



**North Thompson Catholic Parishes**

**Roman Catholic Diocese of Kamloops**

## The Sacrament of Baptism:

### Gateway to New Life

The sacrament of Baptism is the beginning of life—supernatural life.

Because of original sin, we come into the world with a soul which is supernaturally dead. We come into the world with only the natural endowments of human nature. The supernatural life which is the result of God's personal and intimate indwelling, is absent from the soul.

Original sin is not, in the strict sense, a “blot” upon the soul. Indeed, original sin is not a “something” at all. It is the **absence** of something that should be there. It is a darkness where there ought to be light.

Jesus instituted the sacrament of **Baptism** to apply to each individual soul the atonement which He made on the Cross for original sin.

Jesus will not force His gift upon us, the gift of supernatural life for which He paid. He holds the gift

out to us hopefully, but each of us must freely accept it.

We make that acceptance by receiving the sacrament of Baptism.

When the sacrament of Baptism is administered, the spiritual vacuum which we call original sin disappears as God becomes present in the soul, and the soul is caught up into that sharing of God's own life which we call **sanctifying grace**.

## **Children of God**

The sacrament of Baptism not only gives us sanctifying grace: it also makes us adopted children of God and heirs of heaven.

We say "adopted" children because God the Father has only **one** begotten Son—Jesus Christ. He is God's only Son through generation; the rest of us become God's children by adoption.

As children of God, we receive our inheritance at the very moment of our adoption, at the very moment of Baptism. Our inheritance is eternal union with God, and we have that inheritance **now**, once we are baptized.

Nobody can take this inheritance away. Not even God, who has bound Himself by irrevocable promise never to take back what He has given. We ourselves can renounce our rights—as we will do if we commit mortal sin—but no one else can deprive us of our heritage.

The point to be emphasized, and never to be forgotten, is that we are potentially in heaven the **moment** we are baptized.

## **Original sin obliterated by grace**

The point needs to be emphasized because many people remember the effects of Baptism only in negative terms: “It takes away original sin.”

Baptism does take away original sin, of course. Also, in the case of an adult, it takes away all mortal and venial sins & the punishment due for them, if the person baptized is truly sorry for them. Baptism makes a clean sweep of everything.

But the “taking away” is not a negative removal, like the emptying of a trash can by the garbage collector. Sin and its consequences **disappear** when God comes into the soul, just as darkness disappears when the light is turned on.

Sin is a spiritual emptiness which is obliterated by the coming of **grace**.

## **Some effects of original sin remain**

Baptism does **not** restore the preternatural gifts which were lost for us by Adam: freedom from suffering and

death, from ignorance, and inordinate inclinations of passion.

We still are inclined to sin because of these effects, and our bodies will still die.

But who cares? These are **insignificant** compared to the supernatural gifts which are restored.

Here is a newly baptized soul, beautiful with a beauty which even the most wild-eyed artist could not imagine, splendid with a splendor which ravishes the onlooking angels and saints. Here is a soul that already is in heaven except for the formality of a few (even though they be numbered a hundred) quickly passing years.

**That** is what matters!

## **The mark of a Christian**

Two big things happen to us when we are baptized.

- We receive the supernatural life, called sanctifying grace, which dissipates the spiritual emptiness of original sin.
- And there is imparted to the soul a permanent and distinctive quality which we call the character or the mark of Baptism.

If we commit mortal sin after Baptism, then we cut ourselves off from God and from the flow of His divine life, as a severed artery would cause an organ to be cut off from the flow of the heart's blood. We lose sanctifying grace. But we do not lose the baptismal

character, by which the soul has been forever transformed.

Precisely because we possess the baptismal character, we have the right to receive the sacrament of Penance (Reconciliation, or Confession) and regain the grace that we have lost through our individual sins after Baptism. If our soul did not have that character, then we could go to confession a dozen times or a hundred times and nothing would happen. The mortal sin would remain unforgiven; the soul would remain spiritually dead.

That is true, also, of the other five sacraments. None of them can mean a thing to us until first the capacity for receiving the other sacraments has been established in the soul by the character of Baptism.

This is because it is by the character of actual Baptism that we “put on Christ,” in the words of St. Paul. It is the character of Baptism, according to St. Thomas, that “configures” us to Christ and makes us participants in His eternal priesthood.

By Baptism we are given the power—and the obligation—to share with Christ in those things which pertain to divine worship: the Mass and the sacraments.

## **We enter the Church**

The impression of the baptismal character upon the soul also makes us members of the **Church**.

The “mark” of Baptism is what differentiates between those who are members of the Church, Christ’s Mystical Body, and those who are not.

This membership also imposes upon us an obligation to discharge the duties that go with our Christlikeness, our membership in Christ’s Church. This means to:

- Lead a life according to the pattern that Christ has given us
- Give obedience to Christ’s representatives, our bishops and especially our Holy Father the Pope.

Every baptized person is a member of Christ’s Church as long as the bond of union is not broken by heresy, schism, or the most severe form of excommunication.

But even these latter—baptized persons who are severed from actual membership in the Church—still are subject (as are all people) to Christ and subject to His Church (as are all baptized persons).

Unless specifically exempted (as the Church does exempt baptized non-Catholics in regard to certain laws), they still are subject to the laws of the Church. It still would be mortal sin, for example, for an excommunicated Catholic to deliberately ignore fasting on a day like Good Friday.

