

## **Understanding Baptism Part II of IV**

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In part one of our discussion on Baptism and its relation to the life of the Church and the Eucharist, we discovered that it is through the sacraments that God is able to sanctify the totality of Human existence. However, this existence is not a solitary state, in that we as humans need each other in order to strive toward salvation. It is for this reason that we as the Church must gather as a community to realize the manifestation of the Grace of God. Since the aforementioned Grace of God is only truly realized in and through the gathered community of believers, it stands to reason that having the sacraments of initiation separated from the Eucharistic gathering separates these all important actions from the very lifeblood of the Church itself, which is the Eucharist. In part two of our discussion, we will begin to examine the current pastoral challenges that face the sacrament of Baptism.

### **Baptism and its Current Pastoral Challenges**

In order for us as Christians to truly be affected by Baptism, it is essential that we begin by understanding Baptism, not only on a dogmatic and theological level, but also in a historical way. As mentioned previously, Baptism has its earliest roots in the Eucharistic Liturgy, and more precisely, in the height of the Eastern Church. Baptism finds its roots in the Paschal Eucharistic celebration. This liturgy in particular to this very day bears the mark of its connection to the mystery of Baptism:

<sup>1</sup>“Not many know that the liturgy of Easter is primarily a Baptismal Liturgy; that when on Easter eve they hear the biblical readings about the crossing of the Red Sea, or the three children in the furnace, or Johan in the Whales womb, they listen to the most ancient ‘paradigms’ and attend the great Baptismal vigil.”

Knowing and ultimately realizing the importance of the Resurrection and its connection to Baptism is the only true way of knowing the Sacrament of Baptism, and ultimately knowing life in the Church itself. This is the only way to understand true Life in the Church due to the fact that currently in the Eastern Church, Baptism is noticeably absent from the Liturgy, and this may questionably be the cause and source of a number of problems in the Church today. The absence of Baptism from the Church is most apparent when we consider that the sacrament is absent from the Liturgy, and as we have stated previously, has become a private family ceremony. This proves to be problematic in that the absence of Baptism from the Liturgy brings with it an absence of Baptismal piety. This is seen in that members are separated from the Sacrament of Baptism, save a few choice occasions in one’s life; there is not the element of Baptismal renewal present on a regular basis. The Christians of the “golden age” of the Eastern Church knew that each Lenten period was not only the preparation of the Catechumens for Baptism, but it was a preparation for them to renew and relive their own illumination through Baptism. It must be stated that even before the aforementioned “golden ages” of the Eastern Church, in the earliest days of Christianity, there appears to have been an emphasis on the communal participation in both Baptismal

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<sup>1</sup> Schmemmann-Of Water and the Spirit p. 7

preparation as well as the sacrament itself. For we are able to read in the Apology of St Justin:

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<sup>2</sup> “As many as are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting for the remission of the sins that are past, we praying and fasting with them.”

As a result of the current mindset of Baptismal privacy, to the average believer, the notion of Baptism is no longer a real and present experience, but rather has been equated as an abstract concept.

The ultimate result of the absence of Baptismal piety is that Baptism has lost its effect on the lives of believers, and thus no longer is able to truly be that foundation upon which a believer must stand. Baptism has lost the ability to shape the way in which the illumined person sees the world, for if Baptism is merely an event that we look back upon with the assistance of photographs, then the promises made on behalf of the one being illumined bear no weight in their day-to-day existence and decision making. Baptism has lost the power to shape the moral and ethical outlook of the faithful. <sup>3</sup>This was not a problem for Christians in the past for they knew precisely that through Baptism, the relationship between them and the world had radically changed forever, for the Christian had entered into the understanding that baptism would serve as the foundation and the guidepost for their entire existence. The fortunate happening is that even though the sacrament of Baptism has been stripped of a great deal of its meaning and importance in the Church, the fact remains that Baptism is still being performed, and within it lies the potential to reintroduce and rediscover the depth that the sacrament of Baptism brings to life in Christ.

