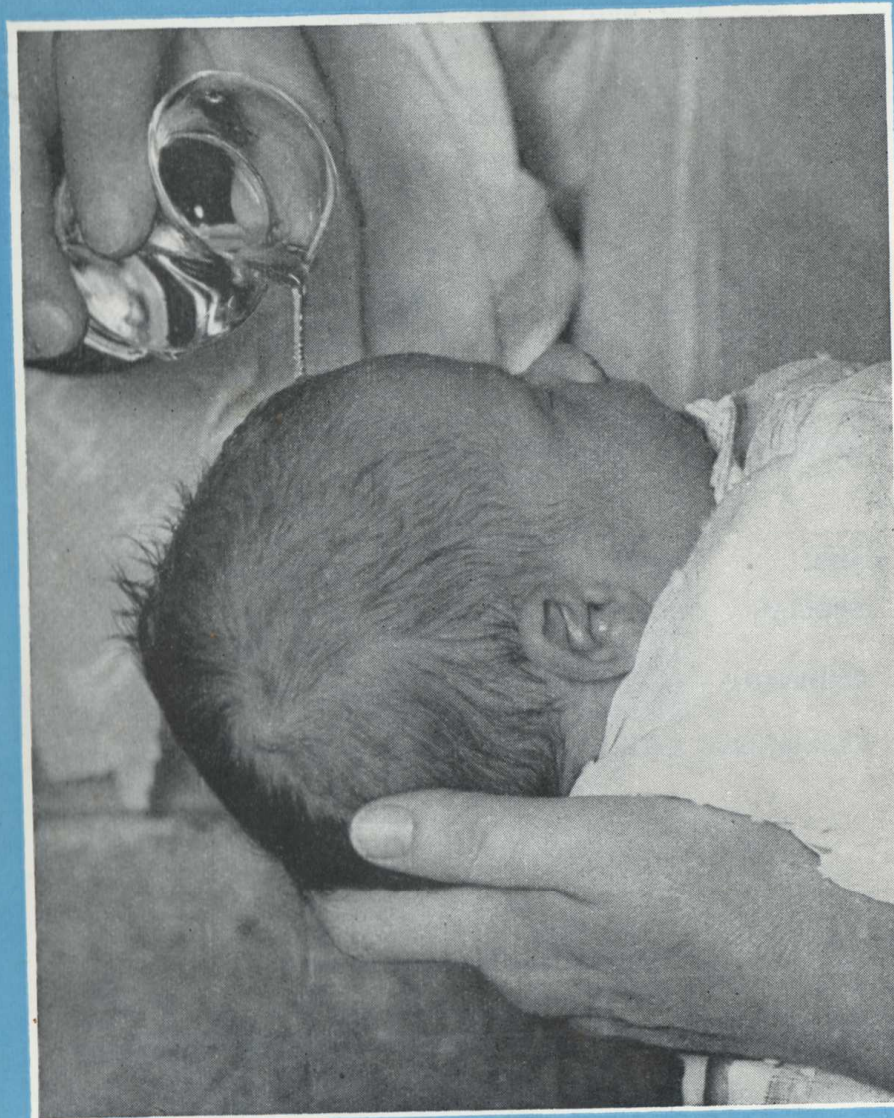


BAPTISM

By Mgr H. FRANCIS DAVIS D.D., M.A.



