

BAPTISM

—by St. Nektarios—

The founder of the sacrament of holy baptism is our Lord Jesus Christ, as recorded in the Holy Gospel of Saint Matthew (Mt. 28:19), Saint Mark (Mk. 16:16), and Saint John (Jn. 3:5). Jesus Christ Himself was baptized: **“It came to pass that Jesus also was baptized; and while He prayed, the heaven was opened”** (Lk. 3:21); **“It came to pass in those days that Jesus came ... and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And immediately coming up from the water He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove”** (Mk. 1:9-10). Through His baptism, not only did Christ **“fulfill all righteousness”** (Mt. 3:15), but He also provided the model of baptism for the rebirth of all who would believe in Him.

Baptism is the starting point of the path leading to reconciliation with God and the inheritance of His heavenly Kingdom. For according to the words of Christ: **“He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned”** (Mk. 16:16). Furthermore, it is a bath of rebirth, which cleanses them who are baptized from the filth of sin, as the Apostle Ananias stated: **“Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins”** (Acts 22:16), and which grants them a new birth unto eternal life, just as Christ declared to Nicodemus: **“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a person is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God”** (Jn. 3:5).

Baptism is a sacrament

The Lord Jesus Christ expressly commanded His disciples: **“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”** (Mt. 28:19). Baptism, therefore, is a sacrament since it is a divine decree. Further, it is a sacrament because during baptism the Grace of the Holy Spirit is transmitted through the use of visible objects, namely: i) water; ii) triple immersion; and iii) the words of the priest: “the servant of God is baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

Baptism is ordered first amongst the sacraments, and its character is such that it can neither be effaced nor repeated. Baptism serves as the initiation for the rest of the sacraments—in the absence of baptism, no other sacrament can take place.

The Holy Apostles baptized according to Christ's commandment

Baptism began to be performed by the Holy Apostles after the descent of the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit descended on Pentecost, the Apostles were invested with divine power and became sacred instruments of the Holy Spirit. Saint Luke the Evangelist states that when the holy Apostle Peter stood up with the other eleven Apostles and spoke to the crowds that day, their hearts were moved and they asked Peter and the rest of the Apostles: **“Men and brethren, what shall we do?’ Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’ Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them” (Acts 2:37-41).**

Henceforth, the Holy Apostles continued to reverently carry out the order that Christ the Savior had given them to baptize the nations. **“But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized” (Acts 8:12).** **“When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 19:5).** The Lord Himself instructed the Apostle Ananias to baptize Paul, in order for him to become a member of the Church: **“And Ananias ... said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized” (Acts 9:18-19).**

Initially, baptism was performed only by the Holy Apostles. The Apostles, however, transmitted this authority to their successors, i.e. to the bishops whom they ordained, and they would also baptize. The bishops, in following, authorized the priests whom they ordained to perform the sacrament of baptism as well.

The ultimate purpose of baptism

The ultimate purpose of holy Baptism is man's rebirth, justification, adoption, and salvation. The Apostle Paul says the following in his epistle to the Romans: **“Those of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized**

into His death. Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin” (Rom. 6:3-6).

In his Epistle to the Corinthians he states that through baptism: **“you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God”** (1Cor. 6:11).

And when speaking to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul declares that God destined us for adoption: **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places of Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved”** (Eph. 1:3-6).

Baptism was prefigured

The sacrament of Baptism was prefigured firstly by circumcision, just as the Apostle Paul notes: **“For He [Christ] is the head of all principality and power. In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ.”** (Col. 2:10-11). Saint John Chrysostom says: “During baptism, circumcision does not take place through human hands as in the past, but through the Spirit. During baptism, not just one part of the body is circumcised, but the entire body. There is a body present during baptism today, just as there was a body present during circumcision in the past; however, here, the body is circumcised in the spirit, whereas, there, it was circumcised in the flesh. Baptism is not like the circumcision of Jews; for it is not the removal of flesh, but the removal of sins.” Saint Athanasios and Saint John of Damascus similarly agree: “Circumcision was a symbol of Christian baptism.”

Additionally, according to Saint John Chrysostom, the pool by the Sheep-Gate¹ served as a sign of holy Baptism: “What was this method used for healing? Which mystery was it alluding to? This event was not recorded pointlessly or by chance; rather, it symbolically depicts and describes the future events beforehand. What exactly does it foretell? That Baptism would be given to us, which would contain great power and prodigious grace. That Baptism would cleanse all sins, and restore a dead man to life.”

The passage of the Jewish people through the Red Sea was yet another symbol of baptism. For when the Jews traversed through the Red Sea, they were delivered from death and the slavery of Pharaoh. Thus, the Apostle Paul interprets: “**All our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea**” (1 Cor. 10:1-2).

