

## MERE BELONGING TO THE CHURCH: NOT ENOUGH

One does not become a Christian automatically. Fr Schmemmann, a respected Orthodox theologian, said, "It is not mere belonging to the Church that saves, for there is no magic in Christianity, but the acceptance of the Spirit of Christ." St. Peter said, "Repent, and every one of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). To become truly a Christian, one must agree freely to be converted, to repent, to turn to Christ, and accept His Holy Spirit.

In baptism there is something that is done by God and something that is done by man. Man responds to God's initiative. He accepts the gift and turns with faith to follow Christ as Lord.

## A PROCESS OF UNENDING GROWTH

The new life, initiated by baptism and sustained by the Eucharist, becomes the way to follow as one walks through this world. This means that salvation is not instant. It begins on the day of our baptism and chrismation when we renounce the devil, receive Christ, and accept the gift of the Holy Spirit. From that moment we begin a process of slow spiritual growth. The sacraments of the Church provide us with the grace we need to become gods by grace, deified, "partakers of divine nature" as St. Peter says. Our salvation (deification) begins at baptism and continues throughout life. It is a process of unending spiritual growth. "Keep working with fear and trembling to complete your salvation," writes St. Paul (Phil. 2:12).

Simon Tugwell, a patristic scholar, expressed it succinctly when he wrote, *There can be no brisk "On with the new man, off with the old!" A long process of growth is required to bring us to perfection. Baptism gives us an "image of perfection" but this has to mature slowly, just as a baby is, in one sense, fully formed, but still has to grow. The immediate result of baptism is that there are now two "personae at work in us. Sin and grace coexist in us. The*

*important thing is that we should side with grace.*<sup>1</sup>

## A MATTER OF DAILY CONCERN

There is no end to baptism; it is ongoing, a lifelong journey. The sins committed following baptism also need to be washed away by water, but this time it is the water of our tears, the tears of repentance. As we renounced the evil one in baptism and united ourselves to Christ, so we need to keep saying "yes" to Jesus and "no" to Satan many times each day as we go through life.

## FAN THE SPARK BACK INTO THE FLAME OF THEOSIS

St. Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain once said that many Christians through indifference and neglect allow the flame of baptism to die down to a tiny spark. He calls on us to fan that spark back into the flame of theosis, or union with Christ, through heartfelt repentance and prayer.

*Because, brethren, we have fallen into sins after baptism and consequently have buried the grace of the Holy Spirit which was given to us at our Baptism, it is necessary that we make every effort to recover that original grace which is found deeply buried underneath our passions, like an ember in the ashes. This ember of grace we must fan into a new flame in our hearts. In order to do that, we must remove the passions from our hearts as ashes from a fireplace, and replace them with the firewood of obedience in the life-giving commandments of the Lord. We can blow upon the spark with heartfelt repentance of the mind and with the repetition of this prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son and Word of God, have mercy on me." When this prayer remains permanently in our heart, it cleanses us from the ashes of the passions, and finding the ember of grace within, it strikes up a wondrous and strange fire.*

## BECOME ALL FLAME

One of the Desert Fathers said, "If you will, you can become all flame." Why not become "all

<sup>1</sup> *The Study of Spirituality*. Edited by C. Jones, G. Wainwright, E. Arnold, Oxford Univ. Press. New York 1986.

flame" for Christ? In the early Church when the priest handed the baptismal candle to the newly baptized, he repeated the words of Jesus, "Let your light so shine before people, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

Become "all light" for Him and spread that light to a deeply sin-scarred world. This is the great challenge of our baptism.

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# BAPTISM: Uniting with Christ

Fr. Anthony M. Coniaris

## WHAT IS BAPTISM?

The late Fr. Lazarus Moore of blessed memory wrote a booklet entitled *Baptism as Thirty Celebrations* wherein he enumerates thirty blessings that God bestows on us in the celebration of holy baptism.\* It is evident that God's love holds nothing back. He showers His blessings upon us in infant baptism even before we can know Him in what is pure grace. Let us examine briefly a few of those thirty baptismal blessings.\*

## EXODUS

Baptism is our passage through the Red Sea of sin. Augustine wrote, "Your sins are your enemies. They will follow you, but only up to the Red Sea. When you have entered (the Red Sea through baptism), you will escape: they (your sins) will be destroyed, just as the Egyptians were engulfed by the waters while the Israelites escaped on dry land." Thus baptism is an act of liberation, a paschal experience, an exodus, a passage through the Red Sea of sin and death to the glorious freedom of the children of God. It is the transition from the world that is under the power of the evil one to the world that has been redeemed by Christ.

## A DROWNING

Baptism is our trip to the Jordan River. In this water we are crucified with Christ; nevertheless we live, sharing His living water. The old sinful nature is drowned in these

\* Available through Light and Life Publishing Co.

waters and we rise, as from a grave, to share in the new life of Christ. Baptism is indeed a tomb and a womb. The waters of baptism are our waters of Siloam and our pool of Bethesda. The Spirit breathes upon this water and we enter to be bathed with thirty blessings of God's abundant grace.

#### AN ADOPTION INTO GOD'S FAMILY

Through baptism God adopts us as His own sons and daughters. He makes us heirs of all His riches. He makes us members of His family. As members of God's family we are all related to each other and responsible for each other. Yet baptism is more than all of this. Through baptism we are attached to Christ. We become members of His body. Each baptized Christian becomes an extension of Christ. We become other Christs in the world. We become His eyes, His hands His tongue, His feet. Christ has chosen to work in the world through us – the members of His body. It is our special responsibility as baptized Christians to let Christ be present wherever we ourselves are stationed in the world as baptized Christians.