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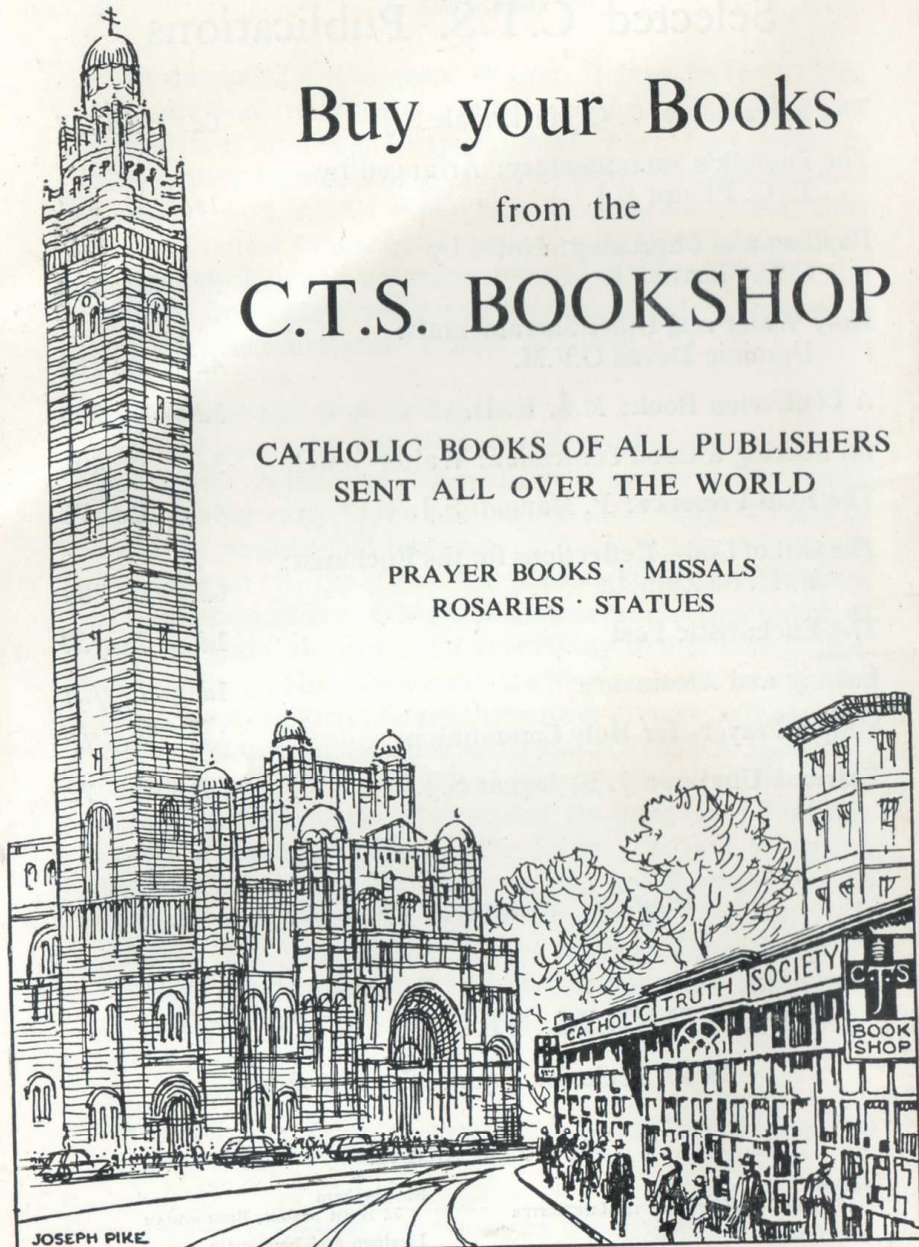
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BAPTISM

BY

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LONDON

CATHOLIC TRUTH SOCIETY

BAPTISM

YOU BECOME A CHRISTIAN by being baptized. It is perhaps difficult in this incredulous age to believe that God can change our inmost being by a ceremony. Yet such is the Christian faith. It is God who works the change. You have to co-operate, and co-operating with God involves sacrifice; but it is God's grace, not man's co-operation, which changes us.

To understand the meaning and beauty of Baptism, we must consider both what God does and how man co-operates. We must also study the way in which from ancient times Christians have been given Baptism.

What God does for us in Baptism

Baptism is the fulfilment of an ancient prophecy that, when Christ should come, God would change our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh.¹ Our Lord called this change a new birth. 'Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.'² By natural birth we get our original nature, by new birth a new nature. This new nature is referred to in Scripture as putting on 'the person of Christ.'³ It results in a most intimate spiritual unity with all other baptized Christians. 'You are all one person in Jesus Christ.'⁴ Elsewhere it is called a new life, contrasted with which our former life was as death. God raised up His Son, Jesus, after three days in the tomb; and, with Him, he raises us. 'And in giving life to him, he gave life to you too, when you lay dead in your sins . . .'⁵ 'In our baptism, we have been buried with him, died like him, that . . . we too might live and move in a

¹Ezech. xi, 16; xxvi, 26.

²John iii, 5; cf. Tit. iii, 5.

³Gal. iii, 27.

