Chapter 4

Baptism: Incorporation into the Body of Christ

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he came up out of the water.
Then heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God
coming down like a dove and resting on him. Then a voice said from heaven:
"This is my dear Son, with whom I am pleased."

Matthew 3:17
INITIATION

Survey

This survey is not an exercise for a grade, but a means to stir up interest and get an idea of varying opinions in your group. Some of the statements are matters of objective fact; others are merely subjective opinions. On the rating scale under each statement circle the number that best reflects your current opinion about that statement.

+2 = strongly agree.
+1 = agree.
0 = cannot make up my mind.
-1 = disagree.
-2 = strongly disagree.

Then share the reasons for your opinion.

1. Rites of initiation are a "graduation" from one state and "commencement" into another.

2. If baptism is an initiation into a group, the parents do not frequent, it is a sham for show.

3. In the earliest days of the Church, most candidates for baptism were adults.

4. Far more vividly than we, newly baptized early Christians knew they were "different" from nonbelievers.

5. Our culture today is almost as pagan and irreligious as the culture of ancient Rome.

6. Like all sacraments, the celebration of Baptism is only one focal step in a lifelong process.

7. Before baptism, an infant is literally a child of Satan.

8. Baptism is a "gift" only in the sense one has been judged worthy of a challenge.

9. Water is a natural symbol of both life and death.

10. Baptism removes from the human soul all tendencies ever to sin again.

A Puzzlement

Saint Paul wrote:

For sure you know that when we were baptized into union with Christ Jesus, we were baptized into union with his death. By our baptism, then, we were buried with him and shared his death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from death by the glorious power of the Father, so also we might live a new life.

Romans 6:3–4

What does this passage mean?

Christian Initiation

Each of us has been initiated more than a few times. The first days of grade school, high school, college, the people who have been there longer go out of their way to erase the embarrassment and the disorientation, to make us feel "at home." They help us fit in—when we do not feel at home at all and feel we are sticking out like a thumb at a garden party. It is called "orientation," getting our bearings against a whole new background. When each of those levels of education is over, a ritual celebrates not only that we have graduated out of the past stage but also that we have entered into a new stage of our life, "a commencement."

Some people have been inducted into the military services, the National Honor Society, the scouts, a fraternity or sorority. With the sponsorship of a full member and after a period of probation, the group holds a ceremony to signify that the person is no longer just one of "them" but one of "us." The ceremony embodies a change in status, a conversion.

CONVERSION: DEATH AND REBIRTH

Baptism is also an initiation. The celebration of baptism is an orientation against the whole new background. It is a "graduation" from one way of looking at life and the "commencement" of a new one. It is the ritualization of a person's conversion. In the very early Church, Baptism, Confirmation, and First Communion were celebrated in an integrated single process. This celebration, usually only for adults, took place only once a year at the Vigil of Easter. It was a fitting, highly symbolic moment.
The whole imagery of baptism recapitulates Jesus' death and rebirth (resurrection), which is the core of Christianity. The church community gathered with the bishop in a large home, singing, meditating on Scripture, praying for the elect who waited outside, praying with their sponsors and deacons. It was an all-night vigil.

Just before dawn, those who had completed the catechumenate—a process of instructions, exorcisms, works of charity, and praying, which sometimes lasted three years—gathered outside around the baptismal pool. There their sponsors attested to their good conduct, especially their works of charity. The elect, those about to be baptized, removed all their clothing, symbolizing putting off their old lives. (Quite likely, out of modesty, men and women were baptized separately, therefore the need for women deacons.)

The deacons invited the elect to forewear paganum, then anointed them with ordinary olive oil, a symbol of the "everyday" the elect were leaving behind. Then deacons led them, naked as Adam and Eve, down the steps into the flowing water. Standing before the elect, a priest asked the three baptismal questions:
- Do you believe in the Father?
- Do you believe in the Son?
- Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?

The elect responded to each, "I do believe." And at each response the deacons submered the person under the water, a ritual drowning into the body of Christ's death. Each time they emerged again and breathed life.

The newly baptized came out of the water, dried themselves, and were anointed once again, but this time with the perfumed oil of thanksgiving, the chrisma, to symbolize their new life. They put on new white garments. And, each holding a lighted candle, filed into "the Church," where the bishop laid his hands on each one in turn, praying they might be worthy recipients of the Holy Spirit.

