

Baptism: Spirit, Water, and Fire

By Rev. Brian Mullady, O.P.

December 16, 2018 – Third Sunday of Advent

Readings: Zephaniah 3.14-18a; Philippians 4.4-7; Luke 3.10-18

In today's readings the Church addresses the spiritual preparation for deepening the grace of Christian life, which is reflected in the historical preparation of the human race for the first coming of Christ in the flesh.

The human race wandered for centuries in ignorance and malice as a result of the Original Sin. On Sinai, God began the active preparation of the human race for the coming of the Messiah by the gift of the Torah, or the Old Law, which established Israel as the people of God from whom the Messiah would come. This law had three sorts of precepts: moral, ceremonial, and juridical. These preparatory aids formed the basis of the joyful expectation of the community of Israel that God would dwell again in the midst of souls by sending the Messiah. "Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! . . . [H]e will renew you in his love" (Zep 3.14).

The ceremonial precepts provided the basis for the Jewish liturgy, and they are comprised in all the cultic practices of Israel, from the Temple liturgy to the practice of circumcision. These practices expressed faith in the future Messiah and could give grace to the people who participated in them from the faith of the recipient.

The Baptism of John

The cultic practices culminated in the baptism of John, which was the immediate preparation of the Jews for the imminent coming of the Messiah. "I baptize you with water" (Lk 3.16). The liturgy expressed the fact that the Jews were to be a holy people, and yet they continued to fall into sin throughout their history. Baptismal rituals were practiced by many in the ancient world around the time of Christ, but that of John was the most important. It demonstrated the attempt of the Jews to rid themselves of sin by washing themselves clean. It was also a testimony to a desire for rebirth. Yet because it was only a testimony of such a desire, it brought grace from the faith of the recipient, not from the work itself. In other words, the baptism of John did not bring the presence of the Holy Spirit back into the soul by the performance of the ritual action itself.

The juridical precepts of the law implemented the moral precepts regarding neighbor. The Jews were called to a higher standard than the Gentiles precisely because they were the chosen people. Again as an immediate preparation for the physical coming and ministry of Christ, John calls them out regarding their need for a vigorous moral inventory. They need conversion of heart. When the people ask, "What are then shall we do?" (Lk 3.10), he answers like a good prophet by exhorting them to practice the holiness to which their liturgy points through moral practices toward their neighbors that go beyond the natural law: "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise" (Lk 3.11).

John looks forward to the teaching of Christ because even the hated publicans and their agents, the soldiers, are not excluded from the call to repentance. To tax collectors he says: "Collect no more than is appointed you" (Lk 3.13). The message to the soldiers is also emphatic: "Rob no one by violence or by false accusations, and be correct with your

wages” (Lk 3.14). These two wings of repentance, the sacraments of the Old Testament and the moral practice that they inspired, were a true preparation for grace to come into the midst of the people again.

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.” The message of the angel to Mary perfectly fulfills the prophecy of Zephaniah when the Lord enters into her midst in the womb. “The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory” (Zep 3.17) That victory is his cross and resurrection, accomplished in his physical flesh born from Mary. The sacraments of the New Testament are an extension of this saving flesh of Christ and his actions throughout time and space.

The Baptism of Christ

An early Christian tradition demonstrates this connection. In the Church of the Holy Sepulcher on Golgotha there are holes in the rock, and under the rock one can hear rushing water. Early Christians thought the spot of the crucifixion was the same as that of the tree of the temptation, and thus was Eden. The water under the rock of the crucifixion represents all the rivers of the world; and when the lance pierced the side of Christ, blood and water flowed out, down the cross, dripped through the holes in the rock, and touched the waters of the world, giving them the spiritual power to communicate grace in baptism by their connection to the body of Christ. The baptism of Christ, then, is no longer just a baptism by water.

The baptism of Christ actually brings about spiritual conversion by the very performance of the work itself (*ex opere operantis*) This is not a testimony to the future coming of the Messiah in the flesh. It is, rather, a participation in the very act of Christ’s atonement in the present. Atonement has two sides to it: First, the punishment for the Original Sin must be satisfied, which is accomplished by the suffering and death of Christ. His sacrifice brings about the forgiveness of sin, which in turn causes the second aspect of the atonement, namely, the sanctification and renewal of the interior person accomplished by the grace of the Holy Spirit: “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Lk. 3:16).

The baptism of Christ also indelibly marks one’s soul as a Christian. That new character as Christian involves a threefold conformity to the missions of Christ – priest, prophet, and king – and also entails certain obligations that are the source of one’s growth in holiness.

Conformity to Christ is the standard by which Christ separates the wheat from the chaff. “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Lk 3.17). The joy of the reception of grace and forgiveness of the Original Sin must be tempered by looking forward through Christian action to the further joy of the reconstitution of all things in Christ.

Three Comings

In Advent we recall the past coming of Christ in the flesh, and we look forward to the second coming, his future coming in glory. A third coming, still, is his entrance into each of our souls by grace, which is caused by the baptism of Christ and is our preparation for the future coming in light of the past coming.

Our preparation for Christ’s coming requires a rigorous prayer life and a firm commitment to Catholic action. Baptism should cause us to approach the world by “having as though not having.” Though the baptized Christian rejoices always, the more one grows in love of God and neighbor, that joy is also tinged by sorrow. As Saint Teresa of Avila cried out in the depth of her prayer life, “*Muero porque no muero*” (I am dying because I do not die). So much in love with the God one cannot see, one may wish to die if that were God’s will to see him.

Man is created to enjoy God and heaven, and by the baptism of Christ such life begins in us as we experience the peace wrought through divine healing. “Let all men know your forbearance. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4.5-6).

John’s baptism was the culmination of the sacraments of the Old Testament. Christ submitted to it not to be made holy but to approve the rite. When the waters touched his body and the voice from heaven proclaimed him to be the Messiah, a process began that would culminate in the sacrament of baptism, which involves not just water but spirit and fire. This fire consumes our egotism and motivates us with the fire of divine love to live a new life imitating Christ, as a preparation for his second coming.

Knowing one possesses a good brings joy. No wonder Paul tells us who have been baptized into Christ, “Rejoice in the Lord always! Again I will say, rejoice” (Phil 4.4).

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For Further Reading

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, [##535-537](#) and [##717-720](#)
- Rev. John A. Hardon, S.J., [“The Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation”](#)
- [“Pope Benedict Calls on Faithful to Look at the Example of St. John the Baptist”](#)

In Short . . .

- *The baptism of John was most important, for it demonstrated the attempt of the Jews to rid themselves of sin by washing themselves clean.*
- *John’s baptism brought grace from the faith of the recipient, not from the work itself.*
- *Christ submitted to this baptism not to be made holy but to approve the rite.*
- *The baptism of Christ, by contrast, brings about spiritual conversion by the very performance of the work itself and is a participation in the act of Christ’s atonement in the present.*
- *The baptism of Christ also indelibly marks one’s soul as a Christian.*
- *Man is created to enjoy God and heaven, and by the baptism of Christ such life begins in us as we experience the peace wrought through divine healing.*