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Talk #3

Baptism in Scripture; Essential Elements



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3. *Baptism in Scripture; Essential Elements*

1. **Baptism in Scripture**

Why did Christ institute the sacrament of Baptism? What is its purpose in the sacramental economy? Baptism is the sacrament of birth into the supernatural life, which is the life of the Mystical Body of Christ. By this supernatural birth we are given a participation in the divine nature (2 Pt 1:4).

The words “baptism” and “baptize” come from the Greek word signifying “immersion.” The original form of Baptism, like the Jewish ritual washing that was its forerunner, was by immersion.

Old Testament Figures

There are numerous figures of Baptism in the events of the Old Testament. A good overview of these texts is found in the Old Testament readings for the liturgy of the Easter Vigil.

Creation and the Spirit Hovering over the Waters

A first foreshadowing of Baptism is given in Genesis 1:1–2: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.”

In Baptism, the Spirit of God hovers over the waters, for as the water of Baptism is applied to the body, the Spirit works the forgiveness of original sin, the infusion of sanctifying grace and the theological virtues, and the gift of the Indwelling Spirit. The blessing over the water of Baptism in the Roman liturgy makes this connection: “At the very dawn of creation your Spirit breathed on the waters, making them the wellspring of all holiness.”¹

The Deluge

The fact that the Deluge is a figure of Baptism is also brought out in the blessing of water in the liturgy of the Easter Vigil in the Roman Missal: “The waters of the great flood you made a sign of the waters of Baptism, that make an end of sin and a new beginning of goodness.”²

In his *Sermons on the Sacraments* for neophytes, St. Ambrose explains the typology of the Flood:

What is the flood, except the situation in which sin dies, in which the righteous man is preserved to be the seeding-ground for righteousness? So the Lord, when he saw the sins of men multiplying, preserved the righteous man alone with his progeny, and commanded the waters to flow. . . . In the flood, then, all the corruption

1 Roman Missal, Easter Vigil 42: Blessing of Water, cited in CCC 1218.

2 Roman Missal, Easter Vigil 42: Blessing of Water, cited in CCC 1219.

of the flesh perished, and only the race and the likeness of the righteous remained. Is not this flood baptism, by which all sins are wiped out and only the spirit and the grace of the righteous are revived?³

Crossing of the Red Sea

The crossing of the Red Sea is the most important type of Baptism. In the Exodus, the Israelites cross in safety and tranquility through the waters of the Red Sea, and once secure on the other side they look back exultingly to see their enemies covered by the waves, annihilated, and their corpses and weapons cast up on the shore. The neophytes, likewise, emerging from the baptismal font, see through the eyes of faith that their sins which have tyrannized them, preventing them from being able to enter into the kingdom of heaven, have been wiped out through the waters of Baptism, whose salvific power comes from the Blood of Christ shed on the Cross on the very day that the Jews celebrated Passover, the memorial of the Exodus.

Pharaoh pursued the Israelites but lost his dominion over them when they passed through the Red Sea. He was not allowed to pass with his chariots. The Israelites were saved by water, by which the pursuing Egyptians were annihilated. Sin likewise pursues humanity until it is blotted out by forgiveness in the waters of Baptism received with living faith.⁴

We can understand why this text from Exodus on the Crossing of the Red Sea is read in the liturgy of the Easter vigil. It is perfectly fitted for the celebration of the rite of Baptism, which was traditionally administered to adult converts on this night. St. Augustine, for example, received Baptism at the hands of St. Ambrose in the Easter Vigil. The Blessing of Water in the Roman Missal makes this connection explicit: “You freed the children of Abraham from the slavery of Pharaoh, bringing them dry-shod

3 St. Ambrose, *Sermons on the Sacraments (De Sacramentis)* 2.1, in Yarnold, *Awe-Inspiring Rites*, 109.

4 See St. Augustine, Sermon IV on Jacob and Esau, n. 9, in *The Works of Saint Augustine. Sermons I (1–19) on the Old Testament*, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1990), 189: “The people, according to the old testament, are liberated from Egypt; the people, according to the new testament, are liberated from the devil. . . . Just as the Egyptians pursue the Jews as far as the sea, so Christians are pursued by their sins as far as baptism. Observe, brothers, and see; through the sea the Jews are liberated, in the sea the Egyptians are overwhelmed. Through baptism Christians are liberated and quit of their sins, while their sins are destroyed. Those ones come out after the Red Sea and journey through the desert; so too Christians after baptism are not yet in the promised land, but live in hope. This age is the desert, and desert indeed it is for Christians after baptism, if they understand what they have received. . . . They will understand that they are living as wandering exiles, longing for their native land.”

through the waters of the Red Sea, to be an image of the people set free in Baptism.”⁵

There is a moral typology here as well. It is not enough that the sins of our past life be wiped clean through the sacrament of Baptism. Baptism is only the beginning of the Christian life: many temptations and obstacles remain before we will be able to attain our homeland and final destination. Thus, after triumphantly crossing the Red Sea, the Israelites wandered and were tempted in the desert for forty years. This is a very important figurative event as well. The Christian likewise must continue to do battle with the world, the devil, sin, and vice, during the period of this mortal life.

Crossing of the Jordan

Another related figure of Baptism is the miraculous crossing of the river Jordan at the time of Joshua’s conquest of the Holy Land. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1222 explains: “Finally, Baptism is prefigured in the crossing of the Jordan River by which the People of God received the gift of the land promised to Abraham’s descendants, an image of eternal life. The promise of this blessed inheritance is fulfilled in the New Covenant.”

