmation is a *Sacrament*. It is not purely a human action. What matters is not what we are doing, but what we are receiving from God. What we receive are the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, courage, reverence, right judgment, understanding knowledge, and fear of the Lord. These gifts help us to commit our lives to God and His Church, and bring forth fruits: love, kindness, joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, patience, faithfulness and self-control.

Prayer

Father, in the rising of your Son death gives birth to new life. The sufferings He endured restored hope to a fallen world. Let sin never ensnare us with empty promises of passing joy. Make us one with you always, so that our joy may be holy, and our love may give life. Amen.