

- Baptism is one of three sacraments that can not be repeated. It leaves an indelible mark on the baptised, that forever links them to Christ. This sign is retained even if someone, after being baptised, subsequently fails to live a life of faith and love and becomes separated from Christ and his Church.

How is Baptism Performed?

Baptism is celebrated by the pouring of water over the head, with the words **“I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”**. It is a Trinitarian baptism. Although St. Paul describes the baptised as being baptised into Jesus’ death (Rm.6) the process of initiation is by the act of the Father and Holy Spirit as much as by the Son.



The usual minister of baptism is an ordained minister, but anyone may baptise in the case of impending death. The full baptismal rites vary dependent on whether children or adults are to be baptised. We are all familiar with the process for babies and young children which is very family centred and full of symbolism, so that the rich effects of the sacrament may be better appreciated:

- The **whole family** is welcomed as a family, and the spiritual dimension of the occasion is affirmed with the **Sign of the Cross** and the welcome of the child into the wider family of the Church of Christ
- The **role of the parents and godparents** in nurturing the baby’s faith is particularly stressed
- The living faith of the Church is made apparent in the **Liturgy of the Word**
- The **prayer of exorcism and the anointing with the oil** of catechumens symbolises a separation from the forces of evil, and faith in Jesus. The renunciation of Satan and evil reminds everyone of the nature of the Christian life, and gives everyone present an opportunity to make a public renewal of their commitment to Christ.
- The **central act of baptism** - water removing Original sin.
- Three further important acts occur that are full of symbolism:
 - the **anointing with Chrism**, the gift of the Holy Spirit, stresses the baby’s incorporation into the Church and into Christ’s role as priest, prophet and king. It also serves as a reminder that there will be a later anointing with Chrism for Confirmation (in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, Confirmation takes place now as the second of the three sacraments of initiation)
 - the **clothing with a white garment** symbolises that the baptised has put on the new and pure life of Christ.
 - the **baptismal candle** signifies the baptised as a light/ sign for the world

Our Catholic Faith

19. The Sacrament of Baptism

- First Sacrament of Initiation into the Church



Questions for Reflection

- Can only those who are baptised enter Heaven?
- How can baptism remove all sin, even personal sin?
- What community aspect has the sacrament of Baptism?

Where did the Practice of Baptising Originate?

The first biblical account of baptising with water for the forgiveness of sins occurs in the Gospels, with the ministry of John the Baptist. In addition, the Church sees a parallel in the flood of Noah when God swept away sin with water (1 Pt.3). The saving function of Baptism is also seen in the crossing of the Red Sea, while Baptism's entry into a new life is paralleled in the crossing of the river Jordan by Joshua and the Hebrews, as they entered the Promised land .



However, the most relevant OT passage is in Ezekiel 36, where God promises to display the holiness of his name by redeeming the Israelites from all their sins:

“I shall pour clean water over you, and you will be cleansed .. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you”. It is not insignificant that the Jewish sect, the Essenes, who lived near the Dead Sea at Qumran, practised an initiation ceremony that involved cleansing with water. Scholars have thought that John the Baptist may have been a member of this sect, which is why he baptised.

Why Does the Church Baptise?

The Church baptises because Jesus gave a command to do so (Mtt.28), because Jesus explained that **“no-one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit”** (Jn.3:5), because Jesus showed its importance by allowing himself to be baptised by the Baptist, and because it was clearly understood, from the time St. Peter made the very first converts, to be a rite of initiation into the Church of Christ (Acts 2:38). St. Paul describes Baptism as the means to participate in Christ's death and resurrection, so our sins are crucified with Christ and Baptism enables us rise with him into a new life (Rm.6).

The necessity of Baptism for salvation refers to those who have been informed adequately about the truth of the Gospel message. These, then, must make their own free choice about whether to accept it by being baptised. However, it does **not** follow that only the baptised can be saved. Those who genuinely seek after God, and follow their own conscience faithfully, may by God's mercy have the **effects** of Baptism granted to them, although they themselves have not actually received the sacrament. Similarly, unbaptised babies who die (including those aborted), and all those who lived before Christ, would have the effects of the sacrament applied to them according to the mercy of God.

In the early Church the initiation of new Christians consisted of Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist at the same time. This process is still followed

for adults, while the Eastern Orthodox Church, our close cousins in faith, also adhere to it even for the initiation of babies. The process of separating Baptism and the Eucharist from Confirmation occurred in the West as Christianity spread into rural areas and it became more difficult for the bishops to be present for every baptism. It became the practice for the priest to baptise and give the Eucharist and to allow time for the child to develop in faith before completing initiation with Confirmation by the Bishop.

What are the Effects of Baptism?

Baptism has several extremely important effects:



1. It removes Original Sin.
2. It forgives all Personal sins in the case of those being baptised who are above the age of reason.
3. It automatically cleanses of any punishment due for personal sins; so entry into Heaven is guaranteed provided no subsequent sin occurs. That is why in the early Church many believers would leave their Baptism until they were on their deathbed e.g. the Emperor Constantine.
4. Baptism is about much more than forgiving sin. It is the key which allows entry into the Christian Community and, importantly, that fact means it automatically incorporates the believer into the Mystical Body of Christ. This entry into the Church of Christ applies to all Christians, not only Catholics, so Baptism is the sacrament that serves to unite all Christian together, whatever their denomination.
5. Remembering that the Church is not only the Body of Christ, that it also shares in the Trinitarian life, then all the Baptised have the potential for divinity as adopted children of God **“You received the Spirit of adoption, enabling you to call out ‘Abba, father’. The Spirit himself joins with our spirit to bear witness that we are children of God”** (Rm.8).
6. The baptised person's entry into the Church, incorporation into the Body of Christ and adoption as a child of the Trinitarian God, is emphasised by the inflowing of sanctifying grace into their soul **“the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Spirit which has been given us”** (Rm.5:5 This is the sign that they are ‘justified’, or made righteous, in the eyes of God through their faith in the salvation brought by Jesus Christ (Rm.3:21-26, 5:1-2).
7. In their daily life, the baptised are now subject to the guidance of the Holy Spirit who lives in them **“You, however, live not by your natural inclinations, but by the Spirit who has made a home in you”** (Rm.8:9) **“Do you not realise that your body is a Temple of the Holy Spirit who lives in you”** (1 Cor.6:19).