Naaman the Leper

The cure of Naaman the Leper in 2 Kings 5 is also a figure of Baptism. Here the valiant Syrian army commander is cured of his leprosy by bathing seven times in the Jordan. Another aspect of the story deepens the significance of the figure. When told to bathe in the Jordan, Naaman is enraged because of the excessive simplicity of the remedy. He was expecting something more spectacular. The same could be said with still greater reason about holy Baptism. The most momentous change in all of creation takes place in every Baptism: a son of Adam is made into a son of God, original sin is stripped away, a mere creature becomes an heir of heaven, and man is given a participation in the divine nature. And all with a simple immersion or pouring of water with the invocation of the Blessed Trinity!⁶

Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36

This prophecy of a New Covenant describing the effects of Baptism is given in Jeremiah 31:31–33:

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts;

⁵ Roman Missal, Easter Vigil 42: Blessing of Water, cited in CCC 1221.

⁶ St. Ambrose brings out this parallel in his *Sermons on the Sacraments* (*De sacramentis*) 1.9–14, in Yarnold, *Awe-Inspiring Rites*, 103–4.

and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

The New Covenant is compared to the covenant established with Israel on Mt. Sinai, but is promised to be superior. The Old Covenant was given to Israel upon tablets of stone. The New Covenant is said here to consist in the forgiveness of sins, and the writing of God’s law on our hearts, which occurs through the gift of grace and charity by means of the sacraments. Under the New Covenant we “know the Lord” in the most intimate way, for the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in the sanctified soul. Just as the Old Covenant established Israel as the People of God, so the New Covenant spoken of by Jeremiah must establish a new People of God, which is the Catholic Church.

A similar prophecy is given in Ezekiel 36:24–27:

For I will take you from among the Gentiles, and will gather you together out of all the countries, and will bring you into your own land. And I will pour upon you clean water, and you shall be cleansed from all your filthiness, and I will cleanse you from all your idols. And I will give you a new heart, and put a new spirit within you, and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit in the midst of you, and I will cause you to walk in my commandments, and to keep my judgments, and do them.

This text refers to the interior cleansing worked by the sacrament of Baptism. The members of the new Israel, taken from all nations, are incorporated into the People of God, the Church, by means of the water of Baptism, which removes the stain of Original Sin and of all personal sins. Baptism confers the inestimable gifts of sanctifying grace and infused charity, which enable those who receive them to follow the Law of God consistently, as long as they cooperate with that grace. The reference to being brought back “into your own land” seems to principally signify incorporation into the People of God, which is the Body of Christ, the Church, spoken of by St. Paul as the “Jerusalem which is above . . . , which is our mother” (Gal 4:26).

Circumcision as a Figure of Baptism

Circumcision was the sacrament (in the broad sense) of the Old Covenant by which a male entered sacramentally into the People of Israel. St. Thomas explains how circumcision is a figure of Baptism in *ST* III, q. 70, a. 1.⁷

⁷ *ST* III, q. 70, a. 1: “Baptism is called the Sacrament of Faith; in so far as in Baptism man makes a profession of faith, and by Baptism is aggregated to the congregation of the faithful. Now our faith is the same as that of the Fathers of old, according to the Apostle (2 Cor 4:13): “Having the same spirit of faith, . . . we . . . believe.” But circumcision was a protestation of faith; wherefore by circumcision also men of old

He says that circumcision, like Baptism, was a sacrament of faith, for circumcision, like Baptism, is a profession of the same faith of the Church, and by circumcision, as in Baptism, men become a member of the congregation of the faithful. Furthermore, since 1 Corinthians 10:11 states that “all things happened” to the Fathers of old “in figure,” circumcision is thus a figure and preparation for Baptism.

Circumcision is also a figure of the spiritual effect of Baptism, which is the circumcision of the heart, which means an interior rejection of the worldly behavior proper to the “old man.” St. Thomas explains: “Circumcision was like Baptism as to the spiritual effect of the latter. For just as circumcision removed a carnal pellicule, so Baptism despoils man of carnal behavior.”⁸

St. Paul speaks of circumcision as a figure of Baptism in Colossians 2:10–13. The passage is about the effects of new life in Christ which begins through Baptism. The Gentile Christians, although uncircumcised, have received the circumcision of the heart through a participation in Christ’s own life through Baptism, by which they share in His death and Resurrection:

You have come to fullness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses.

Ritual Bath in Judaism

Baptism or ritual immersion (*tevillah*)⁹ in a ritual bath (*mikveh*) was part of the Mosaic Law, and was prescribed for obtaining ritual purity after contact with something ritually unclean. It is interesting to note that conversion to Judaism also involves a ritual bath conceived along the same lines as Christian Baptism, and presumably predating it.¹⁰ The convert must undergo a full (and threefold) immersion which symbolizes death and rebirth. One rabbi describes it as follows:

What physical act could a person perform in order to were aggregated to the body of the faithful. Consequently, it is manifest that circumcision was a preparation for Baptism and a figure thereof, forasmuch as ‘all things happened’ to the Fathers of old ‘in figure’ (1 Cor 10:11); just as their faith regarded things to come.”

8 St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 70, a. 1, ad 1.

9 Immersion in a ritual bath was required in various aspects of Jewish life. The Talmud requires it for purification after one had become ritually impure so as to enter the sacred precincts of the Temple; for women prior to marriage; for married women after their monthly cycle; and for those who convert to Judaism.

10 The Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Yevamot*, ch. 4, speaks of immersion as essential to the rite of conversion, and as a long received tradition.

symbolize a radical change of heart, a total commitment? Is there a sign so dramatic, dynamic, and all-encompassing that it could represent the radical change undergone by the convert to Judaism?

Jewish tradition prescribes a profound symbol. It instructs the conversion candidate to place himself or herself in a radically different physical environment—in water rather than air. This leaves the person floating—momentarily suspended without breathing—substituting the usual forward moving nature and purposeful stride that characterize his or her waking movements with an aimlessness, a weightlessness, a detachment from the former environment. Individuality, passion, ego—all are submerged in the metamorphosis from the larval state of the present to a new existence.

