

Understanding Baptism: Part I of IV

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The sacraments, in particular the sacraments of initiation, are pivotal moments in our faith that are sometimes undervalued in terms of their theological importance, and impact on our lives as Christians. Too often in world today we see them as rites of passage in our lives, but fail to truly understand the meaning behind them, and the transforming nature of the Grace bestowed upon us through these actions. In the following months I will be looking at the meaning of Baptism in a series of articles. We will begin our discussion of the sacramental life in the Church with some thoughts on the very concept of sacraments or mysteries. I hope that this examination of one of the most important elements of our Faith will shed light on what entry into the Church truly means.

The Sacraments

It is through the sacraments that God is able to communicate with humankind; it may be said that by this God is able to sanctify the totality of human existence. “In the Sacraments God offers everything and nothing can be added beyond that.”¹ In essence, we are able to say that the totality of God’s reaching toward mankind is found in and through the sacraments. It must be stated; however, that it is the duty of humanity to reach back toward God and thus make divine synergy possible. Examples of this cooperation between God and humankind can be witnessed in all of the sacraments; for example, it is not wheat and grapes that are offered to God on the altar during the Eucharist, but rather, we are able to see the gifts given to us by God coupled with human effort that produce the offering. Much of the same can be said regarding the various other sacraments, especially Baptism, for in the sacrament of Baptism we are able to see that the offering which we make to God is life itself, which God may take and by God’s grace transform and sanctify, thus bringing humankind closer down the road to theosis or deification. In the sacramental life of the Church we are able to see the fullness of synergy in action, for the all important cooperation between humankind and God is assured. It must be stated, however, that it is important in the context of our human realm that we do not lose sight of the polarity found in this divine/human partnership, by this I mean to state that God is transcendent as well as imminent, and it is only through the Christ, and in the sacraments that we are able to experience the totality of God’s imminence in our human condition:

²“The knowledge of God leads to this one, incomprehensible yet obvious and inescapable word: holy. And in this word we express both that God is the Absolutely Other, the One about whom we know nothing, and that He is the end of all our hunger, all our desires, the inaccessible One who mobilizes our wills, the mysterious treasure that attracts us, and there is really nothing to know but Him.”

By this we are able to see the imminence and transcendence of God, and the response of our soul to His call.

As we humans:³ “...are lost individually, but saved collectively,” and therefore are not islands on our own but rather are interrelated and interdependent beings, we require the interaction of those around us in order to strive toward salvation. We are able to state that the

¹ Nellas p. 130

² Schmemmann-For the Life of the World p. 32

³ Khomikov p. 6

fullness of the sacraments is found in the Εκκλησια, or gathering of the faithful, in order to become the body of Christ. It must be stated, however, that in more recent years, the practice of the entire community welcoming new members in has fallen by the wayside, and the most integral sacraments of initiation: Baptism, Chrismation, and the Eucharist, have become private rites of passage shared only amongst the closest family and friends. This segregation of the foundational sacraments has ultimately led to a divorce between these sacraments, and to a great extent, a divorce between these sacraments and the Church itself. We may go so far as to say that this divorce to an extent also includes the believers and the Church itself, for they no longer are able to realize the depth and importance of the gathered community of believers in the realization and manifestation of God's grace. This can be stated due to the fact that the two initial sacraments of initiation are taken out of the Eucharistic context and, therefore, separated from the lifeblood of the Church. Consequently, it is theologically essential that the Eucharistic Liturgy and the sacraments of initiation be together. Through an examination of the history and theology of Baptism, we may more clearly demonstrate how the above mentioned divorce between the sacraments and the Eucharist has brought about a great many pastoral problems.

As we are able to see, it is in and through the sacraments that we as human beings are able to receive and truly understand the working of the Grace of God in our life. Additionally, we may see that the fullness of this Grace is realized in the fullness of the gathering of the Church, which is the body of Christ. In the forthcoming part two of this examination we will explore the practice of baptism currently used in the Orthodox Church.