Then the bishop anointed each again with the same perfumed oil of thanksgiving, signifying their acceptance into the People of God (this anointing, confirmation, later became celebrated separately), kissed them, and welcomed them into the body of Christ, the Church. Then the celebration concluded with the new Christians' first Eucharist.

CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

That ritual at dawn on Easter Sunday morning was only the final, culminating moment in a long process of gradual but total conversion to Christ. It celebrated in ritual a complete turnabout from a life of self-absorption to a life of self-giving. Why did a person choose such a turnabout? At first, the person might have been puzzled by the otherworldly serenity of a Christian neighbor, or the person was puzzled by the neighbor's kindness to the most unpleasant people.

Redemption meant "liberation, setting free." People around could see a change of attitude, a conversion, from apprehension to serenity. The newly initiated now lived differently from the way they had before and from the way most people lived. They were no longer afraid, offering one another support, consolation, funds when they were in need. Even in times of persecution, of personal failure, of bereavement, they now had a totally different perspective: the Resurrection.

This of course is why the Church grew so quickly. ("Can I see your freedom? Can I feel your joy?") People saw what liberation from the chaos of life meant, not in theory but in the everyday lives of Christians. Others wanted to understand such a life, experience it, share it. So, inquisitive neighbors made inquiries and, after a period of scrutiny—to be sure they were not spies looking to report Christians—these "inquiring" were introduced into a first understanding of the gospel message. Then, after a long period of instruction, they were enrolled among those to be baptized at the Easter Vigil.

After such a long process and such a vivid ceremony, newly baptized Christians had no doubt whatever that they were "completely new." They had no doubt they were beginning a totally different way of looking at life, and of dealing with their neighbors, their work, their families. And they knew they were completely different from their pagan neighbors because of that.

Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit.

Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as [children] of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: "Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water and the word."

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1213
Like each of the other sacraments, Baptism is about achieving a newer, richer freedom. Freedom in the Christian sense means that we have courage and self-confidence (or Christ-confidence) enough that we can put ourselves at the disposal of others. The highest, most arrogant have not that kind of courage and self-confidence. That sort of freedom seemed “foolishness” to the Greeks, who classical culture thought were the epitome of how human beings should live.

By means of the so-called “foolish” message we preach, God decided to save those who believe, Jesus went miracles for proof, and Greeks look for wisdom. As for us, we proclaim the crucified Christ, a message that is offensive to the Jews and nonsense to the Gentiles; but for those whom God has called, both Jews and Gentiles, this message is Christ, who is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For what seems to be God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and what seems to be God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

But God has brought you into union with Christ Jesus, and God has made Christ to be our brother. By him we are put right with God, we become God’s holy people and are set free.

1 Corinthians 1:21–25, 30

To be genuinely Christian means that our self-absorption and self-protectiveness are “disabled,” in order that we can be free to serve others.

Baptism introduces us to a community through which we can be outfitted to face the tasks of life in a more dignified way than others do. But, as we have seen so often before, Baptism is an invitation. We can refuse this invitation, even though in infancy others accepted it for us. Being free, we may choose not to be free.

SYMBOLIC ACTIONS

In Greek, baptizo means “to dye a garment to change its color,” and the more intensive form, baptizo, means “to cause to perish,” as in drowning. When speaking of more commonplace ritual cleansings, Greeks used less dramatic words like wash, rinse, sprinkle. Thus, by choosing the word baptizo, the early Church did not think of this baptismal action as an everyday ritual. It was life-changing.

Humming in Water

Water is a very positive symbol. It is a symbol for life. Our planet is the only planet we know of that is blue. All human life came out of these blue waters. Each one of us lived nine months in the water in our mother’s womb; our bodies are 70 percent water. Water quenches thirst; we can go a full month without much food, but only five days without water. We use water to cleanse our bodies and our homes, to water lawns, fill pools, extinguish fires. Without water and the sun, we could grow no food. Perhaps young city people have no felt understanding of the “sacredness” of an oasis to a desert nomad, but the toughest city kid knows the joy of opening a fire hydrant in July and frolicking in water.

