
The Symbolism of the Eastern Orthodox Baptism Rite

Jesus teaches that to enter His Kingdom, we must be baptised by “water and the Holy Spirit” (John 3:5) Our entrance into the Kingdom is an entrance into the life of the Church, as this is where the Kingdom of God is made real in the world. This entrance begins with the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments) of Baptism and Chrismation. In these rites, we receive the grace of God through the baptismal water and the holy “chrism”, which is a sign of the gift of the Holy Spirit. The following is an explanation of the major elements in the Orthodox rites of initiation.

The Churching (*infants only*)

The birth of a child means a new life has come into the world, a new relationship has been established in the family. As the mother returns to the Church after a time of recovery from giving birth (the biblical directive was 40 days), she is welcomed back into the parish with the prayer that God “cleanse her from every sin and impurity, that coming to the Holy Church, she may partake without condemnation of the Holy Mysteries.” The “Holy Mysteries” refer to Holy Communion — partaking of Communion is understood as the primary mark of membership in the Church.

The priest then prays for the child, asking that God “increase him (*her*), sanctify him (*her*), enlighten him (*her*), render him (*her*) chaste and endow him (*her*) with good understanding... that he (*she*) may be numbered among Christ’s Chosen Flock...” The rite of churching the infant will conclude at the end of the service.

The Rite of Making a Catechumen

In the Ancient Church, the first step in membership was to become a student, or “catechumen” of the Church in preparation for baptism. During this time, one would be taught the basic truths of the Faith. As the catechumens are no longer a formal order in the Church, this rite is now usually celebrated as the beginning of the Baptism service.

As baptism is a rite of entry into the Church, these opening prayers are done at the back of the church building, as part of a formal (and literal) entrance into the church.

The Exorcism Prayers: The priest calls upon the Holy Spirit to expel Satan and all his angels from the presence of the candidate for baptism. He prays that the spirits of evil may not lay hold of him/her by temptation or any other torment. The priest blows on the candidate cross-wise three times to symbolize the power of the Holy Spirit—the Hebrew and Greek words for “spirit” also mean “breath.”

The Renunciation of Satan: The candidate and sponsors turn to face the west, the back of the church. West is symbolic of darkness, since the sun sets the west. Through this movement the devil, the “lord of darkness”, is confronted and rejected, along with “and all his works, all his worship, all his angels, and all his pomp.”

The Acceptance of Christ: Turning back to face the east, symbolising the Light of Christ, the candidate and sponsors accept Jesus “as King and as God.” They seal this acceptance by repeating the words of the Nicene Creed, which outlines the Church’s basic beliefs about God, Church, and salvation.

The Rites of Baptism and Chrismation

The Baptismal Candles: One of the terms used in Orthodoxy when referring to baptism is “Holy Illumination,” since it is through baptism that Christ, the Light of the World, enters in our hearts. The baptismal candles are a symbol of baptism as illumination.

The Oil of Gladness: After the opening proclamation and litany, the candidate is anointed with oil. In ancient times oil was used as a salve to cover wounds, protecting them so that they could heal faster. The anointing with the “Oil of Gladness” is a symbol of baptism as an act which heals our broken relationship with God.

The Baptism: The candidate is immersed in the baptismal font in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Entering the font, s/he joins Christ in His burial; coming up out of it s/he takes part in Christ’s resurrection from the tomb. The candidate is “born again,” literally “born from above”, into a new life in Christ Jesus.

The Robe of Radiance: After the baptism, the candidate is wrapped in a white cloth called a “*kryzhma*”, another symbol of Christ. This act reflects the words of St. Paul: “All of those who have been baptised in Christ have been robed in Christ.” (Galatians 3:27)

The Chrismation (Confirmation): The Orthodox Church maintains the ancient practice of confirming the newly baptised Christian immediately after his/her baptism. Just as baptism is a personal “Pascha” (Easter) for each of us, making us partakers in Christ’s

resurrection, our confirmation is a personal Pentecost, as the Holy Spirit descends upon us, confirming us as full members of the Church.

The act of confirmation is done through an anointing with a special oil called “Chrism,” from the Greek word meaning “gift” — as in, the gift of the Holy Spirit. In ancient times lamps were fueled with oil. In this anointing the oil symbolizes the fire which lighted upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost. Because the central act of the confirmation rite is the anointing with Holy Chrism, in Eastern Orthodoxy we call confirmation “Chrismation.”

The baptismal procession: The priest leads the newly baptised and his/her sponsors around the small altar upon which rest the Cross and the Gospel Book. These articles typify everything that Jesus did for us (the Cross), and taught us (the Gospel). This procession reminds us that our entire lives as Christians must be a continuous orbit around Jesus’ life and teachings.

The Scripture Readings:

Romans 6:3-11 – All of those who are baptised in Christ share in His death and resurrection.

Matthew 28:16-20 – Jesus instructs His disciples to preach the Gospel to all peoples, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The Post-Baptismal Rites

In the ancient Christian baptismal rites, the baptism itself would end at this point, and all of the rites following would be celebrated one week later. During this week, the newly-baptised would receive further teachings about the Faith.

The Washing of The Oil: The priest washes the holy oil and Chrism off the candidate. This washing is understood as part of the newly-baptised Christian’s final preparation for entering into the world as a disciple and witness of Christ.

The Tonsure: As Christians we are called to offer our entire life to the Lord. As a symbolic first-offering, the candidate’s hair is cut. Hair, in the Biblical story of Samson is equated with strength; thus the hair offered stands for all the person’s strength and potentials given over to God.

The Churching (*infants, conclusion*)

The priest takes the newly-baptised infant in his arms and standing before the Royal Gates of the altar, he dedicates the child to God. As he returns the child to the parents, the priest chants the hymn of the Righteous Symeon, who had been promised by God that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah: “Now let Your servant depart in peace, O Master, for my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You prepared before the face of all peoples...” (see Luke 2:21-40)

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