

Baptism: A Brief History

Matthew's gospel ends with Jesus' instructing his disciples:

I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always, to the end of the age. Matthew 28:18-20

For the past two thousand years the Church has been doing just that - baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. So what is Baptism and why is it necessary in the Christian life?

History

Before Jesus began his public ministry his cousin, John, was baptizing many in the River Jordan.

The *synoptic* gospels (that is, of Mark, Matthew and Luke) all mention that Jesus presented himself for John's Baptism.

The Baptism that Jesus instructed his disciples to carry out is not the same as John's Baptism. John's was a Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John (the apostle) near the start of his gospel includes these words of John the Baptist:

'I baptize with water; but there stands among you - unknown to you - the one who is coming after me; and I am not fit to undo his sandal strap.

The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and rest is the one who is going to baptize with the Holy Spirit.' John 1:26-27 & 33-34

Jesus gives to the Baptism of John a meaning which it did not have in itself. In the Baptism of Jesus there is a *death* to the old life and a *new birth* into the Kingdom through water and the Spirit.

A person baptized receives the 'mark of Christ' (*Christened*) and has a share in the priesthood of Christ.

Baptize

The word comes from the Greek *baptizein*, which means *dip* or *immerse*. Originally, for Baptism it was not enough to pour a little water on the forehead. The baptisteries of the first centuries were quite large cisterns, often in the form of a cross.

The person to be baptized (catechumen) went down one side by a series of steps, was immersed in the water, and came out the other side.

This helps us to understand how Baptism is both:

an immersion in the death of Christ and a resurrection;

a passing, like that of the Hebrews through the sea at their departure from Egypt under the leadership of Moses.

Pentecost and beyond

On the day of Pentecost (fifty days after the Resurrection), the Church is born with the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus and Baptism (Acts 2:14-41). On that day thousands of Jewish adults were baptized collectively. The first individual Baptism is that of the Ethiopian by Philip (Acts 8:20-39). Soon Gentiles (non-Jews) are being baptized: Cornelius and his followers (Acts 10:47-48). Later in the Acts of the Apostles, there is an incident where Paul is freed from jail and the jailer is baptized, along with all his family. It is reasonable to suppose that this means young children were baptized.

About a hundred years on from this there is evidence that preparation for Baptism and its celebration were being organised. The Church was faced with intermittent persecution at the hands of

Roman emperors. People who had little or no preparation before they were received into the Church would often, under threat of death, renounce their faith and swear allegiance to the emperor.

To combat this, the Church began to decree that *catechumens* (candidates for reception into the Church) should undergo a lengthy preparation of perhaps two or three years under the guidance of a *sponsor* before being received into the Church. This lengthy process, known as the *catechumenate*, was meant to ensure that the candidate was serious in their intentions. The final stage of preparation took place in the six weeks before Easter. Candidates were expected to pray, do penance and perform works of charity. Here we see the origins of the season of Lent.

Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist, as the three sacraments of initiation, were **united in one celebration** when a catechumen became a member of the Church. When the new member received the Eucharist they were then a full member of the Christian community.

The Emperor Constantine, in 313, freed the Church from persecution and later it was decreed that Christianity should be the state religion. As the years passed, more and more adults were Christians. Bishops had to take care of ever larger, more dispersed communities and so became more distant figures. It became the practice that bishops appointed *presbyters*, or priests, to oversee the needs of small Christian groups. The custom was established of the priest baptizing catechumens and then waiting for the bishop for the laying on of hands, or confirmation. In this way, Baptism and confirmation came to be seen as separate celebrations.

These years saw the shift away from baptizing adults to baptizing children. As Christian communities became more established their numbers were increased less by adult converts and more by the children of Christians. The catechumenate (preparation of adults to be received into the Church) grew into disuse.

In the Middle Ages it became common to baptize infants soon after birth. One of the reasons for this

was the high rate of infant mortality during those times. It should also be realised that the life expectancy of adults was short; disease and war increased the chance of a child being made an orphan. *Godparents*, as guardians of the child's moral upbringing in the absence of the true parents, had a very serious role to play.

In the early part of this century, under Pope Pius X, it was decreed that children should, as was the custom, be baptized as babies whilst the first Eucharist should be received by children about the age of seven. Confirmation would follow some time after that, often in the early teens. The child was recognised as a full member of the Church after confirmation. This reversed the ancient understanding that a catechumen became a full member of the Church after first Eucharist.

At the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, there were calls for the restoration of the catechumenate after almost fifteen hundred years of disuse. In 1972 the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (R.C.I.A.) was published by the Vatican, and so the catechumenate returned to the life of the Church.

There are now three ways of proceeding to Christian initiation: through the rite for the Baptism (and confirmation & eucharist) of adults (R.C.I.A.), through the rite for the Baptism of children old enough to receive religious instruction, through the rite for the Baptism of small children.