Yet, like human nature, water has its dark side too. Floods destroy homes, crops, human lives; polluted water carries disease; storms can wipe out whole coalitions. Anyone used to swimming in calm lakes knows the terror of water when swimming in the ocean the first time and being caught and hurled head over heels in the breakers. Anyone caught at sea in a storm, as the apostles were, understands the panic water can raise in us. It was out of the chaos of the primeval waters that God brought cosmos, and the two forces have been in conflict ever since.
Chapter 1: Entering into Christ through Baptism

Father, you give us grace through sacramental signs, which tell us of the wonders of your unseen power.

In baptism we use your gift of water, which you have made a rich symbol of the grace you give us in this sacrament.

Roman Mass: Easter Vigil: Blessing of Water

At the opening of Genesis, God's Spirit hovered over the chaos of the waters and, with a word, brought forth all living things (Genesis 1:1-31). Entering the ark by Noah and his family (as entering the Church) was making a commitment to a new, special relationship with God: they were reborn out of the waters to begin again. The terms of acceptance? A new respect for life (Genesis 7:1-9:28).

The Israelites were through the turmoil of the Red Sea and came out on the other side a new nation, while the Egyptian slaves perished (Exodus 14:1-31). And finally they passed through the River Jordan into the Promised Land. But ever after that they kept falling back into "the slave mentality," worshipping idols, returning to chaos.

John the Baptist appeared by that same Jordan, preaching conversion and entry into the new Promised Land. And though sinless himself, Jesus underwent a baptism, going down into the water and emerging restored in the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:15-17). This Jesus, who identified himself with the sinners he came to save, leads us from the waters of chaos by going to the very bottom of them himself and coming out. During his life, Jesus calmed the storm on the lake (Matthew 8:23-27) and walked on the waters without fear (Matthew 14:22-33). And to Peter Jesus said:

"I have a baptism to receive, and how distressed I am until it is over!"

Luke 12:50

For Jesus, his second "baptism" was his death and resurrection. And the early Christian communities believed that they too had died and been reborn completely new because of Christ's death-restitution.

For surely you know that when we were baptized into union with Christ Jesus, we were baptized into union with his death. By our baptism, then, we were buried with him and shared his death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from death by the glorious power of the Father, so also we might live a new life.

Romans 6:3-4

Baptism "recaptures" that whole series of events. In baptism we are "plunged into" that experience of Jesus, and are born again as daughters and sons of God.

For through the living and eternal word of God you have been born again as the children of a parent who is immortal, not mortal. 1 Peter 1:23

Anointing with Chrism

In our culture, oil has a very commonplace, domestic, undramatic meaning: salads, cosmetics, lubrication. It also has strongly negative associations: crude oil spills and the death of the ecology. But at the time when the sacraments were taking concrete form, oil—like water and wine—was an important element of daily life.

Oil was what bound together the elements of bread, and therefore it symbolized the healing of fragmentation. Whosoever anointed their entire bodies to make it more difficult for an opponent to get a hold on them, and Saint Ambrose (A.D. 340-397) claimed that that was precisely one of the functions of anointing at Christian initiation.

In the Bible, priests, monarchs, and prophets were anointed with oil when they assumed their new roles (1 Samuel 10:1; 16:1-13). As the first public act of Jesus' ministry:

... be came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and went into the synagogue on the sabbath day as was his custom. He stood up to read, and they handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll he found the place where it is written:

"The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me,
for he has anointed me..."

He then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the assistant and sat down.

The word messiah means "the Anointed One." Thus, in the oil of baptism, each of us is anointed a "messiah"—priest, monarch, prophet.

God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin, given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and welcomed you into his holy people. He now assists you with the duties of salvation. As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as members of his body, sharing everlasting life.

Rite of Baptism for Children

In his first letter Peter is not speaking to officials of the church community but to ordinary people like you. He writes:

You are the chosen race, the King's priests, the holy nation. God's own people.

chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who called you out of darkness into his own marvelous light. 1 Peter 2:9

It makes no difference if Christians speak Greek or Hebrew, whether they are male or female, old or young. They—you—are priests, prophets, peers of the realm of God.