## **Infant baptism**

We can understand, then, why it is that the Church insists that babies be baptized as soon as possible after birth—as soon as the infant can safely be carried to church.

It is an article of faith that anyone who dies in the state of original sin is excluded from heaven, from the vision of God. However, the Church has never officially taught that the souls of infants who die without Baptism do not see God; it may be that God has some way of compensating in such souls for their lack of Baptism. But if so, God has not revealed it to us.

Most theologians are of the opinion that the souls of unbaptized infants enjoy a high degree of natural happiness (to which they give the name of “limbo”) but not the supernatural and supreme happiness of the beatific vision. In any event, our obligation is to follow the safer course: never through our fault to let a soul enter eternity without Baptism.

For parents, this means that they should not unduly delay the Baptism of their newborn child. Parents who unnecessarily delay or neglect the Baptism of their child become guilty of grave sin.

It would be very wrong, for example, for parents to put off Baptism simply because Uncle George is coming to town next month, and they want Uncle George to be godfather of the baby. Right now, the baby needs Baptism more than he needs Uncle George—and Uncle George still can be godfather by proxy.

It would be still worse to postpone Baptism so the parents can put together an elaborate party. The baby’s big party is with God and the angels and saints at the baptismal font; none of them are interested in a keg of beer.

## Who can baptize?

The ordinary minister of Baptism is a priest or a deacon.

But in an emergency, anyone can baptize—even a non-Catholic or non-Christian. All that is required is that the person baptizing:

- Intend to do what the Catholic Church does in this sacrament
- Pour water upon the head (ordinary tap water is fine in an emergency)
- Say audibly the words of Baptism while pouring water, similar to: “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

These are words that every Catholic should know as well as he knows his own name. Someone’s eternal salvation may one day depend upon the knowing of these words.

If the person receiving emergency Baptism is of the age of reason (at least seven years old or so), then they must have the necessary faith to receive Baptism:

- Faith in God the Blessed Trinity as the rewarder of the just and the punisher of the wicked and in Jesus Christ as God’s own Son and our Redeemer
- The willingness to accept all that the Catholic Church teaches

Such opportunities to administer Baptism may never come to us, but it is of profound importance that we be prepared.

## Those who die without Baptism

If Baptism is so absolutely necessary in order to get to heaven (and it is), then what about all those people who die without even having a chance to be baptized? What about those who perhaps don't even know about Baptism? Will they lose heaven when it's no fault of theirs at all?

No one who has reached the age of reason loses heaven except through his own fault. It is an article of Christian faith, defined by the Church, that God gives to **every** soul He creates sufficient grace to be saved. No one ever will be able to say: "I lost heaven because I couldn't help it."

For those who have no opportunity to be baptized, the path to God is the path of **love**.

A person who loves God above all things else and desires to do all that God wants him to do has "Baptism of desire." If circumstances make it impossible for him to receive sacramental Baptism, his Baptism of desire will be sufficient to open for him the gates of heaven.

Just as supreme love for God forgives all sin, even mortal sin, in the soul of a baptized person who cannot get to confession, so also supreme love for God will take away all sin, original as well as actual sin, from the soul of one who cannot yet receive Baptism.

When a person who loves God knows about Baptism and wants to be baptized, we call that *explicit* Baptism of desire. When a person ignorant of Baptism loves God and has the desire to do all that God wants, we

call that *implicit* Baptism of desire. In other words, the desire for Baptism is contained implicitly in the desire to do God's will. If the person knew about Baptism and knew that God wanted him to receive it, the person would be baptized; what God wants, he wants.

A person taking instruction in preparation for Baptism would have explicit Baptism of desire if his faith were accompanied by a love for God for His own sake. A devout Jew or Muslim with supreme love for God might well have implicit Baptism of desire.

## **Martyrdom**

The highest form of substitute for sacramental Baptism is what we call Baptism of blood. "Greater love than this no one has, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Even without Baptism, anyone who suffers martyrdom for the sake of Christ is certain of his eternal reward. Martyrdom is defined as "the suffering, from a supernatural motive, of death or a mortal wound inflicted out of hatred for Christ, His religion, or a Christian virtue."

The term "martyr" is reserved officially for one who has suffered a bloody or a violent death for Christ.

In the days when the Church was formulating her definition of martyrdom, death at the hands of Christ's enemies was usually quick, if not always merciful. It remained for our modern "civilized" age to refine methods of torture by which death could be made to

last for years and a man could be killed without leaving a mark upon his body.

There have been many souls in Communist prisons and slave-labor camps who are suffering what Bishop Fulton Sheen has called “dry martyrdom.” There can be no questioning the reality of their martyrdom. Their agony of mind and body may last for years. Whether they die of dysentery or other prison-contracted disease or are left to freeze to death where they drop of exhaustion—it will be a martyr’s palm that they bear with them into eternity.

And doubtless many among them—especially in China—are catechumens who never had the opportunity to be baptized before their imprisonment.

## **The crowning event of life**

If someone were to ask you, “What is the most important thing in life for everybody without exception?” I wonder whether you would come up with the right answer, instantly and without hesitation. You would, if your Catholic training has been adequate. You would whip back the answer, “Baptism!” without a second thought.