

THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY BAPTISM in The Liberal Catholic Church

What is Baptism?

Baptism¹ is the sacrament of Initiation into the Christian Church, and is common to all denominations in one form or another. A sacrament may be defined as an outward and visible sign which embodies an inward and spiritual grace. In orthodox terms, baptism is “essential to salvation”, and “confers an indelible character on the soul”. In The Liberal Catholic Church we prefer to regard baptism as a powerful stimulus to the potentialities for good within the candidate. We join all other Christians in acknowledging that by this sacrament the candidate is “grafted into the Mystical Body of Christ”, which is the Church – that is, linked inwardly with the Lord, and therefore with all other Christians.

Baptism thus confers upon the candidate membership of the Church Universal, and also of the particular church body conferring the sacrament – in this case, The Liberal Catholic Church. Notwithstanding all of these benefits, Liberal Catholics do not generally endorse the notion of baptism as “essential to salvation”. Nor would they hold the mediaeval notion that unbaptised babies enter a realm of ‘limbo’, where, although in a happy and comfortable state, they are denied the ‘beatific vision’.

Who May be Baptised?

Any person of any age, of any faith or of none, may be received into the Christian Church by baptism. If previously baptised in another Christian denomination, that rite may be accepted by The Liberal Catholic Church and the candidate merely ‘admitted’. But if the form of baptism is considered defective or incomplete, and especially if the newcomer is likely to go on into the clergy, baptism may be given ‘conditionally’ – that is, on the condition that the previous baptism was in some way faulty, and the person is not in fact truly baptised. However, valid baptism is one of the sacraments that can in fact be given once only.

The Church has also generally recognised two other ways of baptism than by washing with water: by martyrdom, and by an act of faith or desire. For example, we understand that strict catholic dogma would allow that a Jew who came forward sincerely to receive Communion, would be “baptised by faith”.

History

Baptism was practised by the Essene Jews as an almost daily rite of purification, and is found in other cultures as well. John the Baptist practised it to draw recalcitrant Jews back into the Covenant relationship with God, and protect them from the “wrath that is to come”. Jesus submitted to this rite, largely as proof that he was human in essence, and not ‘merely’ divine (and thus beyond our emulation!). Some later baptisms were performed in the name of Jesus, but it was probably Jesus himself who established the formula “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”.

Adult baptism was the norm in the early centuries of the Church, it being held that when a man was received and baptised, his entire household of family, relatives and servants would also be automatically and collectively baptised. But there is evidence of infant baptism from the 3rd century. In the Middle Ages, when the plague was

decimating the population, fears that new-born un-baptised babies would lose their souls by an early death were allayed by the generalised use of infant baptism.

In order to give such infants a later opportunity to make a conscious and voluntary submission to God and commitment to his Church (previously given on the child's behalf by its godparents), the sacrament of Confirmation became established as a separate rite for use with older children and with adults. It was originally a part of the full baptismal service of adults, which consisted of baptism by water, anointing with holy oils, and the 'gift of the Spirit'. To this day, in the Eastern Orthodox Churches, infants receive baptism, together with a simple form of Confirmation on the same occasion. Indeed, this derives from the practice in the early Church of both baptising and confirming adult candidates in one ceremony on Easter Eve.

The Structure of Baptism

In the Liberal Catholic Rite, baptism consists of three main features. The first is an exorcism of any "influences and seeds of evil" which an infant may be considered to bear from a previous existence. (We do not think in the orthodox way of the child as having inherited the 'original sin' of Adam). This is followed, after a preliminary anointing, by the actual baptism with water, and the incidental use of the child's given name. It is not, however, a naming ceremony as such.

Finally, the neophyte is anointed with specially blessed holy oil, or Chrism, which is the veritable touch of Christ himself, signifying the acceptance by God of this new Christian. The child or adult is thus formally received into the Christian Church, and is thereafter (when of suitable age) entitled to share in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

The method of applying water varies in different denominations. In the ministries of John the Baptist and of Jesus, this was by total immersion in the River Jordan, or in special baptismal tanks, and this has been maintained by the Baptists and some others to this day. The intended symbolism is certainly best conveyed by this method. By for convenience, the practice was developed of pouring water over the head of the candidate (affusion) and in some churches by merely sprinkling the brow (aspersion). These are less satisfactory as symbols, but quite valid as a sacrament – that is, the symbols and actions achieve what is intended in the baptismal rite, as will be explained below.