But—with that ever-present Christian irony—to be anointed as priest-prophet-earl means precisely the opposite of what it means in "the world": not to rule but to serve.

I appeal to you to be shepherds of the flock that God gave you and to take care of it willingly, as God wants you to, and not unwillingly. Do your work, not for mere pay, but from a real desire to serve. Do not try to rule over those who have been put in your care, but be examples to the flock. 1 Peter 5:1-3

Exploitation of people who are living in poverty, hatreds, rivalries, greed, manipulation of the minds of the young. drugs sold in schoolyards, drive-by shootings, families living under bridges, sexually abused children, battered and murdered wives—never get the three-inch headlines in the daily tabloids. We give as little notice to them as we do to the Kiddle Komix, unless they are especially blatant or done by a celebrity. For most, they are not even news.

For earlier cultures, even up to as recently as the 50s, evil was not an abstraction. It was concretized, even for the most sophisticated and educated, in the symbolic figure of Satan. Today, except for a few fringe Satan cults, that embodiment of pure evil is ludicrous to anyone who routinely flies in a plane or uses a computer or has taken even elementary psychology, the stuff of "Fat Side" cartoons. Which, if there is in fact a Devil, would probably be just dandy with him.

But then for a while there was the uncanny phenomenon of The Exorcist. That film was different from other horror movies, such as The Omen, and Nightmare on Elm Street, and even the sequels to The Exorcist, all of which gave no more real scare than the momentary terror on a roller coaster. But that film was quite different. In the first place, people were lined up for blockades (and weeks) to see it. Second, it triggered all kinds of bizarre responses. Third, it frightened a great many people back to some practice of religion—perhaps not for long. But at least for a while these people were aware that evil does exist because they had seen it unmasked and almost palpably terrifying.
Chapter 4: Biblical Eschatology in the Study of Evil

Reflection

Consider the question posed in this chapter about the radical difference between the attitudes, priorities, and actions of early Christians and their pagan neighbors.

- Our end above taking part in the celebration of Masses, but are your concrete choices different from a non-believer?

We have discussed three quite basic manifestations of evil in the world today to which we have, maybe without realizing it, hardened ourselves: the monstrous evils that overwhelm whole peoples, the inner humanities to which the day-to-day reportage has toughened our sensibilities, and the petty everyday indignities that we have come to regard as simply irritating “givens.”

- Make three columns on a sheet of paper and label them Monstrous, Inhuman, Mean-Spirited. Spend some time—perhaps more than you had originally planned—and fill in the columns. Is there more evil in the world than you suspected?

In Baptism, those about to be baptized encounter evil.

Do you reject sin, so as to live in the freedom of God’s children?

I do.

Do you reject the glamour of evil, and refuse to be mastered by sin?

I do.

Do you reject Satan, father of sin and prince of darkness?

I do.

- List the ways you reject “evil.”

The reality Satan symbolizes is corrosively real, furiously active in every corner of our lives, and as easily ignored as the pollution in our rivers and the poison in our air.

There are those finer evils, which are nonetheless evil:

- lying to people we claim to love,
- cheating on a quit that in a week we will forget we even took,
- savaging the reputation of another human being in order to “fit,”
- sneering at other people’s skin color,
- spitting gum in the drinking fountain because the basket is too far away.

And their very pettiness, rather than embarrassing us, seems to exonerate us.

Whether there is a literal Satan, a disembodied force that haunts the world seeking to seduce us, is not the question. What need would we have for such an unchecked tempter when we have a perfectly adequate one within each of us? There is no doubt that whatever the reality Satan symbolizes, evil is corrosively real, furiously active in every corner of our lives. And it is as easily ignored as the pollution in our rivers and the poison in our air.

Simon was right.

Many today are uneasy with the exorcisms of Baptism and any mention of “Satan” in celebration of the ritual. The seeming literalism of the word Satan is a bit of an embarrassment even to less sophisticated people. The problem could probably be alleviated—since it is a matter of sacrasm symbols but of an undeniable reality—by substituting for “Satan” some other formula less associated with superstitious literalism, such as “the powers within us that lead us to harm others and ourselves.”

But there is no doubt that Baptism, for adults or for infants, is a declaration that the purpose of the Church and all those genuinely within it is directly counter to that inner force.