Ritual immersion is the total submersion of the body in a pool of water. This pool and its water are precisely prescribed by Jewish law. Immersion, *tevillah*, is the common core component of every [traditional] Jewish conversion process, for male and female, adult and child, ignoramus and scholar. It is *sine qua non*, and a conversion ceremony without immersion is unacceptable to the traditional religious community and simply not Jewish in character. . . . No other religious act is so freighted with meaning as this one which touches every aspect of life and proclaims a total commitment to a new idea and a new way of life as it swallows up the old and gives birth to the new.

The water of the mikveh is designed to ritually cleanse a person from deeds of the past. The convert is considered by Jewish law to be like a newborn child.¹¹ By spiritually cleansing the convert, the mikveh water prepares him or her to confront God, life, and people with a fresh spirit and new eyes—it washes away the past, leaving only the future.¹²

John’s baptism gave a messianic character to the established practice of Jewish ritual immersion (*tevillah*). His baptism was a sign of the purification of hearts by which all Israel could prepare for the advent of the Messiah, whom he would point to in the waters of baptism as the Lamb of God.

Christ’s institution of Baptism as the sacrament of Christian initiation then took the water of the *mikveh* of the Old Covenant with its profound symbolism of new birth, and gave it a new power to supernaturally accomplish that new

11 See Yevamot 48b: R. Yosi rules that when “a convert is immersed [in a mikvah] he is comparable to a newborn child.” Rashi notes that the convert is no longer liable for previous sins. See Rabbi J. Simcha Cohen, *Intermarriage and Conversion: A Halakhic Solution* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav publishing House, 1987), 67.

12 Rabbi Maurice Lamm, *Becoming a Jew* (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, 1991), available online at http://www.myjewishlearning.com/life/Life_Events/Conversion/Conversion_Process/Mikveh.shtml.

birth. The newly baptized person is engrafted into Christ's Mystical Body, his sins are forgiven, and the supernatural life of the Spirit is poured into his soul.

The Baptism of John and Christ's Baptism

The Baptism of Christ is different from the ritual baths (*mikveh*) and immersions (*tevillah*) of Israel, as well as from John's baptism, precisely because Christ gave it the power to convey the Holy Spirit. The ritual baths of Judaism (including that of John) are indeed holy because they were instituted by God to symbolize conversion, and thus help to dispose one for it. Baptism, however, is holy in a higher way, because it is mysteriously endowed with the power to give the grace that it symbolizes. St. Thomas explains the difference between the Baptism of John and of Christ:

The whole teaching and work of John was in preparation for Christ: just as it is the duty of the servant and of the under-craftsman to prepare the matter for the form which is accomplished by the head-craftsman. Now grace was to be conferred on men through Christ, according to John 1:17: "Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Therefore the baptism of John did not confer grace, but only prepared the way for grace; and this in three ways: first, by John's teaching, which led men to faith in Christ; secondly, by accustoming men to the rite of Christ's baptism; thirdly, by penance, preparing men to receive the effect of Christ's baptism.¹³

Because John's baptism did not confer grace nor Baptismal character, it follows that those who received his baptism still had to receive the Baptism of Christ, as we see in Acts 19:1–7.¹⁴ The heavens were opened in Christ's Baptism in the Jordan to show that the effect of His Baptism was to open the way for salvation.¹⁵

The theophany of the Holy Spirit and of God the Father that accompanied Jesus' Baptism, together with the divine proclamation that Jesus was the Beloved Son of God, was also fitting for three reasons. First of all, in this way Jesus was revealed to be the Son of God at the beginning of His public ministry, not only by John but also by the voice of God the Father. Second, it showed that the principal effect of Baptism is to make us adopted sons of God in His natural Son. Third, it manifested the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, into whose intimate life we are inserted by sanctifying grace given in Baptism.

New Testament Texts

The two most important texts on the sacrament of

13 St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 38, a. 3.

14 See St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 38, a. 6.

15 See St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 39, a. 5: "Because the entrance to the heavenly kingdom was opened to us by the baptism of Christ in a special manner, which entrance had been closed to the first man through sin. Hence, when Christ was baptized, the heavens were opened, to show that the way to heaven is open to the baptized."

Baptism are John 3 and Matthew 28:20.

John 3

Jesus explains the meaning and necessity of Baptism in His nocturnal dialogue with Nicodemus recounted in John 3:1–8:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him." Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew,¹⁶ he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit."

John 3 is the beginning of Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of John—after His first miracle at the wedding at Cana—and so it is fitting that He begin by teaching on spiritual rebirth and the necessity of Baptism. The occasion is given by Nicodemus, who is not a disciple and who comes to Jesus to be taught clandestinely at night. Thus it would appear that he is not yet baptized. Christ begins to speak with him by telling him of the necessity of Baptism in order to enter into the Kingdom.

It is significant that Nicodemus does not understand Christ's teaching, for this teaching is a mystery in the full sense of the word. Jesus is proclaiming that entrance into His Kingdom requires a supernatural birth, for it is a supernatural kingdom. As natural life requires natural birth through the flesh, so supernatural life requires a supernatural birth through the Spirit. St. Augustine comments:

Whilst there are two births, then, he understood only one. One is of the earth, the other of heaven; one of the flesh, the other of the Spirit; one of mortality, the other of eternity; one of male and female, the other of God and the Church. But these two are each single; there can be no repeating the one or the other.¹⁷

John 3:22–4:1

In John 3:22–4:1, we are told that the disciples of Jesus were already administering the Baptism of Jesus, even before the imprisonment of John the Baptist:

16 The Greek word translated "anew" here can also be translated "from above." Both meanings are relevant.

17 St. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, tractate 11.6, in NPNF1, 7:77.

After this Jesus and his disciples went into the land of Judea; there he remained with them and baptized. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and people came and were baptized. For John had not yet been put in prison. Now a discussion arose between John's disciples and a Jew over purifying. And they came to John, and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you bore witness, here he is, baptizing, and all are going to him. . . . Now when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), he left Judea and departed again to Galilee.