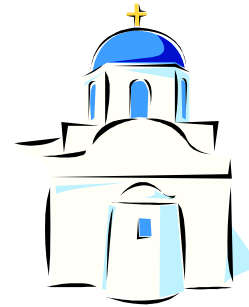
Christ has made Himself dependent on us to do His work in the world today. To quote St. Chrysostom, "Christ is the head of the Church, but what can the head do without hands, without feet, without eyes, without ears, without tongue?"

In baptism the members of our body are anointed with the sign of the cross to signify that they are now dedicated to serve Him since they are members of His Body. Baptism is the sacrament of belonging.

#### GOD CLAIMS US

Baptism is God laying claim to you. St. Paul says, "You are not your own, you are bought with a price, so glorify God in your body." God doesn't rent you. He buys you. He holds title to you. He owns you. Through baptism you become His child. And when God adopts you as His child, He does so *for* a purpose. He has a plan for you. You're saved *from* sin.

You're saved *for* service, *for* love, *for* good works, *for* enlarging the kingdom. You're saved into significance. You're saved for theosis. Your life has real worth and meaning. "I know My sheep," said Jesus. "And nobody can pluck them out of my hand."



Following baptism you are God's property. You have the authority to say to the devil, "Take your hands off me. I don't belong to you. I belong to God. I am His property. You have no claim over me. I renounce you!"

#### A NEW BIRTH

Baptism is the sacrament of new birth. It is the creation of the new person in Christ. It is to be born anew of water and the Spirit. I had nothing to do with my physical birth. Birth for me was a great gift of God which He wrought through my parents. This first birth was a birth of the flesh. My second birth, the "born-anew" birth, was also something with which I had nothing to do. It also was a gift of God wrought for me by God's grace at the baptismal font.

After baptism man is a living member of the Body of Christ. He is no longer *mere* man, but man transformed, divinized, newly transfigured, begotten as God's own son or daughter. He carries within him the very life of God.

#### A MANTLE OF SALVATION

Baptism in the Orthodox Church is far more than the remission of sins. The dominant theme of baptism is positive. As St. Nicholas Cabasilas, a 14<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine theologian points out all the scriptural and traditional terms applied to baptism point to a positive meaning: "birth", "new birth", "clothing", "anointing", "gifts", "washing", "enlightening", "refashioning", "seal", etc. Theodore of Cyrus (393-466 A.D.) confirms this when he writes:

*If the only meaning of baptism were remission of sins, why would we baptize newborn children who have not yet tasted of sin? But the mystery of baptism is not limited to this; it is a promise of greater and more perfect gifts. In it are the promises of future delights; it is the type of the future resurrection, a communion with the Master's passion, a participation in His resurrection, a mantle of salvation, a tunic of gladness, a garment of light, or rather it is light itself.*

#### CLOTHED WITH CHRIST

St. Gregory of Nazianzus wrote, "The Holy Spirit divinizes (deifies) the person who is baptized." Baptism, according to Orthodox theology, does more than set us free from the bondage of original sin, it clothes us with Christ and makes us partakers of His divine nature. Hence the singing during the baptismal service of the verse from the letter of Paul to the Galatians, "As many of you as have been baptized in Christ have put on Christ."

At a certain point in the baptismal service, the celebrant priest says to the newly baptized, "You are baptized. You are illumined. You are anointed with the Holy Christ. You are sanctified. You are washed in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." We may add to these words the expression of St. Gregory of Sinai: "Become what you already are," i.e., claim the gift of theosis that God has given you in holy baptism and develop it as you go through life. Grow in the life of Christ which you have received in baptism that you may become a true son or daughter of the heavenly Father.

#### BETROTHED TO CHRIST

Through baptism we are betrothed to Jesus. He becomes our Bridegroom. We enter into a marriage relationship with Him that requires love and faithfulness.

#### THE ROBE OF GLORY REGAINED

Through baptism we "put on Christ." This has tremendous implications. If we have put on Christ, then we have put on His love, His forgiveness, His peace, His joy. If we have put

on Christ, we have put on His servanthood: "If I your Lord and Master have washed your feet, then you also ought to wash one another's feet." If we have put on Christ, then we shall suffer as Christ suffered; we shall be persecuted for the truth as Christ was persecuted. If we have put on Christ, we shall be resurrected as Jesus was. We shall be glorified as Christ was glorified; we shall ascend to the Father as He ascended to the Father. We shall sit at the right hand of the Father with Jesus. We shall partake of His divine nature and share in His life and glory, becoming "gods by grace" as He is God by nature and essence. Some early Church Fathers see this as the recovery of the "robe of glory", lost by Adam at the fall.

#### A PERSONAL RESPONSE

Baptism demands a personal response on the part of the baptized child when it grows up. The child must accept what God did for him or her in baptism. For baptism is not a divine pass that will get us into heaven automatically. Dr. Nikos Nissiotis, a well-known Orthodox theologian, once said, "A baptized Christian – especially in the Churches in which infant baptism is practiced – needs to make a personal decision regarding the Christian faith which he has passively inherited from his Christian environment."

Any relationship has to be developed by two parties. The baptized infant has not yet developed a relationship with God. But one party in the relationship has already taken the initiative: God loves us from the first moment of our conception. He takes the initiative to establish the relationship. Infant baptism is an expression of God's wooing love from the first moment of life.

As the child becomes aware of faith in Jesus Christ, he looks back and realizes that something or someone led him to this act of faith. Eventually, he realizes that it all began back there in baptism when God came to him. At that moment he must make a personal response to God, committing his life to Him.