

# THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM



Baptism is a covenant, an agreement between God and man. God promises to be our Father and we promise to be His children. Baptizing infants, before they are aware of what will take place, is an expression of God's great love for us. It shows us that God loves us and accepts us before we can even know Him or love Him. It shows us that we are wanted and loved by God from the moment of our birth. Baptism is necessary for salvation (Mark 16:15-16) and in accordance with the Holy Tradition, must be performed by triple immersion in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18-20). It is through baptism that one becomes a fully participating member of the Church.

Explanation of the Sacrament

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The many gestures involved in the performance of the Sacrament of Baptism in the Eastern Orthodox Church are not mere forms devoid of meaning. Christianity is life. Each action in the Sacrament of Baptism expresses what Christ is actually doing for us through this sacrament.

## Exorcisms

The first act of the baptismal service begins in the narthex (entrance) of the church. This is to show that the one being received is not yet a member of the Church. The purpose of baptism is to bring him into the Church. To enter into the temple of God is to be with Christ, to become a member of His body.

The priest then calls upon the sponsor to renounce the devil and all his works for the child: "Do you renounce Satan, and all his angels, and all his works, and all his services, and all his pride?" Fr. Alexander Schmemmann explains the meaning of this renunciation when he says, "The first act of the Christian life is a renunciation, a challenge. No one can be Christ's until he has, first, faced Evil, and then become ready to fight it. . . . The exorcisms mean this: to face Evil, to acknowledge its reality, to know its power, and to proclaim the power of God to destroy it. The exorcisms announce the forthcoming baptism as an act of victory."

The renouncing of Satan is done facing the west because the west is where the sun disappears and was regarded by the ancient Greeks as the place of the gates of Hades. Then the priest faces east whence the light of the sun rises and asks the godparent to accept for the child Him who is the Light of the World, "Do you unite yourself to Christ?" The renunciation of Satan and the union with Christ express our faith that the newly baptized child has been transferred from one master to another, from Satan to Christ.

## The Sign of the Cross

The priest then makes the sign of the cross on the child's body. This is repeated often during the service. Essentially the cross is the sign of victory which puts the devil to flight. In the old days slaves were branded, as are animals today, to show to what master they belong. Today the sign of the cross brands us as belonging to Christ.

## The Creed

The godparent is then asked to confess faith in Christ in behalf of the infant. At this point the godparent reads the confession of faith contained in the Nicene Creed. The "symbolon tis pisteos," as it is called in Greek, was a true symbol or sign of recognition among the early Christians- it was the password that distinguished the true members of God's family. By reading the Creed the godparent confesses the true faith.

## **The Naming**

From the moment the child is received into the Church, emphasis is placed on his individuality. He is given his own particular name by which he shall be distinguished from every other child of God. This expresses our belief that the child has the dignity of his own selfhood in the eyes of God. It is the Church's acceptance of him as an individual in his own right. The new name expresses also the new life received through baptism.

## **The Baptismal Font**

The baptismal font in the language of the Church Fathers is the Divine Womb whence we receive the second birth as children of God. Baptism is truly a birth. "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12, 13).

## **The Triple Immersion**

We believe that Christ died for our sins. To show that we, and not Christ, are worthy of death because of our sins, we are immersed in the baptismal font. The immersion in water symbolizes death, since a person cannot live long under water. Through baptism we share mysteriously in Christ's death. As St. Paul says, "We were buried therefore with him [Christ] by baptism into death so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." The baptized person rises out of the baptismal font a new man, cleansed of every sin and promising, like St. Paul, to surrender his life to Christ, his Savior: "He died for all that they who live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him who died for them." The triple immersion symbolizes the three days our Lord spent in the tomb as well as the Holy Trinity since the baptismal formula used in the Orthodox Church is: "The servant of God is baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

## **The Water**

Water is used for cleansing. In baptism it expresses the fact that through this sacrament Christ cleanses us from original and personal sin.

Describing what occurs at baptism Saint John Chrysostom writes, "When you come to the sacred initiation, the eyes of the flesh see water; the eyes of faith behold the Spirit. Those eyes see the body being baptized; these see the old man being buried. The eyes of the flesh see the flesh being washed, the eyes of the spirit see the soul being cleansed. The eyes of the body see the body emerging from the water; the eyes of faith see the new man come forth brightly shining from that new purification. Our bodily eyes see the priest as, from above, he lays his right hand on the head and touches (him who is being baptized) our spiritual eyes' see the great High Priest (Jesus) as He stretches forth His invisible hand to touch his head. For, at that moment, the one who baptizes is not a man, but the only-begotten Son of God."

## **The Naked Infant**

The infant is baptized in its naked state to denote that just as we came out of our mother's womb naked so we emerge naked out of the womb of God (the baptismal font). The removal of all clothes also signifies the old slough of sin which will be cast off entirely through baptism. Nakedness without shame refers also to the original state of man in Paradise where he was not ashamed of the body which God had created and had called good.