This passage indicates that relatively early in His public ministry, Jesus' disciples were baptized with Jesus' Baptism, which was understood to be distinct from that of John. It is also interesting that Jesus Himself was not regularly baptizing, but His disciples were, clearly in His name. The third chapter of John thus shows us not only the meaning and necessity of Baptism, but also indicates that Christ's Baptism, as distinct from that of John the Baptist, was already being administered by His disciples during His public ministry.

In **John 1:12–13**, John also alludes to Baptism as the power to become children of God: "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."

Matthew 28:19

Although Christ's Baptism was administered from early in Jesus' public ministry, the solemn promulgation of the Church's mission to baptize all nations was given by the Lord after His Resurrection, as recounted in Matthew 28:18–20: "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.'"

The missionary mandate is a command to bring all men into Christ's Mystical Body, the Church, in which Christ is present with them until the end of time. This is realized through Baptism in the name of the Blessed Trinity. Baptism is presented thus as the gate into the Church, through which all are called to pass so that they can receive the fullness of Christ's teaching and intimate presence.

Mark's version of the missionary mandate in 16:15–16 also makes reference to Baptism: "And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.'" Salvation is described here as coming through faith and bap-

tism. Condemnation, on the other hand, is said to be the consequence of lack of faith. This seems to indicate that one who believes, but for some reason is unable to receive Baptism, is not on that account necessarily condemned. In other words, the formulation of the missionary mandate in Mark 16:16 leaves room for Baptism of desire.

Matthew 28:19 is the earliest reference to the Trinitarian formula of Baptism.¹⁸ The Trinitarian formula is extremely fitting, because the purpose of Baptism is to insert the recipient into the life of Christ, which is the life of the Blessed Trinity. Baptism inserts the baptized into the communion of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. By Baptism the faithful are made sons of the Father, in the Son, and are given a share in the mutual love of the Father and the Son, which is the Holy Spirit.

Administration of Baptism in Acts

Not surprisingly, the beginning of the Church's mission of preaching on Pentecost is marked by the exhortation to receive Baptism, and its actual administration to 3,000 adults, as recounted in Acts 2: 37–41:

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" And Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him." And he testified with many other words and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

Several times in Acts, it is narrated that whole households were baptized together when the head of the household came to faith. This is implied in the case of Cornelius in Acts 11:14, Lydia in Acts 16:15, and, more dramatically, with regard to St. Paul's jailor in Philippi in Acts 16:31–33. After the earthquake in the middle of the night, finding Paul and Silas still there, the jailor asks what he must do to be saved. Paul replies: "'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.' And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their wounds, and he was baptized at once, with all his family." These texts are a good indication that infant Baptism was practiced from the beginning by Apostolic Tradition.

The essential distinction of Christian Baptism from that of John the Baptist is indicated in Acts 19:2–7. When St. Paul arrived in Ephesus, he found some disciples there and asked them if they had received the gift of the Holy

¹⁸ The Trinitarian formula is also given in chapter 7 of the *Didache* stemming from roughly 50–120AD.

Spirit when they were initiated into the faith. They replied that they did not even know of the existence of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul then asked them: “‘Into what then were you baptized?’ They said, ‘Into John’s baptism.’ . . . On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.¹⁹ And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them; and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve of them in all.”

This text shows that John’s baptism is essentially different from that of Jesus, as can be seen from the fact that Paul baptizes them again, this time with Christ’s Baptism, as indicated by the words, “in the name of the Lord Jesus.” John’s Baptism did not make its recipients members of Christ and His Church, nor give them a share in Christ’s Spirit—the grace of the Holy Spirit. As will be seen below, Acts 19:6 is also important with regard to the sacrament of Confirmation, for it is presumed that Paul is celebrating that sacrament when he lays his hands on the newly baptized.

St. Paul on Baptism

St. Paul interprets Baptism as a sacramental participation in Christ’s Passion, death, and Resurrection in 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.

St. John Chrysostom comments:

In Baptism are fulfilled the pledges of our covenant with God; burial and death, resurrection and life; and these take place all at once. For when we immerse our heads in the water, the old man is buried as in a tomb below, and wholly sunk forever; then as we raise them again, the new man rises in its stead. As it is easy for us to dip and to lift our heads again, so it is easy for God to bury the old man, and to show forth the new. And this is done thrice, that you may learn that the power of the

¹⁹ For a discussion of this phrase, “baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus,” see the section on the essential form of Baptism below.

Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost fulfillleth all this.²⁰

St. Paul speaks of the regeneration effected by Baptism in Ephesians 5 and Titus as a spiritual regeneration produced by a spiritual washing. In Ephesians 5:26 he says that Christ gave himself up for the Church, His bride, “that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.” In Titus 3:4–7, St. Paul says

When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, *by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.*

Baptism is presented as the means by which we have been regenerated, justified by His grace, renewed by the gift of the Holy Spirit, and become heirs of heaven.

Baptism in the First Letter of Peter 3:18–22

St. Peter speaks of Baptism in 1 Peter 3:21 as a spiritual washing, in connection with the great Flood, which was a figure of Baptism:

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.

This difficult passage puts together four key elements in the paschal mystery: Christ’s death, His descent into hell, the sacrament of Baptism whose power comes from the Resurrection, and the Ascension of Christ.²¹

After being “being put to death in the flesh,” Christ was “made alive in the spirit.”²² This does not yet seem to refer to His bodily Resurrection, but to His soul which separated from His body during the time between His

²⁰ St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. John*, Homily 25.2, trans. Philip Schaff, in NPNF1, 14:89.