⁴Gal. iii, 28.

⁵Gal. ii, 13.

new kind of existence.⁶ This baptismal life is usually called sanctifying grace, because it comes from God's free graciousness, and makes us holy.

Before baptism, we belonged to a fallen race. After baptism, from being children of wrath, we become children of heaven. 'The nature of the earth-born man is shared by earthly sons, the nature of the heaven-born man, by his heavenly sons: and it remains for us, who once bore the stamp of earth, to bear the stamp of heaven.'⁷

Our sins, then, are washed away, and divine life, or sanctifying grace, is given to us. We become by grace like unto Christ our brother, sons of God and heirs of heaven.

The Fathers never tire of telling us of the endless gifts that come with these. While we were unregenerate, we were not merely without grace, not even merely stained and filthy; the godlike beauty in which we were made was now defaced. This has never perhaps been more impressively described than by St John Chrysostom: 'It is as though one were to take some pock-fretted victim of pestilence, disease, old age, want and hunger, and were to make him at once into a comely young man, surpassing all in his beauty, shining with radiance from his cheeks, his eyes glowing with a light more splendid than the sun, and then were to place him in the flower of youth and clothe him about with a purple robe, a diadem and kingly attire. Thus has he adorned our soul, and made it comely, desirable and lovable. The angels, archangels, and other powers long to gaze upon such a soul. To such an extent has He made us pleasing and desirable to Himself.'⁸

Another early writer, St Methodius, says that, at the moment of baptism, Christ is born within each of us, and we assume the features and vigorous mind of Christ.⁹ St Basil says we put on a garment of light, and are sealed

⁶Rom. vi, 4.

⁷1 Cor. xv, 48, 49; cf. 1 Cor. xv, 21.

⁸St John Chrysostom, Hom on Eph. i, 6, P.G. 62, 13 (my translation).

⁹Convivium decem virginum, viii, 8.

with an unbreakable seal, and board the vessel that will convey us to heaven.¹⁰

All this we can gain for ourselves, or give our infants, at no greater cost than a simple ceremony. Though, as we shall see, there will be a sacrifice demanded of us in our lives.

The new gift of God in Baptism is symbolized in the liturgy by the white garment given by the priest to the newly baptized person, with the words: 'Receive this white garment, and see thou carry it without stain before the judgment-seat of our Lord Jesus Christ, that thou mayest have eternal life.' In some countries it is the Catholic custom to give the baptized person a small white vestment, that he may retain it through life as a keepsake and reminder of the moment when he became for the first time a member of Christ. Some of the Fathers saw this baptismal garment of grace and innocence in the wedding-garment of the parable, that we must wear when we go to our heavenly banquet of eternity.

The Seal of Baptism

Along with this grace we receive what the early Christians called a seal, what modern Catholics call a character. Our souls are set apart, marked, sealed, signed as Christ's property. 'Character' is simply Latin for a permanent mark, usually carved or branded on something. Nobody thinks the soul can be really carved or branded, but it can be just as permanently stamped in a spiritual way with the imprint of Christ. The Fathers likened it to a branding of sheep, or a soldier's tattoo, whereby in the ancient world sheep or soldiers were recognized as belonging to, or serving, a certain master. A second-century writer speaks of baptized people being sealed 'with the seal of the Son of God.'¹¹ Sometimes they compare it to the stamp on a coin. Christ is stamped on our souls, as the head of the emperor was stamped on imperial coinage.

¹⁰Hom. xiii, 5.

¹¹Hermas, Pastor, Sim. ix, 16.

This character of Christ is not merely a proud badge. It gives us new powers. It sets us apart officially as Christ's members, able to join with the rest of the Church in offering His sacrifice in the Mass. It gives us a share in His priesthood, enabling us to join in the Church's sacraments. Thus Baptism, as the gateway to the Church, is also the gateway to the other sacraments. They cannot be validly received without it.

The Gateway to Heaven

But the principal effect of all, as St Thomas tells us, is to open for us the gates of heaven. Following the Fathers, he thinks that this is why Our Lord was baptized in the Jordan. For the Jordan, over which the Jews had crossed to enter the promised land, was afterwards the type of our passage at the last day into the final promised land, the heavenly Jerusalem. St Thomas adds that, in so far as Baptism is a washing away of sin, it is pre-figured in the crossing over the Red Sea; but, as a passage to heaven, in the passage over the Jordan.

