

BAPTIZED TO BE HOLY

Old Testament Connections

The Old Testament has a rich tradition of stories that focus on water and enrich our understanding of baptism as we recall at the Easter Vigil liturgy.

Creation (Genesis 1):

At the very dawn of creation
Your Spirit breathed on the waters,
Making them a **wellspring of all holiness**. CCC 1218

The Great Flood (Genesis 7):

The waters of the great Flood
You made a sign of the waters of Baptism,
That make an **end of sin** and a **new beginning** of goodness. CCC 1219

Parting of the Red Sea (Exodus 14) liberating Israel from the slavery of Egypt:

You freed the children of Abraham from the slavery of Pharaoh,
Bringing them dry-shod through the waters of the Red Sea,
To be an image of the people **set free** in Baptism. CCC 1221

The Israelites Cross the River Jordan to Reach the Promised Land:

The Israelites (People of God) receive the gift of the land promised to
Abraham's descendants, an image of **eternal life**. CCC 1222

The New Testament

In the New Testament, Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River. He was not baptized to remove original sin since he was not subject to sin, but he is baptized at the beginning of his public ministry to identify himself with sinners and to fulfill God's plan for salvation of the human race.

Jesus, who ascended to the Father after his resurrection, promised to send the Holy Spirit. This was fulfilled at Pentecost, literally "fifty days" after the Resurrection. The small Christian community was gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem, about 120 women and men (Acts 1:15), including Mary, the mother of Jesus. Suddenly, "tongues as of fire came to rest on each one of them, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:3-4). Note well that the Spirit descended upon and 'filled' every disciple present, not just the leaders.

Then Peter preached the opening sermon of the young Church, urging listeners, "Change your lives and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you, too, will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

From that time onward, the first Christians viewed baptism as a call to transformation of life by the power of the Holy Spirit. They believed they were

baptized into the “Body of Christ” to live as disciples of Jesus, to continue his mission in the world, and to be ever rising with the Risen One into new life. Those first disciples were convinced that baptism calls every Christian to holiness after the way of Jesus.

This inclusive sentiment continued throughout the first three centuries—that *all Christians* are equally called to bring *life to faith* and *faith to life*. There is no evidence that the vocation to holiness was exclusive to a few, i.e., the ‘religious’ ones. And today the Church teaches that **all Christians have this spiritual vocation by their baptism**. It is the common vocation we all share, and it underlies our individual life vocations as married, single or religious or any career we have chosen.

Preparation Period to Become a Christian

The special care that the early Church took to prepare new converts reflected this radical understanding of baptism. The **catechumenate**, or preparation period for anyone desiring to become a Christian, was a rigorous process. Catechumens (unbaptized non-Christians) often underwent a three-year period of instruction and formation; they shared in the life of the community with study, prayer and service. Only after a makeover in lifestyle was there an intense period of *informing* them in the creeds and core beliefs of Christian faith. When it was judged that they were ready to abandon old sinful ways and embrace the full Christian life, they began a period of spiritual preparation leading up to receiving the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and eucharist at Easter. This time of preparation is the origin of Lent.

Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) – Then & Now

The process involved in becoming a Christian gradually developed from an informal orientation in the first century to a fairly long and formalized process by the fourth century. Reasons for the separation of the three sacraments are several and complex but include the practice of Christians baptizing their children as infants and the inability of the bishops to administer confirmation to growing numbers of catechumens scattered over ever-increasing geographical areas.

Over time, there was a decline in adequate catechesis or preparation, and the initiation process as it existed in the fifth century gradually broke down. Efforts to revive it in later centuries were only minimally successful.

In 1972, the **RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults)** was the last of the sacramental rites revised after Vatican II. It marked a significant shift in the practice of welcoming new adult members into the Catholic community. Prior to the 1970s, individuals interested in joining the Catholic Church generally did so

by receiving a series of 'instructions' from a parish priest or attending a few 'convert' classes. Now most parishes use the RCIA process over a period of several months to a year as a means of taking in new members. The current RCIA model is intended to be a process of *formation* and *information* as it was in the early Church, but formation takes time and our present-day lifestyle often makes this challenging.