²¹ For commentaries on this text, see Urbanus Holzmeister, *Commentarius in Epistulas SS. Petri et Iudae Apostolorum*, part 1 (Paris: Lethielleux, 1937); and William Joseph Dalton, *Christ’s Proclamation to the Spirits: A Study of 1 Peter 3:18–4:6* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965). I am following the interpretation of Holzmeister, who follows Cajetan and St. Robert Bellarmine.

²² The phrase “made alive in the spirit” could be understood to mean that Jesus’ was made *life-giving* in the spirit. In other words, His glorious soul went to the souls of the dead to bring them the eternal life of the beatific vision.

death and Resurrection. What did His glorious soul do? Christ's life-giving soul went to preach to the "spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey when God's patience waited in the days of Noah."

"Spirits in prison" seems to refer to the souls of those detained in Sheol, which was regarded as a kind of prison that kept the righteous in the bondage of not being able to see God. Verse 20, however, specifies that Christ preached also to certain souls who at one time were without faith, when Noah was building the ark. However, the text specifies that these "formerly" or "at first" did not obey, thus implying that they did afterwards come to believe. Presumably this coming to faith and repentance would have occurred when they experienced the actual event of the Flood foretold by Noah. Although all of mankind, with the exception of Noah and his household would have perished physically in the Flood, it is reasonable to think that many would have died with repentance and contrition. Calamitous events, especially if prophesied, have a way of bringing men to seek forgiveness.

Why does 1 Peter 3:20 single out the formerly disbelieving souls who died in the Flood as the recipients of Christ's preaching on Holy Saturday? One reason is that a connection is made between these souls and Baptism, for the Flood is a type or figure of that sacrament. As all men were purged by the water of the Flood, so sin is purged in every soul by the water of Baptism. Christ's preaching to the dead in Sheol was also a kind of Baptism for these souls, even though they died in a state of grace, in that His communication opened up the gates of Heaven for them and joined them definitively to the Church triumphant, which is an effect of the grace of Baptism. Although they had to die physically and suffer the penalty of original sin and their personal sins, they were freed from the "second death," which is eternal separation from God. We can infer that this only applied to those who died with proper repentance, and not to the impenitent, who would have gone to Gehenna to remain there forever.

Another possible reason why 1 Peter 3:19 singles out the people who lived at the time of the Flood is to address a stumbling block to a right understanding of God's mercy. For it could seem that the Flood story paints a picture of God's severity in contrast with the mercy of God shown in the New Testament. How could God have simply condemned all of mankind at that time with the exception of eight people? The answer of 1 Peter 3:19 is that although all men passed away in the Flood, not all men were condemned eternally to hell. A chance was given to all of them to repent, for God gives sufficient grace to all men to be saved, and it would seem that many, in fact, were saved, despite a prior resistance to God's grace.

2. Essential Elements of Baptism

Matter and Form of Baptism

The matter and form of Baptism essentially consist in ablution with water accompanied by the spoken words of the Trinitarian formula of Baptism as given in Matthew 28:19.

The Essential Matter

The matter of any sacrament includes material elements and sensible gestures. The essential material element for Baptism is natural water of any kind, and the sensible gesture is pouring the water over the body.²³ Why water? The symbolism is rich and clear. Water cleans, refreshes, is associated with life, can symbolize death and rebirth, and is most abundantly available.

First, water is the substance with which we habitually wash, and so to sacramentally represent spiritual cleansing, washing with water is the natural sign. Thus the washing with water sacramentally represents (and accomplishes) washing from all sin, whether original or personal. Second, as immersion in water can symbolize death and rebirth, so it is a fitting sign of spiritual death and rebirth, as St. Paul explains in Romans 6:4. Third, Baptism is not only the washing away of sin, but also the beginning of the new life of grace. Thus the fact that water is associated with life is significant in this regard.²⁴ Fourth, as bathing in water refreshes the soul, so Baptism spiritually refreshes the soul with new supernatural life, tempering our passions and promoting peace.²⁵ Finally, the great abundance of water makes it fitting matter for the sacrament most necessary for salvation.²⁶

The essential sensible gesture for Baptism is the act of immersion or pouring.²⁷ Immersion was the standard method in the early Church, as this was inherited from the traditions of Israel. In the thirteenth century, St. Thomas still viewed immersion as the more standard practice: "Now washing may be done with water not only by immersion, but also by sprinkling²⁸ or pouring. And, therefore,

23 See *The Roman Catechism*, part 2, ch 1, section 7, p. 167: "That is to say, whatever can be called 'water,' natural and without adulteration—whether it be sea-water, river-water, water from a pond, well or fountain."

24 See St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 66, a. 3: "The very nature of Baptism. . . is a regeneration unto spiritual life. And this answers to the nature of water in a special degree; wherefore seeds, from which all living things, viz. plants and animals are generated, are moist and akin to water. For this reason certain philosophers held that water is the first principle of all things."

25 See *The Roman Catechism*, p. 168.

26 Apart from cases of necessity, the water must be blessed according to the liturgical books (canon 853).

27 See the Code of Canon Law, can. 854: "Baptism is to be conferred either by immersion or by pouring."

28 Sprinkling (aspersion) is not given as a licit option in the new *Code of Canon Law*, canon 854, although its validity was mentioned

although it is safer to baptize by immersion, because this is the more ordinary fashion, yet Baptism can be conferred by sprinkling or also by pouring, according to Ezekiel 36:25: "I will pour upon you clean water."²⁹

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1239 states: "Baptism is performed in the most expressive way by triple immersion in the baptismal water. However, from ancient times it has also been able to be conferred by pouring the water three times over the candidate's head." Water is poured on the head because of its preeminence as the principal member of the body.

That the immersion or pouring of water be threefold is not necessary for the validity of Baptism,³⁰ but fittingly expresses its Trinitarian dimension: entering into the communion of the Blessed Trinity as an adopted son of the Father in the Holy Spirit.