## **The Anointing with Oil**

Olive oil is blessed and then applied by the priest to the various members of the child's body: hands, feet, ears, mouth, in order to dedicate them to the service of Christ. The sponsor then anoints the entire body of the infant with olive oil. This custom had its beginning among the ancient Greek wrestlers who anointed their bodies with olive oil to make it difficult for the opponent to maintain a grip on them. In baptism the child is anointed with olive oil to express our prayer that with Christ's help the infant may be able to elude the grip of sin.

## **New Clothes**

The new clothes signify the entirely new life that we receive after we are "buried with Jesus in his death" (Rom. 6:4). In the early church the newly baptized did not put on the old clothing he had taken off. He put on a new white robe, which was worn at all the services during Easter week. (Most baptisms were performed on Holy Saturday.) The white robe expresses the purity of the soul that has been washed from sin. It recalls also the shining robe in which Christ appeared at the Transfiguration. There is now a likeness between the one baptized and the transfigured Lord. Nay, it is more than a likeness. Saint Paul calls it a putting on of Christ: "For as many of you as have been baptized in Christ, have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:26, 27). Baptism is more than an external cleansing. It is a deeply rooted transformation. St. Gregory of Nyssa states that the white robe worn after baptism symbolizes the garment of light which was man's before the Fall: "Thou hast driven us out of paradise and called us back. Thou hast taken away the fig leaves, that garment of our misery, and clothed us once more with the robe of glory."

## **The Candles**

However dark may be the night that surrounds us, baptism remains the sacrament of entrance into light. It opens the eyes of the soul to see Christ, the light of the world (John 1:19). It makes us sons of light (I Thess. 5:5).

In the early Church the baptismal candle was always kept by the one baptized. It was given to the newly baptized with the scriptural admonition: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). The baptismal candle was brought to Church on feast days, on the anniversary of one's baptism and for the midnight Easter liturgy. If the person was married, the same candle was lighted at the wedding. If he was ordained, he would light it at his ordination. When the final hour of life approached it was lighted again as the soul went forth to meet its Judge. It was a constant reminder for the Christian to live and die by the light of Christ.

## **The Sacrament of Chrismation or Confirmation**

In the Orthodox Church the Sacrament of Confirmation is administered immediately following baptism as in the early Church. It is considered the fulfillment of baptism. Human nature purified by baptism is made ready to receive the manifold gifts of the Holy Spirit. As Fr. Schmemmann says, "Confirmation is thus the personal Pentecost of man, his entrance into the life of the Holy Spirit, his ordination as truly and fully man. . . His whole body is anointed, sealed, sanctified, dedicated to the new life: 'the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit,' says the priest as he anoints the newly baptized on the brow, and on the eyes, and the nostrils, and the lips, and on both ears, and the breast and on the hands, and the feet. . . The whole man is now made the temple of God. . ."

The Greek word for Confirmation is *chrisma*, which means anointing. The one anointed with "*chrisma*" becomes "*Christos*," that is, the anointed one, which is the meaning of the name Christ. Thus, by this sacrament we are made Christians or other Christs. Chrismation is the ordination of the laity. According to Orthodox belief every baptized lay person is ordained a priest by this sacrament he receives the gift of the Holy Spirit to become a deputy or an ambassador for Christ in this world.

## **The Eucharist**

Immediately following Baptism the neophyte receives the precious Body and Blood of Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion and, in the case of an infant, is brought to Church regularly after baptism to receive the sacrament. The new life in Christ, given in baptism, is renewed again and again in the Eucharist. In the Orthodox Church every baptized and confirmed infant becomes a full member of the Church and is entitled to receive Holy Communion. As nature provides milk for the nourishment of the infant after birth so God provides Holy Communion for the infant immediately following baptism in order to provide nourishment for the spiritual life the neophyte has received through baptism.

## **The Cutting of Hair**

After confirming the child, the priest cuts three locks of hair from the child's head. This is an expression of gratitude from the child, who having received an abundance of blessings through the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation and having nothing to give to God in return, offers part of its hair, which is symbolic of strength (see Samson in the Old Testament). The child, therefore, promises to serve God with all its strength. In the words of Father Schmemmann, the cutting of the hair "is a sign that the life which now begins is a life of offering and sacrifice." It is significant that boys in ancient Greece dedicated their hair to the gods upon reaching manhood. Some Christian monks today cut off most of their hair as a sign of their dedication to God.

## **A Religious Dance**

A religious dance is made around the baptismal font with the priest accompanied by the sponsor who holds the newly baptized infant. This reflects the belief that at this moment the angels in heaven are dancing, expressing their joy that a new soul has been registered in the Book of Life. The priest sings, "As many of you as have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27). This expresses our belief that through baptism the child has "put on Christ." Tradition states that at this moment God assigns a guardian angel to stay with the newly baptized person until the end of his earthly life.

## **The Epistle Lesson (Romans 6:3-11)**

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

## **The Gospel Lesson (Matthew 28:16-20)**

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all Nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."