Anyone who is baptized, even any infant, if he dies before he has lost his baptismal grace, will be assured his passage into heaven. This helps us to realize that our entry into heaven will be entirely due to Christ and His merits. Before Baptism we have no merits; after Baptism, whatever merits we acquire depend on the grace of Baptism, together with the succeeding graces that Jesus Christ pours upon his members.

Our own contribution at Baptism

But before the sacrament will have any effect on us, we must know its meaning and seriousness. We must understand that, though it is much more, it is the great Initiation Rite into the Body of Christ. Christ died for us all. In Baptism we come to Him that He may give us the fruits of His sacrifice. Early Christians saw a type of Baptism in Noe's ark. For in this sacrament we are saved, not merely

for ourselves, but for Christ and His Church. This is why the custom is growing of inviting as many as possible to come and be present at a baptismal ceremony, that the Church may receive her new member with solemnity and rejoicing.

We must realize its necessity

It is not merely very important, it is imperative. Christ Himself said to Nicodemus: 'Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.'¹² His parting message was: 'Going therefore teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.' Or, in another place, 'He that believeth and is baptized, shall be saved: but he that believeth not shall be condemned.'¹³

For we must be born anew; and this initiation-rite joins us symbolically to Christ's death, burial and resurrection, and so regenerates us. St Paul made this clear to the Romans; and of course it is every bit as true for us today: 'You know well enough, that we who were taken up into Christ by baptism have been taken up, all of us, into his death. In our baptism, we have been buried with him, died like him, that so, just as Christ was raised up by his Father's power from the dead, we too might live and move in a new kind of existence.'¹⁴ He said something very similar to the Colossians: 'You, by baptism, have been united with his burial, united, too, with his resurrection, through your faith in that exercise of power by which God raised him from the dead. And in giving life to him, he gave life to you too, when you lay dead in your sins, with nature all uncircumcised in you.'¹⁵

Jesus Christ, the Fathers tell us, had become man that He might die. He died, that we might also die to sin. He rose from the dead, that we might rise with Him. He continues His human life in heaven, that we may live with Him eternally after our resurrection. But, before His death and

¹²Jn. iii, 15.

¹³Mt. xxviii, 19 & Mk. xvi, 17.

¹⁴Rom. vi, 34.

¹⁵Col. ii, 12.

resurrection may be truly ours, we must be joined to Him by faith and by sacramental burial and rising. This is the way we become His members, and He our Head.

But our likeness to Christ does not cease at the moment of Baptism. The rest of our Christian lives are to be like that of Christ. We unite our trials and crosses with His redemptive suffering, that we may enter into glory with Him.¹⁶ Our Lord seems to connect this with Baptism, where he says: 'You shall indeed drink of the chalice that I drink of: and with the baptism wherewith I am baptized, you shall be baptized.'¹⁷ We must be immersed with Christ in his sufferings as well as in water, before Baptism finally opens for us the gates of heaven.

Other aspects of Baptism we must know

We must bear in mind that water is used not only to signify burial, but also washing. Some modes of Baptism represent one of these better than others. But, where we baptize by immersion or simple pouring, we symbolize both. For we are washed clean, made holy, and justified by the Spirit of God.¹⁸

It is especially a sign of unity

Still more must we see Baptism, like drinking from a common source, as a pledge of unity. In this sense, St Paul says: 'We have all been given drink at a single source, the one Spirit,' and so have been 'baptized into a single body.'¹⁹

Christians have always been taught that God has ~~no~~ ^{one} plan of salvation for us separately and singly. Our hope is in our union with one another under the same Father through the one Christ in the one Spirit. For in unity alone is found salvation. 'You are one body, with a single Spirit: each of you, when he was called, called in the same hope; with the same Lord, the same faith, the same baptism; with the

¹⁶Gal. iii, 19; Rom. vi, 5.

¹⁷Mk. x, 39.

¹⁸1 Cor. vi, 11.

¹⁹1 Cor. xii, 13.

same God, the same Father, all of us . . .'²⁰ As in the older translations, 'One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism.'