The Essential Form: In the Name of the Trinity

In the Latin Church, the baptismal formula is: "N., I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." In the Eastern liturgies, the formula is in the passive voice while the catechumen turns to the East: "The servant of God, N., is baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." At the invocation of each person of the Most Holy Trinity, the priest immerses the candidate in the water and raises him up again.³¹ The invocation of the three Persons of the Trinity is essential and thus necessary for validity.

An objection can be raised that the Acts of the Apostles speaks of Baptism "in the name of the Lord Jesus." It might seem that the expression, "baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus," implies that the Trinitarian formula was not used.

in the 1917 Code, canon 758. Sprinkling is problematic because there can be uncertainty whether the water actually moves over the body so as to create the sacramental sign of washing with water.

29 St. Thomas, *ST* III, q. 66, a. 7.

30 The *Code of Canon Law*, canon 854, does not mention whether the immersion or pouring be triple or single. The *Roman Catechism*, part 2, ch. 1, § 18, p. 172, states: "It is also a matter of indifference as far as validity is concerned, whether the ablution is repeated for a total of three times in succession, or whether it is done only once. St. Gregory the Great says that Baptism had been and may still be administered in either way. Practically speaking, the faithful should follow the practice of the particular rite to which they belong."

31 CCC 1240. See the Council of Florence, Decree for the Armenians (*Exsultate Domino*, DS 1314), which stipulates the form for Baptism: "The matter of this sacrament is true and natural water; and it is indifferent whether it be cold or hot. The form is: I baptize thee in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. We do not, however, deny that the words: Let this servant of Christ be baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost; or: This person is baptized by my hands in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, constitute true baptism; because since the principal cause from which baptism has its efficacy is the Holy Trinity, and the instrumental cause is the minister who confers the sacrament exteriorly, then if the act exercised by the minister be expressed, together with the invocation of the Holy Trinity, the sacrament is perfected."

We have seen that St. Paul speaks this way in Acts 19:4. The same expression is also used in other places, such as Acts 2:38; 8:16; and 10:48.

The *Roman Catechism* has a very interesting commentary on this question. It is possible in theory that Christ could have dispensed with the Trinitarian formula during the Apostolic period by a special inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but it seems highly unlikely that this was the case:

If the Apostles ever baptized exclusively in the one Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, they undoubtedly did so under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This practice would have made more manifest in the very beginning of the Church the greatness of the Name of Jesus Christ and the immensity of his divine power. As we reflect on it, we can easily enough conclude that this formula implicitly contains all that the Savior himself prescribed. For whoever says "Jesus Christ" certainly implies the Person of the Father who anointed him, and also the Person of the Holy Spirit who was his anointing.

That the apostles actually used this formula [in the name of the Lord Jesus alone] in baptizing is very doubtful, according to St. Ambrose and St. Basil. . . . They interpret the phrase "Baptism in the Name of Jesus Christ" as being simply a descriptive phrase, i.e., as a convenient and obvious way of distinguishing between the Baptism that came from John and the Baptism that came from Christ. We need not say, therefore, that the Apostles ever departed from the formula which was clearly the original one, viz., the one in which each of the divine Persons is distinctly named. It seems, moreover, that this is also the explanation of the Pauline phrase: "as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal 3:27). That is to say, they were baptized in the faith of Christ, and with no other form than what that same Christ had commanded to be used.³²

That the Apostles baptized using the Trinitarian formula, and not merely in the name of Jesus, is also evidenced by the earliest extra-biblical record of the baptismal liturgy, which is the *Didache*, dating from perhaps the middle or latter part of the first century in Israel or Syria. This work has a brief baptismal instruction:

And concerning baptism, baptize this way: Having first said all these things, baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living water. But if you have no living water, baptize into other water; and if you cannot do so in cold water, do so in warm. But if you have neither, pour out water three times upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit. But before the baptism let the baptizer fast, and the baptized, and whoever else can; but you

32 *The Roman Catechism*, part 2, ch. 1, sections 15–16, p. 171

shall order the baptized to fast one or two days before.³³

Thus it seems highly unlikely that Baptism was administered by St. Paul or the other Apostles only in the name of Jesus, and not also in the name of the Father and the Holy Spirit, even though the Trinitarian formula is not explicitly mentioned in Acts. It seems much more probable, in the absence of any more concrete data, that St. Luke used that expression as a shorthand technical term to indicate Christ's Baptism, as opposed to that of John. Furthermore, Acts 19:2, in which St. Paul questions them about their reception of the Holy Spirit, implies that Christian Baptism as understood by St. Paul included a reference not only to the Lord Jesus but also to the Holy Spirit. This is also implied in 1 Corinthians 6:11: "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God."³⁴

Minister and Subject of Baptism

Minister of Baptism

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1256 explains Catholic teaching on the minister of Baptism:

The ordinary ministers of Baptism are the bishop and priest and, in the Latin Church, also the deacon. In case of necessity, any person, even someone not baptized, can baptize, if he has the required intention. The intention required is to will to do what the Church does when she baptizes, and to apply the Trinitarian baptismal formula. The Church finds the reason for this possibility in the universal saving will of God and the necessity of Baptism for salvation.

As long as Baptism can be performed by the ordinary minister (bishop, priest, or deacon), it is illicit to make use of someone else. However, in case of necessity, anyone can baptize, as long as that person has the intention to do what the Church does.³⁵ This is because Baptism is necessary for salvation and Christ willed it to be available to all. The *Code of Canon Law*, canon 861, §2, states:

When an ordinary minister is absent or impeded, a catechist or another person designated for this function by the local ordinary, or in a case of necessity any person with the right intention, confers baptism licitly.

