

Understanding Baptism Part IV of IV

By: Fr. Timothy Chrapko

In Part three of our discussion on the Sacrament of Baptism, we examined the History of Baptism. Through this we were able to see the progression of practice from the early form of the sacrament, through the “golden age” of the Church on to the current inherited practice used today. As we are able to see, and have already discussed, this current practice has led to a great deal of pastoral challenges, in that in some ways, the current practice of Baptism is contradictory to the spirit and intent of the early Church. We will conclude our discussion of the Sacrament of Baptism by looking at the most essential element of this subject matter, which is the Theology of Baptism.

Theology of Baptism

Having already discussed the Pastoral complexity of the current Eastern Christian practice of Baptism, along with some thoughts on its historical place, it is now important to discuss the theology of this sacrament at some length. As we have stated many times previously, Baptism is the true point of entrance into life in Christ. However, we must also keep in mind that life in Christ is begun in our earthly life and is brought to perfection and completion through the Holy Sacraments/Mysteries of the Church. Again we restate that the cause, source, and eventual goal of all of these mysteries is to achieve union with Christ. In order for this union to take place it is important that we, the faithful, share in everything that is Christ's. This is to say that: ¹ “He who seeks to be united with Him must therefore share with Him in His flesh, partake of deification, and share in His death and resurrection.” The faithful are Baptized into the death of Christ in order to partake of His resurrection, this is our birth into the life in Christ, and thusly we are able to state that the act of Baptism is an act of personal resurrection in and through Jesus Christ. This can be stated due to the death and resurrection of Christ being experienced in a personal way. The action of Baptism is further completed with Christmation; as priests, kings and prophets, as ourselves share in these aspects of the ministry of Christ, we are brought into the realm of deification (theosis), for at this moment we are united to Christ who has deified and glorified the human form as He Ascended with His resurrected body to the throne on the right hand of God the Father. Christmation is for us the conveyance of the energy of the charisma, which is the Holy Spirit working within us. This entire process is further completed through the receiving of the Eucharist, which bring the believer into a share with the very Body and Blood assumed by Christ in His great salvific work. The Eucharist, as is indicated by its name is our thanksgiving, and the true food of our souls. Before we experience birth it is not possible for us to move or be moved or fed. It is through these actions that we are joined to the cause and source of our salvation and deification, Jesus Christ.

²“Since a true human being is one who is in Christ, and since the spiritual life is the life in Christ, the living of such a life cannot be realized except by the union and communion of man with Christ, a communion which in its fullness is called in the Orthodox tradition, deification or theosis.” This ultimate union is truly realized by humankind through its being, this is to state that

¹ Cabasilas p. 65

² Nellas p. 121

movement generated by the Holy Spirit this “being” active, through life and attaining knowledge and the correction of the will. In the act of Baptism, the physical human being participates in the death and resurrection of Christ, and by this becomes a new creation.³ It is important to state that this new creation is neither creation *ex nihilo* nor is it similar to the creation of our first parents out of already existing physical matter, but rather it is a creation out of the pre-existing physical person of humankind.⁴ “To belong to God, to be immersed in His Spirit and to be united to Jesus Christ – these things do not happen simply because a man or woman is born in a natural way; these things happen because of a new creation...” Through this new creation, the human being becomes that which they were originally intended to be, and the faculties of their soul are restored to that which they were before the fall of humankind, with the nous governing the appetitive, and irascible faculties of the soul, humankind take on the qualities of those who have to potential to attain theosis. Through Baptism each person has been transformed into members of the body of Christ.⁵ “Baptism... enhypositicizes (humankind) to Christ; and it is this which is the cause of all the other blessings which the sacrament bestows. Baptism... constitutes for man, an ontological event; it refashions and completes his created being.” It is for this reason that Baptism is viewed in the Orthodox Church as being the point of departure for life in Christ, and ultimately why sound and correct Baptismal piety is of the utmost importance.

Since the Sacraments of Initiation are so closely intertwined in the Eastern Church, it is essential to touch upon their interrelation both in the context of history as well as theology. As a person, through Baptism, has been given new being in Christ through the sacrament of Baptism, they also through Christ gain awareness and motivation of this new created being through the sacrament of Chrismation. It is the Holy Spirit who has entered into humankind, not in the same way as the spirit entered at the time of the creation of humans (Gen 2:7), but rather in a more personal way, this is to say that the Chrismation is a personal experience of Pentecost. In the sacrament of Chrismation, the Holy Spirit activates and enlivens the functions which each newly baptized person has received through Christ, the amount to which this activation occurs, depends greatly upon how prepared for the individual is. For:⁶ “[The Holy Spirit] makes the spiritual energies active, one energy in one person, another in someone else, several in a third, according to how prepared each person is for the sacrament.” As we are able to see, the true fullness of the theology of Baptism is brought to fruition through the participation in the sacrament of Chrismation.

As we have mentioned previously, the final act that brings to completion to the initiation into the Church is the Eucharist. In accordance with the Eastern Christian practice, the newly illumined and chrismated person is then expected to partake of the divine Body and precious Blood of Jesus Christ. This action is the seal of all that has been done previously. This can be said due to the fact that⁷ “...this is the consummation of life; those who attain it henceforth lack nothing which is necessary to the blessedness they seek.” For at this moment we do not only participate in the death and resurrection of Christ, nor do we simply receive the movement of the newly created being which we have become, but what is more is that we receive Christ Himself who is the cause, and reason for all the grace we are receiving in our life. It is this receiving that

³ Cabasilas p. 67

⁴ Osborne p. 58

⁵ Nellas p. 124

⁶ Cabasilas p. 101

⁷ Nellas p. 126

truly makes the process complete, for Christ is the fountain of grace from which all sacraments are fed. The body of which we partake is not simply the body that belongs to Christ, but rather it is Christ Himself, it is for this reason that through the reception of this sacrament, all others are completed. It is this same Eucharist that is the lifeblood of the Church and the very centre of its spiritual life. The Fathers of the Church call the Eucharist a marriage of Christ with His bride the Church. It is the ultimate union between God and Humankind: ⁸“...by (the Eucharist) we become flesh of His flesh, bone of His bone (Gen 2:21)”. By this we are able to see not only the completion of the sacraments of initiation, but furthermore, we are able to see that through it is the Eucharist that allows humankind to become united to Christ, and thereby changed in reality, and not simply in matter of adherence.

Having discussed the pastoral problems arising from the divorce of Baptism from the Eucharistic Liturgy, along with the History and theology of the sacraments, it is only fitting that we now discuss the question of re-establishing or rediscovering the link between the Eucharist and the sacrament of Baptism. In that we have examined at great length the benefits for the entire Church of Baptismal piety, which indeed will reverberate through the entire Church, and ultimately lead to a renewal of faith by the entire body of believers, the only satisfactory solution appears to be to reinstitute this practice of making the acceptance and embracing of new members an organic component of the worship of the Church. Only when this comes to pass will it be possible for the Church to experience the fullness of Life in Christ. It will require the general acceptance of the parish as a “family,” a supportive structure that celebrates theological sacraments as a whole, in order for this to take place. It is my belief that a return to the supportive parish families our grandparents enjoyed can only be for the betterment of the Church as a whole. Therefore for all of the reasons presented above, the sacrament of Baptism must return to what was intended.

⁸ Cabasilas p. 145