According to Saint John of Damascus, the washing of the disciples’ feet by the Lord was a further image symbolic of holy baptism.

Concerning the proper method of baptism

The fiftieth canon of the Holy Apostles states that we carry out “three baptisms during initiation”; that is, three immersions when performing one baptism, and during each immersion to invoke one of the names of the Holy Trinity. During the first centuries baptism took place through immersion. Tertullian (†220 AD) says the following: “We are immersed not once but three times, being baptized in the name of each of the Persons [of the Trinity].” And Saint Justin the Philosopher and Martyr (†165 AD), when speaking of baptism during his apology refers to it as a bath: “[They who believe in Christ] then receive the bath in the water, in the name of the Father-of-all and Lord God, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit.” This is how the Apostles would baptize. St. Basil the Great (†378 AD), during a homily on the Holy Spirit, states that triple immersion is a tradition given to us by the Apostles. Triple immersion baptism was performed in the west as well during the first centuries of Christianity.

¹ This pool was located in Jerusalem, next to a city gate called the Sheep Gate. Here is the account given in the Gospel according to Saint John: “Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porticos. In these lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water; then whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well of whatever disease he had” (Jn. 5:1-8)

Baptism through sprinkling is something that appeared more recently; the Church would refer to this as “baptism of the bedridden.” The fiftieth Apostolic Canon expressly states the following concerning triple immersion during baptism: “If any bishop or priest does not perform three baptisms but one, may he be defrocked.”² Additionally, the seventh canon of the Second Ecumenical Synod ruled the following against the Eunomians who would baptize using a single immersion in order to express their nonbelief in the Trinity: “Eunomians who have been baptized with one single immersion we receive as Gentiles.”

Concerning the effects of baptism

Saint Cyprian (†258 AD) describes the marvelous power of baptism in this manner: “When I was lying in the darkness of night and in the stormy sea of this present world, I was wavering with uncertainty concerning the end of my life, and alienated from the truth and the light. At that time I considered salvation, as had been promised by divine grace, extremely difficult. Namely, that someone can be reborn, rejuvenated through the bath of salvation unto new life, put off the old man, and have a transformation of soul and heart while subsisting in such a carnal body. How, I would ask myself, is such a conversion possible? How can someone be liberated from all the things we have inherited since birth, which we subsequently acquired, and which have grown with us as we have aged? Such thoughts would often overtake me ... However, when the water of rebirth washed the filth of my former life, a gladsome and pure light descended from heaven upon my heart. When I was transformed into a new man through rebirth, my unstable and straying soul was extraordinarily empowered. The mysteries were revealed to me. Darkness was dispersed ... I came to know that what had lived in me according to the flesh through sin was earthly; now the divine had commenced living in me through Holy Baptism.”

² The entire canon states: “If any bishop or presbyter does not perform three baptisms [immersions] in making one initiation [baptism], but a single baptism [immersion], that given into the death of the Lord, let him be deposed. For the Lord did not say, ‘Baptize into my death,’ but, ‘Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.’” This means, of course, baptize them with three immersions, and with each immersion add aloud each single name of the Holy Trinity. For through the triple immersion both faith in the Holy Trinity and the three day death, burial, and resurrection of Christ are simultaneously symbolized.

Hippolytos (†235 AD) says the following concerning holy Baptism: “The person who with faith descends into the bath of rebirth rejects the evil one, and joins himself unto Christ; he renounces the enemy, and confesses that Christ is God; he casts away slavery, and receives adoption. He comes out of the baptismal water shining like the sun, radiating with the rays of righteousness. The greatest of all: he is rendered a son of God and co-heir of Christ.”

In his general epistle, the Apostle Barnabas (†60 AD) teaches the following concerning the effects of baptism: “We go into the water full of sins and filth, and we come out with the fear and hope in Jesus Christ flourishing in our heart.” We feel it is appropriate to mention these words both to them who deny the divine effects of baptism, as well as to them who do not want to go down into the water and come out of the water, but who instead choose to perform baptism by sprinkling. The Apostle Barnabas teaches us that Christians would be baptized according to the baptism of our Savior Jesus Christ, Who descended into the water and came out of the waters, just as the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke record in their Gospels. Through the descent into the water we are buried along with Christ, and through the ascent out of the water we are raised up along with Christ. Through baptism, the Savior foreshadowed the mystery of His burial and resurrection, and the cleansing of humanity’s sins. Thus, salvation takes place through baptism; baptism, in turn, takes place via immersion and arising, just as the Orthodox Church received and performs. **“And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him” (Acts 8:38).**

During baptism, therefore, we die and are buried with Christ, and immediately are raised up along with Him through faith, as the Apostle Paul states in his epistle to the Colossians: **“Buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead” (Col. 2:12).**