Pastors of souls, especially the pastor of a parish, are

³³ Chapter 7. Translation by Roberts-Donaldson, available online at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-roberts.html>.

³⁴ See the discussion of this point in Emmanuel Doronzo, *De Baptismo et Confirmatione* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1947), 65–72. St. Thomas addresses the question in *ST III*, q. 66, a. 6, ad 2.

³⁵ One of the errors of Calvin was holding that Baptism could only be administered by an ordained minister, with no exception for danger of death. See the *Institutes*, ch. 15.20, p. 868: "The practice which has been in use for many ages, and even almost from the very commencement of the church, for laics to baptize, in danger of death, when a minister could not be present in time, cannot, it appears to me, be defended on sufficient grounds."

to be concerned that the Christian faithful are taught the correct way to baptize.

We see the same practice in Tertullian's day, at the beginning of the third century: "The supreme right of giving it belongs to the high priest, which is the bishop: after him, to the presbyters and deacons, yet not without commission from the bishop, on account of the church's dignity: for when this is safe, peace is safe. Except for that, even laymen have the right."³⁶

In cases of urgent necessity, Baptism can be administered with only those things required for the validity of the sacrament, which are proper matter (pouring of water or immersion), form (Trinitarian formula), and intention to do what the Church does. Outside of urgent necessity, it must be "administered according to the approved liturgical books."³⁷ Healthcare workers ought to be instructed in how to administer Baptism in danger of death.

Baptism can be validly administered not only by lay Catholics, but also by non-Catholics and non-Christians, as long as the right matter and form is used with the intention to do what the Church does. This intention is not rendered invalid by the fact that the minister has a wrong or heretical idea of the true effects of Baptism. Thus Baptism administered by heretics is valid, as long as the essential matter and form are preserved.³⁸

Baptism is to be administered in a church or oratory—ordinarily in the parish church—unless there is an emergency. The Baptism must be recorded in the parish baptismal book. When an adult is baptized, he is ordinarily to receive Confirmation and first Holy Communion in the same ceremony.

Subject of Baptism

Every unbaptized human being is potentially a subject for Baptism. The *Code of Canon Law* says succinctly that "Every person not yet baptized and only such a person is able to be baptized."³⁹ This includes both infants and adults, those in possession of reason and those who are not.

A person who does not have the use of reason is not capable of placing any personal obstacle to the reception of the sacrament, and thus will receive the full effects of Baptism: the imprinting of character, the forgiveness of original sin, and the infusion of sanctifying grace and the theological virtues.

³⁶ *De baptismo* 17, cited in J. D. C. Fisher, *Confirmation: Then and Now* (London: S.P.C.K., 1978), 32.

³⁷ CIC, canon 850.

³⁸ See Pope Stephen I, letter to St. Cyprian of 256 (DS 110). See also the Council of Florence, Decree for Armenians, DS 1315, and the Council of Trent, session 7, canon 4 on Baptism (DS 1617): "If anyone says that baptism, even that given by heretics in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, with the intention of doing what the Church does, is not true baptism, anathema sit."

³⁹ CIC, canon 864, cited in CCC 1246.

Although every unbaptized human being is a potential recipient of Baptism, an adult must be rightly disposed to receive the grace of Baptism. All adults who are validly baptized receive baptismal character, but not all receive the grace of baptism.

Baptism of Adults

Canon 865 gives the conditions for the Baptism of adults:

For an adult to be baptized, the person must have manifested the intention to receive baptism, have been instructed sufficiently about the truths of the faith and Christian obligations, and have been tested in the Christian life through the catechumenate. The adult is also to be urged to have sorrow for personal sins.

An adult in danger of death can be baptized, if, having some knowledge of the principal truths of the faith, the person has manifested in any way at all the intention to receive baptism and promises to observe the commandments of the Christian religion.

Condition for Validity

In order for an adult to be validly baptized, he must intend to receive the sacrament. If this intention is truly lacking, the sacrament is invalid, which means that the sacrament is not received. No character is imprinted, and no grace is given.

In order to make this act of intention, it is not necessary for a person to understand exactly what Baptism is, or to have a right faith concerning the sacrament, although obviously that is extremely desirable! It is sufficient that he understand baptism to be a rite of entrance into the Church, and have the intention to receive what the Church does in baptizing. It is also sufficient that this intention be virtual or habitual, as will be explained below.

If an adult is forcibly baptized against his will, such a Baptism is invalid (non-existent) because the intention is clearly lacking. The requirement that a person intend to receive the sacrament is only applicable for those who are capable of making such consent, which presupposes the use of reason. For those who never had the use of reason, the act of intending to receive the sacrament is not necessary, for they are not capable of it. It becomes necessary only when they are capable of it.

It is sufficient that the intention to receive Baptism is habitual. Habitual intention refers to a habitual state of intending something. This occurs whenever one actually intends something and does not subsequently withdraw that intention by changing one's mind. Habitual intention comes into play with regard to someone who has lost the capacity for actual intention, such as a person in a coma. Can one baptize a catechumen who has lost the use of reason due to an accident? Yes, for the catechumen demonstrated a prior actual intention by enrolling in the RCIA. As long as there are no clear signs that that former

actual intention was repudiated, one can assume that the person has a habitual intention to receive the sacrament, and that would be sufficient.⁴⁰

St. Augustine recounts an episode of this type in book 4 of his *Confessions*. He had a very dear friend who, like him, was a catechumen, and whom he had inculcated with Manichean ideas. This friend fell into a coma, upon which his family despaired of his recovery and had him baptized in that state. After receiving Baptism he briefly regained his senses, and forbade Augustine to disparage the Baptism he had received unconsciously. St. Augustine writes:

For long, sore sick of a fever, he lay senseless in a death-sweat; and his recovery being despaired of, he was baptised, unknowing; myself meanwhile little regarding, and presuming that his soul would retain rather what it had received of me, not what was wrought on his unconscious body. But it proved far otherwise: for he was refreshed, and restored. Forthwith, as soon as I could speak with him (and I could, so soon as he was able, for I never left him, and we hung but too much upon each other), I essayed to jest with him, as though he would jest with me at that baptism which he had received, when utterly absent in mind and feeling, but had now understood that he had received. But he so shrunk from me, as from an enemy; and with a wonderful and sudden freedom bade me, as I would continue his friend, forbear such language to him. I, all astonished and amazed, suppressed all my emotions till he should grow well, and his health were strong enough for me to deal with him as I would. But he was taken away from my frenzy, that with Thee he might be preserved for my comfort; a few days after in my absence, he was attacked again by the fever, and so departed.