And the Sacrament of the Church

We must know that the unity we seek in Baptism is the Church. Jesus Christ so loved the Church that he gave Himself on its behalf, that He might hallow it and purify it 'by bathing it in the water to which his word gave life.'²¹ This makes the Church holy and spotless, with 'no stain, no wrinkle, no such disfigurement.'²² For Baptism makes us members of the body of Christ, whose Head is Christ, and whose soul and holiness is the Spirit. Even after Baptism, unfortunately, we can still fall into sin; but, when we do so, we withdraw ourselves from the unity of Christ's body, the Church. The Holy Spirit never leaves the body, hallowing all who will submit to His influence.

As a sacrament of unity and of the Church, Baptism is closely related to the Eucharist. Baptism gives us birth into the unity of the Church, while the Eucharist is the food that feeds and maintains and increases that unity.

Realizing Baptism's importance, we must believe

It is no good an adult coming to Baptism until he is able to believe in Christ. When one of the earliest converts asked for Baptism, Philip first said to him: 'If thou dost believe with all thy heart, thou mayest.'²³ For Our Lord had mentioned faith with Baptism: 'He that believeth and is baptized . . .'²⁴ Our main part in Baptism is our acceptance of Christ as the one name in which we hope to be saved. If we are baptized as babies, we have no power actually to believe or disbelieve. We then belong to our parents, and they must act for us. They bring us to the Church, say, with the intention that we should be baptized into the body of Christ. The Church through the godparents answers on our behalf. God does not demand of infants what infants cannot

²⁰Eph. iv, 4-6.

²¹Eph. v, 26.

²²Eph. v, 27.

²³Acts viii, 37.

²⁴Mk. xvi, 17.

give. It is only when they grow up that God will ask them to exercise their gift of Baptism and make personally the act of faith and acceptance that their godparents made on their behalf in their infancy. If our parents failed to bring us to Christ in infancy, we are none the less bound to come ourselves at the age of discretion. Baptized or not, we belong to Christ, and have a duty to give ourselves freely to him.

The Scripture convert mentioned above answered Philip by giving what may have been the earliest Christian creed. 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'²⁵ They all accepted God the Father, so His name need not be mentioned. But they needed to proclaim their allegiance to God the Son. 'Salvation is not to be found elsewhere;' said St Peter, 'this alone of all the names under heaven has been appointed to men as the one by which we must needs be saved.'²⁶ So, when we read in the *Acts* that men were baptized in the name of Jesus, it probably means that they made a confession like that quoted above: 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'²⁷ Later, it became necessary to add first God the Father and then God the Holy Ghost to the baptismal creed. The trinitarian creed is still repeated by the candidate for Baptism. 'Dost thou believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth? I do believe. Dost thou believe in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, who was born into this world, and who suffered for us? I do believe. Dost thou believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints, the Forgiveness of Sins, the Resurrection of the Body, and Life Everlasting? I do believe.' Such is the way in which the candidate first confesses what is now called the Apostles' Creed. In an emergency Baptism of children, it is not necessary for anyone to say these words for the child. The

²⁵Acts viii, 37.

²⁶Acts iv, 12.

²⁷Cf. Joseph H. Crehan S.J., *Early Christian Baptism and the Creed*. Other scholars think that 'in the name of Jesus' means 'in His authority' or 'into His service'. Others again think it refers to a special short baptismal formula: 'I baptize thee in the name of Jesus.'

faith and desire of the Church suffice. In an adult emergency Baptism, the candidate expresses as best he can his faith in Christ and desire to be a Christian.

Together with our act of faith, we pledge our lives to Christ

It is not enough to believe, and then leave it all to God. We must seriously mean to play our part. We must adopt a new outlook on life. It could mean the renunciation of our present calling or mode of life, if that happens to be incompatible with the Gospel. In the first centuries, they were for a time asked to renounce such professions as those of actor and gladiator, because of Roman licentiousness and brutality. At times, and in certain places, the civil service and the army would be forbidden to Christians, because such service was inseparable from pagan sacrificial rites.

Nowadays, at the moment of Baptism, the candidate must pledge himself to lifelong abandonment of Satan and his works and pomps. From that moment, he is committed against heresy and sin of all kinds, and against the false values of this world. He is committed for life, without repentance, to these baptismal vows. Though God has a right to demand these vows from us, and we have no right to refuse, yet we may not take them thoughtlessly. That we might the better recall this pledge, we now renew our baptismal vows during the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday night, around the newly blessed paschal candle, which represents Christ, the light of the world. Thus we are reminded that we have forsaken the kingdom of darkness for the kingdom of light. For this reason, parts of the Early Church called Baptism the *Enlightenment* or *Illumination*.