It must be stated that from the perception of the canons of the Church, and even from a strictly dogmatic approach, the separation of the sacrament of Baptism from the Liturgy is not of that great a concern, and technically speaking, there is nothing in principle wrong with a fewer number of people in attendance at a Baptism, for neither canon law, nor the dogma of the faith dictate that a specific number of people must be present in order for the Baptism to take place; however, the problem lies in the fact that such a point of view is so prevalent, which conveys the depth of the divorce between the sacrament and the Church itself, and ultimately calls into question if indeed the faith expressed in the sacraments and services of the Church is indeed the same faith that is interpreted and perceived by those desiring adherence to the rule of the faith. This is to say that the rule, meaning canon law and dogma, is able to justify current practice; however, the tradition of the Church, and also the Spirit of the early Church are disregarded. <sup>4</sup>It is clear that the narrowing of the scope of understanding on the Eastern practice of Baptism corresponds with the increase of the influence of western scholasticism that forced eastern theology regarding the sacraments into a realm that was and is not conducive to the theology presented by the patristic fathers. This is to say that the patristic approach does not truly lend itself to the framework provided by scholasticism. This framework strives to prove and convey the validity of Baptism; however, in many ways, it is possible to see how these efforts fall short,

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<sup>2</sup> Osborne p.63

<sup>3</sup> Schmemmann-Of Water and the Spirit p. 8

<sup>4</sup> Schmemmann-For the Life of the World p. 73

for all the effort put forth in finding validity has appeared to forget what exactly is being made valid in and through the sacraments. This process has been assisted by the above mentioned aspects of Dogma and Canon Law, which have justified and expedited the process of the sacrament away from the common worship, or liturgy of the Church, and thus made into a private service.<sup>5</sup> This once Cosmic act which incorporated the entire Church has now been reduced to a private rite of individual passage, and with it the Church has been reduced to a simple agency for the conveyance of the sacraments. If the fulfillment of the sacrament requires only those things which are essential, then how far are we from taking a minimalistic approach to the entire sacrament, and doing away with the traditions of the Church which are able to instill the faithful with the correct and solid understanding of this sacrament? Fr. Alexander Schmemmann explains this notion well as he states:

<sup>6</sup>“...Why not have the water and the oil blessed in advance in order to save our precious time? Why bother with archaic rubrics which prescribe that ‘all the candles be lighted’ and the priest ‘be vested in white vestments’? Why involve the parish, the congregation, the people of God in all of this? Thus today it takes some fifteen minutes to perform in a dark corner of a church, with one ‘psalterist’ giving the responses, an act in ‘which the fathers saw and acclaimed the greatest solemnity of the Church: a mystery which fills with joy the angels and archangels and all the powers from above and the earthly creatures,’ a mystery for which the Church prepared herself by forty days of fasting and which constituted the very essence of her paschal joy.”

Thus we are able to say that the three fundamental pillars that must be upheld if we want the Church to once again become the force of changing and sculpting the life of its faithful are: sound, complete liturgy, and theology, which will ultimately lead to a correct and responsive piety that will reverberate through the entire Church and her sacramental life. Since<sup>7</sup> “[the] sacrament of Baptism is the door into the Church, the Kingdom of grace, and the beginning of Christian life,” it is essential that the faithful fully and truly understand it in all its depth and beauty.

It is because of the aforementioned divorce of the sacrament of Baptism from the essential life of the Church that we need to go through a process of Baptismal reclamation, and reintroduce the notion of Baptismal piety into the scope of Christian living and ethics, in the hope of having this foundational and<sup>8</sup> primordial sacrament once again shape the lives and the world view of the faithful. By this reclamation of the sacrament into the liturgical life of the Church, one may state that the Church will benefit in two ways: firstly in the aspects of liturgy, for it will once again find its wholeness through participation and the reliving act of each individual believers Baptism; additionally, Baptismal theology will be restored in that it will once again have a living experience of illumination theology in action accessible to all believers. As we have just seen in examining the current practice of the sacrament of Baptism, there exists a pastoral crisis from which the Church must recover in order to experience the fullness of the faith which she professes. We will, in the following parts of this discussion, attempt to look at

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<sup>5</sup> Schmemmann-For the Life of the World p. 67

<sup>6</sup> Schmemmann-Of Water and the Spirit p.11

<sup>7</sup> Alfeyev p.132

<sup>8</sup> Osborne p.24

some of the history of the sacrament of Baptism so that we may hope to see the true spirit of the sacrament (which since has been lost) displayed.