

Understanding Baptism Part III of IV

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In part two of our discussion on the Sacrament of Baptism, we discussed the current pastoral challenges that have arisen from the divorce of the Sacrament of Baptism from the Eucharistic Assembly. As we have read previously, this divorce has led to an overall shift in the influence of Baptism on the life of a Christian, for Baptism is no longer able to shape the “world view” of the faithful as it once did. In part three, we will focus our attention on the historical elements of the Sacrament of Baptism, from the spirit and practice of the early Church down to the current practice of Baptism that has been passed on to us.

History of Baptism

To reclaim the sacrament of Baptism, it is first essential for us to examine the origins of this practice, and likewise trace its development through the course of time. For this process one must take into consideration the natural occurring development of the sacrament as it appears in the pages of the New Testament, on through the early church practice. This is to state that to get the fullest picture of the history of the sacrament, we must first look at the event which gave weight to the eventual practice of Baptism, this being the Baptism of Christ Himself in the Jordan. For, not only does this event have historical significance in that it was a major event in the life of Christ and thus was also the initiation of the Baptismal practice, but it also serves as a theological point of departure; it is the occurrence of the Theophany or revelation of God in Christ to humankind. The event of Christ’s Baptism clearly was important to the life of the early Church as well, as we are able to see this event captured in the accounts of all four evangelists. Furthermore, the Patristic Fathers of the Church also point to this even in time to give meaning to the sacramental practice they were engaged in. The fact remains that it is not hard to find ample support and mention of the event of the Baptism of Christ in the pages of the New Testament. It is also of interest for us to consider the origins of the very act of Baptism with water.

¹It is clear from historical as well as Gospel accounts, that the practice of immersion into water for the cleansing of sin was an already established practice at the time of the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan. ²It is essential; however, that we not only understand that notion, but also examine the origins of this action when contrasted with the social and religious practices occurring in the middle east at the time of Christ. Both the Jews as well as the Hellenists of the time participated in rituals of cleansing and purification involving water. We are well aware of these practices due to the circumstances surrounding the Baptism of Jesus by John in the river Jordan, for it was an act of ablution common among several sects of Judaism of that time. Even in a historical sense it is important to understand that Christ himself instituted the sacrament of Baptism: ³“Christ’s command (Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...) contains the essential elements of the baptismal rite: preliminary teaching without which the adoption of faith cannot be continuous, immersion in water and the Trinitarian formula ‘in the

¹ Alfeyev p. 132

² Osborne p. 51

³ Alfeyev p. 137

Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit’.” In the Early Church, we are able to see that the practice of water continues; however, the specification of living water, that being water from a lake or stream becomes the norm. The early Church also lays claim to the innovation of the Baptistry, or pool in which baptisms took place. It must be stated that the normal practice was full immersion in water; however, it was permissible to sprinkle or even pour water on the candidate in extreme situations such as illness. Furthermore, even more exceptions were made to this rule: ⁴“In *The Spiritual Meadow* by John Moschus, there is a case of Baptism not with water but with sand. Some travelers were in the desert, death approached, and there was no water.” In the fourth century we encounter the practice of Baptizing adults near the end of their life, such as the practice with the Emperor Constantine. Others Baptized later in life are St. Gregory the Theologian, St. Basil the Great and St. John Chrysostom.

The initial custom of the Eastern Church was to Baptize all candidates on the eve of Easter, during the Resurrection Vigil. This process was later extended to include the feast of Christmas, ⁵and it is because of this reason that the 40 days of fasting came to be established prior to the celebration of the Nativity of the Lord. It must also be stated that these Baptisms took place only after a long period of preparation know as the Catechumenate. Although in this time period there is for the most part no formal means of preparation of those wanting to become Baptized, it must be stated that this is one aspect that is seriously needed by the Church, especially in the case of adult candidates. We may now be able to see the progression of the sacrament of Baptism from its beginnings true to the spirit of the Church to its current practice of separation from the life of the Church. In part four, the last section of this article, we will discuss the theological meaning of Baptism, so that we may truly understand its place in the Church.

⁴ Alfeyev p. 133

⁵ Schmemmann-For the Life of the World p. 76