What is the essence of the baptismal ceremony?

In the earliest baptisms recorded, nothing is mentioned but water. 'See, here is water; why may I not be baptized?'²⁸ There was no oil, it seems. No books of elaborate ritual. No salt or candles or white garments. These have a reason. They represent wisdom (salt); strength (first oil); a

²⁸Acts viii, 37.

priestly and royal consecration (second oil); resurrection and life with Christ (garment). But, in the midst of all the ceremonies, the actual Baptism remains today what it always was, an immersing, or washing, in water. The word 'baptize' is, of course, of Greek origin. We have just given it an English form. In the Greek, it means 'to immerse' or 'to wash by dipping'. When Philip baptized the Ethiopian, he must have taken him into a pond or river and immersed him. To judge by many early Christian wall-paintings, he may have poured water over the candidate's head, as both stood in the water. As he did this, we can be sure he said the words that have been repeated all through the centuries: 'I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.' This is found already in St Matthew's Gospel, in Our Lord's own mouth. It is the only form of words we find in the earliest liturgies. It is still used everywhere in the West. From an early period, the Eastern Christians have used a slightly different formula with the same meaning.

In a case of emergency, anyone available should baptize a person who needs it. In such cases it is only necessary to pour water over the head, making sure it touches the skin, saying as one pours: 'I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.' It would even be valid to receive Baptism from a non-Christian; and it would be the only right thing to do in an emergency if no one else were available. This may seem strange. But God is so anxious not to exclude anyone from possibility of Baptism that he will even use non-Christians for this purpose. The Church has invariably taught this. All that would be necessary in such a case would be for the person to intend to confer Christian Baptism, and to pour the water over the head while saying the correct words.

Are there different methods of baptizing?

Everyone knows that Baptism has been given in some places and times by way of immersion, and at other places

and times by way of pouring. It has even been given by sprinkling in some cases of grave emergency. This last method is not recommended where either of the other ways is possible, since there is a risk that the water may not touch the persons who are being baptized. But Baptism by immersion and by pouring are both recognized as possibilities in the Roman ritual. In the early Church, immersion was normal. Today it is usually done by pouring. Sometimes the two methods have been combined. In the early days, when immersion was normal, we know of cases where, in an emergency, a person was baptized, say, in bed, by simple pouring. The wall-paintings make it certain that Baptism by pouring was conferred much more often than we should judge by documents. Finally, on the day of Pentecost, when 3,000 were baptized, it seems unlikely that all were completely immersed.

The question is sometimes asked why the normal method has changed with the times. In fact, there are Protestants who complain of this, and who maintain that it is wrong to baptize by pouring. Other people admit that it is not wrong to do it this way; but they think immersion is far more impressive, and more in harmony with St Paul.

The reasons for the change may be partly the spread of the faith in northern regions, where the dangers of immersing newly born babies in cold water were feared, and where adults themselves sometimes suffered from a certain timidity. Add to this the growth of the faith, and the vast numbers of candidates for Baptism, together with a growing sensitiveness to the danger of water-contamination, and a certain shyness of many people regarding a ceremony of public bathing. Whatever the reason, either form of Baptism is equally valid. Much more important than the method of washing is that the ceremony should be performed as publicly as possible, and with supreme reverence and devotion. For the entry of a new member into the Church is an occasion of joy and thanksgiving, which, as one priest once put it, could well be announced by a fanfare of trumpets.

Can anyone be baptized?

No one in the Church has ever doubted that any man, woman, or child is eligible. Those who are of age should first satisfy the conditions mentioned above. They should know what they are doing, make an act of faith, and take the baptismal vows. As long as they are in good health, and there is no immediate danger, the Church insists on a period of trial and instruction before admission. This differs in length and detail in different times and places. The candidate is finally admitted when he knows enough to make the above acts.