Baptism of Infants

A sign of the necessity of infant Baptism can be seen in Jesus' welcoming of little children, as in Mark 10:14: "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God." The necessity of infant Baptism comes from a right understanding of the necessity of Baptism as the sacrament by which original sin is forgiven and membership in the Church and sanctifying grace conferred. Jesus' words in John 3 or Matthew 28:19 do not contain any restriction, but imply a universal necessity. Infant baptism enables the little children to "come to Jesus" in truth, being sacramentally inserted into Him, and made members of His Body.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1250 eloquently explains the necessity of infant Baptism:

Born with a fallen human nature and tainted by original

40 Although normally adults must go through a catechumenate before Baptism, in danger of death they can be baptized "if, having some knowledge of the principal truths of the faith, the person has manifested in any way at all the intention to receive baptism and promises to observe the commandments of the Christian religion" (canon 865 §2).

sin, children also have need of the new birth in Baptism to be freed from the power of darkness and brought into the realm of the freedom of the children of God, to which all men are called. The sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant Baptism. The Church and the parents would deny a child the priceless grace of becoming a child of God were they not to confer Baptism shortly after birth.

The necessity of Baptism for infants is also explained in the 1980 Instruction on Infant Baptism, *Pastoralis actio*, of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith:

She [the Church] has always understood the words of Jesus to Nicodemus to mean that “children should not be deprived of Baptism.”⁴¹ Jesus’ words are so universal and absolute in form that the Fathers employed them to establish the necessity of Baptism, and the Magisterium applied them expressly to infants; the sacrament is for them, too, entry into the People of God⁴² and the gateway to personal salvation.⁴³

The Old Testament provides the type for infant Baptism in the rite of circumcision performed on the eighth day. Circumcision incorporated the children into the covenant and thus into Israel, the People of God. By being made part of the holy people, circumcision served as a kind of consecration of those who received it, marking them out from the rest of the world. The fact that the Mosaic Law required circumcision on the eighth day shows the divine will that infants be incorporated into the covenant and its inestimable benefits. Since circumcision was a sign of faith and covenant, infants were incorporated into the faith of Israel and her covenant with God. The fact that the infants of Israel could not make a personal act of faith was not an obstacle to this insertion into the covenant and the resulting consecration.

As seen above, the Acts of the Apostles implies the practice of infant Baptism by saying that whole households were baptized (Acts 16:31–33; 16:15; 18:8). As the CCC 1252 notes: “The practice of infant Baptism is an immemorial tradition of the Church. There is explicit testimony to this practice from the second century on, and it is quite possible that, from the beginning of the apostolic preaching, when whole ‘households’ received baptism, infants may also have been baptized.”

Like infants, all those who never have had the use of reason because of a mental handicap, can and should be baptized. However, if someone previously had the use of reason and lost it through some kind of accident, they can

receive Baptism if they had some intention to receive it before losing their ability to reason.⁴⁴

Baptism of Infants Whose Parents Do Not Wish the Child to Be Baptized

The Church has always condemned the forcible Baptism of the children of unbelievers against the will of their parents, just as it condemns the forcible Baptism of adults. St. Thomas poses the question of whether this could be licit, and argued very strongly against such a position on the grounds that the parents have both the duty and the right by natural law to instruct their children according to their conscience, even if it is erring:

The children of unbelievers either have the use of reason or they have not. If they have, then they already begin to control their own actions, in things that are of Divine or natural law. And therefore of their own accord, and against the will of their parents, they can receive Baptism, just as they can contract marriage. Consequently such can lawfully be advised and persuaded to be baptized. If, however, they have not yet the use of free-will, according to the natural law they are under the care of their parents as long as they cannot look after themselves. For which reason we say that even the children of the ancients “were saved through the faith of their parents.” Wherefore it would be contrary to natural justice if such children were baptized against their parents’ will; just as it would be if one having the use of reason were baptized against his will. Moreover under the circumstances it would be dangerous to baptize the children of unbelievers; for they would be liable to lapse into unbelief, by reason of their natural affection for their parents. Therefore it is not the custom of the Church to baptize the children of unbelievers against their parents’ will.

The *Code of Canon Law* deals with this issue in canon 868. For an infant to be baptized licitly, two conditions must be met:

1. The parents or at least one of them or the person who legitimately takes their place must consent;
2. there must be a founded hope that the infant will be brought up in the Catholic religion; if such hope is altogether lacking, the baptism is to be delayed according to the prescripts of particular law. . . .

In § 2 of this canon, it is stated that “an infant of Catholic parents or even of non-Catholic parents is baptized licitly in danger of death, even against the will of the parents.” Canon 871 specifies that “if aborted fetuses are alive, they are to be baptized insofar as possible.”

41 *Ordo baptismi parvulorum*, Praenotanda, no. 2, p. 15.

42 See St. Augustine, *De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum* 3.4.7, PL 44:189: “What is done when children are baptized, is to incorporate them into the Church, that is to say to associate them with Christ’s body and members.”

43 *Pastoralis actio* 12.

44 *The Roman Catechism*, p. 182. See CIC, canon 852 § 2.