

## BAPTISM - ORIGINS

1. Christians have baptized from the beginning, but were not the first to do so. Ritual washings and bathings were common in ancient religions of Egypt and Mesopotamia.
2. Gentiles who wanted to become Jews were initiated by a) Circumcision (sign of covenant between Abraham and God) b) Immersion in water symbolized joining the Israelites who passed through the Red Sea), and c) offering sacrifice (acceptance of law given to Jews at Sinai)
3. As far as we know, the apostles were never baptized unless by John the Baptist.
4. Apostles began baptizing those who accepted the message of resurrection mostly after Jesus' death. Acts traces this back to the first day of their preaching on Pentecost.
5. Baptism of adults was the norm in the early Church for those who merely expressed their faith in Jesus. The rites were simple but included baptizing with water, prayers and sharing of the Lord's supper.
6. As time passed, simple confession of faith in Jesus no longer sufficed for Baptism. One had to have a member of the community as a sponsor during the period of moral development—a period of 2-3 years. The sponsors were to witness the lifestyle and sincerity of those wanting to join the Christian community. If they wanted to become Christian, prostitutes, soldiers, gladiators, makers of idols had to find a new occupation. Murder, violence, adultery had to be avoided and one had to be able to prove it.
7. Baptism gradually became an elaborate ritual which stretched over a period of days. The following is a description of the initiation rites typical of the Patristic era (2<sup>nd</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> century). There were variations from one city to the next and from one century to the next, but the sacramental stages of initiation were basically the same.
8. On the one hand, it was an intensely individual act marking a decisive break with the past and inaugurating a new style of religious belief and practice. On the other hand, it was an impressively communal act supported by sponsors, applauded by the community and solemnly recognized by its leaders.
9. This lengthy period of preparation was called the CATECHUMENATE (Greek word for 'instruction.'
10. The new Christian were told that their sinful past was dead, that they were forgiven by a *gracious God*, and that they were filled with the spiritual power to

live free from sinfulness in the future. They heard it, and were surrounded by others who testified that it was true. They believed it, they felt it, and they were affected by it. Being baptized brought a real change in their lives they couldn't deny. This baptism was a very effective sacrament.

11. A few weeks before the annual baptism (after 2-3 years of preparation), catechumens began a period of more intense preparation (Lent). They were presented to the bishop; their worthiness was attested to by their sponsor; the responsibilities they were about to take on were made clear. Those who were not faithful to God's way of life were not given a second chance at baptism. Each Sunday they were exorcised of evil spirits that had ruled them in the past. They were prayed over, blessed, touched, anointed with oil, signed with the cross on different parts of their body, or blown on by the bishop with the breath of the Holy Spirit. Each week this repeated and candidates entered into more fully into a consciousness of what it meant to be a Christian and what was about to happen to them.
12. In the final week before baptism, candidates reexamined their life; there were further exorcisms and the promise to renounce the devil. They were taught the Lord's prayer and had to memorize the Apostle's Creed. Two days before the ceremony, they fasted from food to experience a more complete dependence on God.
13. On evening before Easter, the solemn ceremonies began in the presence of the bishop and the congregation which they were about to join. It was the vigil of the feast of the Christian Passover, of Christ's passage from death to life. In the darkness, they saw the Paschal candle lit, the symbol of Christ the light of the world. They heard hymns of praise and prayers of thanksgiving for the salvation Christ had brought. They listened to readings from the Bible (creation, exodus of Israel through Red Sea, the flood's destruction of sinners and Noah's salvation, etc.) They kept their vigil all through the night, in preparation for the dawn that was about to come upon them.
14. In the early morning light the catechumens, the bishop and assistants went to a cistern or baptismal pool located in or near the place where they prayed. The water was blessed, they were anointed and exorcised a final time and they made a final renunciation of the devil and his evil ways. One by one they were stripped naked, the men assisted by deacons and women by deaconesses who went down with them into the bath. Standing in the water they were asked two times, "Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his Son, our Lord, who was brought into the world to suffer for it?" They answered and each time water was poured over them. They were asked, "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Church, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting?" After their final "I do believe", water was poured over them a final time. (Baptism)

15. Coming out of the pool, they were anointed in the name of Christ, the Anointed One, and given a white garment to wear before returning to the assembly. Symbolically, they had cast off their sinful ways, they had gone down into the waters of salvation, and they had emerged to be clothed in Christ. The newly initiated were expected to wear it and kept it unsoiled for the 50 days of Easter.
16. Individually, they presented themselves to the bishop who laid his hand on their head and anointed them with oil a final time as he prayed that they be filled with the Holy Spirit (Confirmation).
17. They were now fully baptized and received into the church, and all that remained to complete their initiation as Christians was to join the assembled community in celebrating the Easter liturgy of the resurrection. For the Eucharist which they had never before attended was now also their prayer of thanksgiving for the salvation they had received.

Reference: Martos, Joseph. Doors to the Sacred. Liguori Publications, 2001.