Infant Baptism

In the last few centuries, certain Protestants have protested against the validity of infant Baptism. They have argued that Scripture does not mention it, and that, in any case, the children cannot make an act of faith. Some modern people have added a further reason. They complain that no one ought to be committed to the obligations of Christianity by his or her parents or elders.

Admittedly there is no direct evidence in the Scriptures for the baptizing of babies. Yet there is no contrary evidence, and much indirect witness to it. First, the earliest converts were Jews, and it had always been the custom to circumcize or otherwise initiate Jewish children in early infancy. Christians would naturally tend to initiate their own children at a similar age, unless this were explicitly forbidden.

There are, moreover, several cases where whole houses were baptized. Instances are Lydia with her household, the gaoler with his household, probably Crispus with all his house, and the household of Stephanas.²⁹

Besides, Baptism is the sacrament of the Church, of the community, not an exclusive rite for the individual. It would be out of harmony with the sense of community to exclude some of the community's members.

We also find children among the Christians addressed by

²⁹cf. Acts xvi, xviii; 1 Cor. i, 16.

St Paul,³⁰ just as Our Lord had claimed the children as especially His own. And did not Our Lord remind us of their guardian angels, and bless them?³¹ It is inconceivable that He should have objected to the entry into the Church of the little children He had blessed.

After the Scriptures, there is plenty of evidence for Infant Baptism. Origen (II-III cent.), St Cyprian (III cent.), St Hippolytus (III cent.),³² are witnesses in the early period.

As for the objection that Baptism is a sacrament of faith, we do not doubt this truth. But Baptism *gives* us faith, rather than *supposes* it. In the baptismal ceremony from time immemorial, the priest has asked the candidate: 'What dost thou ask of the Church of God?' He answers: 'Faith.' This faith is given even to infants, though they are not able to exercise that faith and make acts until they come to the age of reason. Adults are asked to confess their faith beforehand, it is true; but this is but a disposition and a sign of sincerity, which will become rooted and established through the grace of the sacrament. In the case of infants, they are presented by the Church, at the request of the parents or guardians. The Church believes in Christ, and makes a solemn act of faith on behalf of the child. The faith with which the adult asks for Baptism is the result of the inspiration of God's call, enabling him to surrender to Christ in utter trust. The faith given in Baptism is a deep-rooted habitual faith, enabling him to remain loyal to Christ's teaching and commands throughout life. This faith remains unshakably until death, if we are sincere and do not reject it.

Finally, is it right to give Baptism to children before they have a chance of deciding for themselves? It is right in the same way that we give them food and drink and all they need in the natural order. If we love our children, we should not willingly deprive them of what is a far greater treasure

³⁰Gal. iii, 20.

³¹Mt. xviii, 10; Mk. x, 16.

³²Cf. Origen, Hom. viii in Lev., 3; Hom. xiv in Luc.; Com. in Rom. v, 9; St Cyprian, Ep. 64 ad Fidum; S. Hipp., Trad. Ap. Tertullian advised waiting till the children could be instructed, but did not deny the possibility of Infant Baptism.

than natural life, the grace of God. If they have the gift, they are God's children and temples of the Holy Spirit, even before they are able to speak. And, when they begin to think, they have God's grace to help them from the first moment. And, whether they have God's grace or not, they are still bound to live good lives. The child will choose God far more easily and naturally, if he has all his life been the child of God's grace, than if he is left to decide by means of his unregenerate nature alone.

The wonder and glory of Baptism

May I conclude with a passage from the fourth century St Gregory Nazianzus, where he tells us the many names given by the early Christians for this sacrament, in order to manifest its manifold blessings.

'We call it the Gift, the Grace, Baptism, Unction, Illumination, the Clothing of Immortality, the Laver of Regeneration, the Seal, and everything that is honourable. We call it the Gift, because it is given to us in return for nothing on our part; Grace, because it is conferred even on debtors; Baptism, because sin is buried with it in water; Unction, as Priestly and Royal, for such were they who were anointed; Illumination, because of its splendour; Clothing, because it hides our shame; the Laver, because it washes us; the Seal, because it preserves us, and is moreover the indication of Dominion. In it the heavens rejoice; it is glorified by Angels . . . It is the image of the heavenly bliss. We long indeed to sing its praises, but we cannot worthily do so.'³³

³³St Greg. Naz., Oratio 40, 4 (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, new series, vol vii, p. 360).

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