Comparison of Jesus' Baptism and Our Baptism

- As Jesus begins his public life after baptism, we begin a new life in Christ after our baptism.
- As Jesus is proclaimed Son of God by the Father, we become sons and daughters of God.
- As Jesus is chosen by God to redeem us, we are chosen to continue Jesus' mission of redemption.
- As the Spirit came over Jesus as he was baptized, the Holy Spirit is poured on us as we are baptized.

Annual Baptism

1. It is still the practice today for unbaptized adults to be baptized at the Vigil of Easter.
2. In the early developing church, children started to be baptized soon after birth rather than at the annual baptismal service as parents were worried they might die before the annual baptism occurred.

Can People Who Are Not Baptized Go To Heaven?

1. For unbaptized adults and children, Catholics believe that God's mercy can supply for the lack of Baptism in a way that has not been revealed to us. They are entrusted to the mysterious but infinitely kind and powerful love of God who wants all God's children to be with him in heaven.
2. **Baptism of Blood.**
For those who die for the Christian faith before Baptism.
3. **Baptism of Desire.**
Those, who through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel of Christ, yet sincerely seek God and strive to do his will as it is known to them through their conscience receive baptism of desire.
4. **Who Can Baptize?**
Ordinarily a priest or minister or deacon, but anyone may baptize in cases of necessity. Water must be used in the prescribed way and as well as pronouncing the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Baptism A Sacrament of Life and Death

Here are some ways to think about the life and death aspects of baptism from Richard Fragomeni's book "Come to the Light" in which he tries to renew and reexamine the significance of baptism for us.

Fragomeni uses an early writing from Tertullian (100 AD) who was trying to defend baptismal beliefs against those who said baptism was an ineffective ritual. How could anything as simple as water do anything as magnificent as was claimed in baptism? *We claim that new life is given, that the church is reborn, people are regenerated.*

Tertullian praises water as that ordinary, simple element that pagans praised and that pagans used. But now in Christ it has become extraordinary. It has become the plunging place where we make the plunge into God. He is clear that the word *baptism* means to drown to death. To be baptized means to be held under the water so that one experiences what fish experience—learning to breathe in a new way. He suggests that entering the water is risky business because it demands we die. Entering the water means that everything has to be left behind; we must continually surrender into the water, and that takes a long time.

What Tertullian is after is the awareness that to be baptized means that we are always being baptized... for as long as we live. We must keep on surrendering and dying...bit by bit. We must learn to live a new mode of life...and let go of the old one. We must learn to breathe under water! We follow the big fish, Jesus, who was crucified and breathed life into death and turned death into life. That is the message of baptism and the foundational experience of Christian life.

Fragomeni continues, "But I want to live. I don't want to surrender. I don't want to see the ordinary be extraordinary. I live in a culture thrilled by the extraordinary. I want to be like the early apostles, who wanted Jesus to come down off the cross. I don't want him to wash feet. I don't want him to be born in Bethlehem. But Catholic tradition holds that the extraordinary is embedded in the ordinary; like being born in a little town of Bethlehem and washing feet. I don't want to surrender in relationships. I don't often want to breathe death either; I don't even want to face the fact that my hair is falling out, much less mortality. I don't want to look at people who are suffering sometimes, because it is too painful to face the fact that I'm going to go six feet under. But that is what baptism keeps asking us to do! Surrender. Surrender in love.

But I get glimpses through the water of what it might be like to live in the freedom of breathing underneath it. Just glimpses. The glimpse is this: I am now a new creation and I am free. There is no more fear and no more guilt or shame,

because I am no longer I who live, but gradually in glimpses, when I am at my best, I begin to see in that surrender in that dying and in that ordinary water that it is Christ who lives in me.”