The water used in baptism is usually stipulated to be 'any running water', but can be a river, the sea, or water poured from a jug. In most rites deriving from the Catholic Mother Church, a little salt is added to the water, which is blessed by a set prayer. Some churches still pour holy oil on the surface of the font, to protect from infection and pollution the water, which is then blessed only once a year, at Easter. But in our Liberal Catholic Rite, the water is blessed afresh for each baptism, and the oil is applied directly to the candidate. This provides a clearer and more direct symbol of anointing and is surely a more hygienic practice!

What does Baptism Do?

The basic attitude in baptism should be one of unreservedly offering oneself to God, in his service. This implies a certain giving up of one's own more selfish needs and desires and actions, and therefore should be a *willing sacrifice* – that is, a voluntary

and sacred act of faith, something which is done with joy and not grudgingly. If this intent is missing, or the vicarious promise of the godparents lacking, as when baptism or 'christening' is merely a social occasion, it is doubtful if much 'sacramental grace' is bestowed, and the rite is in danger of degenerating into a quasi-magical and even superstitious observance.

This self-offering also implies a commitment to Christ's Church. Obviously an infant cannot do these things, so its godparents make vicarious promises for the child that (in orthodox term) he or she will renounce "the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world". In the Liberal Catholic Rite, they are charged with the supervision of the child to ensure that he or she will be instructed in the rudiments of the faith, especially Christ's commandment to love God and one's neighbour.

At Confirmation, these promises are *confirmed* by the initiate, who makes a voluntary act of self-dedication to God, and renounces sin and selfishness.

The next function of baptism after this offering of oneself to God, is *purification*. It effects a purging of 'seeds of evil' in infants, and 'sins' in adults. Water is certainly a symbol of life, but first we see total immersion as signifying a death to the 'old Adam', and the limitations imposed on one by the lower personality, and by our existence in time and matter. It is a washing away of sin and selfishness. Then, arising from the waters of life, the neophyte is symbolically and spiritually *re-born* to newness of life, a life in and for God – in effect, a life in the eternal, a timeless and direct relationship with God. Associated with this watery purification, and preceding it is our rite, is a ceremonial 'exorcism' or casting out of all that is base, selfish and sinful in the candidate.

By baptism, the individual is also *protected* as far as possible from onslaughts in infancy by external influences on body, emotions and mind. The blessings given by Christ at the hand of the priest to some extent assist this protection, but it is chiefly the anointing of the 'vital centres' of the body, and signing them with the sign of the cross, that in various ways open, activate and protect those centres, which can otherwise be so easily traumatised by the outside world. In the older child, baptism and later confirmation help to protect against the hazards of puberty and adolescence.

The baptismal candidate is also protected traditionally by a 'guardian angel' – a focus of divine action and power – the priest praying that this "holy angel (may) go before thee and follow after thee; may he be with thee in thy downsitting and thine uprising, and keep thee in all thy ways". Many people have testified to a conviction that this guardian angel has intervened in their lives in times of crisis or danger.

In addition to this protective role, the holy oils, which are linked with Christ by a bishop at a special service just before Easter, are applied to the crown and brow of the neophyte as symbols of God's *recognition and acceptance* of this new Christian. He or she is thus acknowledged as a son or daughter of God. This is akin to the anointing in ancient times of God's prophets, and nowadays, as then, of kings and queens, who are considered to reign in God's name.

As noted earlier, the initiate is thus united inwardly with God and with his Church, by which is meant the universal Church Catholic, and not just the particular

denomination. He is thus partaking in a living, universal and historic mystery, and not merely undergoing some shallow antiquated ceremony of observance. St Paul expresses it as being 'grafted into Christ', into his Mystical Body.

The newly baptised is also incidentally made a member of the denomination performing the ceremony – in this case, The Liberal Catholic Church. But true membership means much more than merely 'signing of the dotted line', as with a club. A member means a *limb* – an arm or leg – and the Christian member is, as it were, an active hand of the Church, a hand doing God's work in the world. Thus, especial responsibilities are implied for the new Christian, as well as the privileges of at-one-ment with God, and access to the Christian mysteries or sacraments.

Such responsibilities would include sharing in acts of worship with the whole community, and in particular taking part in the Holy Eucharist on a regular basis. Only thus can Christ's Mystical Body, the Church, the living agent of Christ's work in the world, be truly effective in this spiritual work for humanity and nature.

The Christian cannot afford to leave this work to 'others' – what others? We must all, each and every one, be fully responsible and fully active. It is the worshipping *lay person*, not the priest, who is the backbone of Christ's Church. For he and she provide nothing less than the basic 'raw materials' of devotion and love with which the divine grace of the Holy Spirit is transmuted into sacramental blessing at a human level.