

Association of Hebrew Catholics Lecture Series  
*The Mystery of Israel and the Church*

Fall 2012 – Series #10

*Sacraments: From the Old Covenant to the New*

Talk #4

*The Effects and Necessity of Baptism*



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Note: *This document contains the unedited text of Dr. Feingold's talk. It will eventually undergo final editing for inclusion in the series of books being published by The Miriam Press under the series title: "The Mystery of Israel and the Church". If you find errors of any type, please send your observations to [lfeingold@hebrewcatholic.org](mailto:lfeingold@hebrewcatholic.org)*

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## 4. The Effects and Necessity of Baptism

The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* urges pastors to preach frequently to the faithful about the effects of Baptism, “in order that the faithful may become more aware of the high dignity which is theirs by Baptism, and may never allow themselves to be dragged down from that height by either the infiltration or the frontal attacks of Satan.”<sup>1</sup>

A magnificent summary of the effects of Baptism are given by St. Gregory Nazianzus:

Baptism is God’s most beautiful and magnificent gift. . . . We call it gift, grace, anointing, enlightenment, garment of immortality, bath of rebirth, seal, and most precious gift. It is called gift because it is conferred on those who bring nothing of their own; grace since it is given even to the guilty; Baptism because sin is buried in the water; anointing for it is priestly and royal as are those who are anointed; enlightenment because it radiates light; clothing since it veils our shame; bath because it washes; and seal as it is our guard and the sign of God’s Lordship.<sup>2</sup>

As in the case of Confirmation and Holy Orders, the sacrament of Baptism has two distinct effects: the imprinting of an indelible character, and the infusion of grace.

### **Baptismal Character**

Baptismal character is an invisible seal on the soul by which the recipient is marked as belonging to Christ and His Mystical Body, the Church. This character thus confers membership in the Church<sup>3</sup> and makes a person capable of participating in the supernatural life of the Church, which is the life of Christ and His Spirit, directed to the glory of God the Father and the sanctification of men. Baptismal character thus gives to the recipient the power to participate in Christ’s priesthood, as well as in His prophetic and kingly office.

Pius XII speaks of baptismal character in his encyclical on the Liturgy, *Mediator Dei* 88: “By the waters of baptism, as by common right, Christians are made members of the Mystical Body of Christ the Priest, and by the ‘character’ which is imprinted on their souls, they are appointed to give worship to God. Thus they participate, according to their condition, in the priesthood of Christ.” *Lumen gentium* 11 takes up the same theme: “Incorporated in the Church through baptism, the faithful are destined by the baptismal character for the worship of the Christian religion; reborn

as sons of God they must confess before men the faith which they have received from God through the Church.”

Baptismal character thus provides two things: (1) membership in the Body of Christ, and thus also (2) a participation in the priesthood of Christ. The baptized faithful have been rendered members of a Body which has a perfect priesthood. Through baptismal character, the faithful are able to share, according to their station in the Body, in Christ’s own perfect worship of God, and to receive the sanctification that flows from Baptism and the other sacraments. In other words, the baptized faithful are rendered capable of participating in the ascending and descending priestly mediation of Christ. The ascending direction is the glorification of God. The descending direction is the sanctification of men.

With regard to the ascending movement of glorification of the Father, Baptism makes it possible for a person to participate in the worship of the Church and in her liturgical life. This participation culminates in the offering of the sacrifice of the Mass. The baptized faithful participate in the Mass by spiritually offering the sacrifice of Christ to the Father, and by spiritually joining their own lives and hearts to the sacrifice of Christ on the altar. Baptismal character makes it possible for the faithful liturgically to join their own interior oblation—the oblation of the Christian life—to the oblation of the Lamb of God.

Pius XII explains the participation of the baptized faithful in the offering of the sacrifice of the Mass in his encyclical, *Mediator Dei* 98–99:

In order that the oblation by which the faithful offer the divine Victim in this sacrifice to the heavenly Father may have its full effect, it is necessary that the people add something else, namely, the *offering of themselves as a victim*.... For the Prince of the Apostles wishes us, as living stones built upon Christ, the cornerstone, to be able as “a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ” (1 Pt 2:5). St. Paul the Apostle addresses the following words of exhortation to Christians.... “I beseech you therefore, . . . that you present your bodies, a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing unto God, your reasonable service”(Rom 12:1)...

With the High Priest and through Him they offer themselves as a spiritual sacrifice,...and each one should consecrate himself to the furthering of the divine glory, desiring to become as like as possible to Christ in His most grievous sufferings.

The Second Vatican Council several times reiterated this teaching regarding the participation of the faithful in the

1 *The Roman Catechism*, p. 183.

2 “Oratio” 40, 3–4, PG 36:361C, quoted in CCC 1216.

3 Although character cannot be lost, full visible membership in the Church can be lost through public and formal heresy, schism, apostasy, or excommunication. See Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis Christi* 22, 23.

sacrifice of Christ. *Lumen gentium* 11 states: “Taking part in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, which is the source and summit of the whole Christian life, they offer the divine victim to God, and offer themselves along with it.” *Sacrosanctum concilium* 48 says: “Offering the immaculate victim, not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, they should learn to offer themselves.”

The participation of the baptized faithful in the priesthood of Christ through baptismal character is essentially distinct from the higher participation of those who have received priestly character imparted by Holy Orders. As *Lumen gentium* 10 states, this distinction is not just a matter of degree, but of essence:

Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ. The ministerial priest, by the sacred power he enjoys, teaches and rules the priestly people; acting in the person of Christ, he makes present the Eucharistic sacrifice, and offers it to God in the name of all the people. But the faithful, in virtue of their royal priesthood, join in the offering of the Eucharist. They likewise exercise that priesthood in receiving the sacraments, in prayer and thanksgiving, in the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity.

Priestly character enables the priest to act in the person of Christ the Head of the Church (*in persona Christi capitis*). Baptismal character, on the other hand, makes it possible for the baptized faithful to act in the person of the Church into which they have been incorporated. This means they can join in the offering of the Sacrifice of the Head as members of His Body.

This aspect of baptismal character, which inserts the baptized into a royal priesthood, is the greatest dignity of the Christian faithful. The royal priesthood is proclaimed in 1 Peter 2:9: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.”

St. Peter is making reference to Exodus 19:5–6, in which God on Mt. Sinai tells Moses to say to the people of Israel: “Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” As Israel was a kingdom of priests because all the people participated in the worship performed by the priests of the line of Aaron, so the Church is a priestly people. However, this new royal priesthood has immeasurably greater dignity, because the

Mystical Body participates in the priesthood of its Head, Jesus Christ. *Lumen gentium* 10 explains the nature of this royal priesthood:

Christ the Lord, High Priest taken from among men, made the new people “a kingdom and priests to God the Father”. The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, in order that through all those works which are those of the Christian man they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light. Therefore all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God, should present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Everywhere on earth they must bear witness to Christ and give an answer to those who seek an account of that hope of eternal life which is in them.

Bl. John Paul develops this teaching in *Christifideles laici* 14:

The participation of the lay faithful in the threefold mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King finds its source in the anointing of Baptism, its further development in Confirmation and its realization and dynamic sustenance in the Holy Eucharist. . . In such a way individuals are sharers in the threefold mission of Christ in virtue of their being members of the Church, as St. Peter clearly teaches. . . (*I Pt* 2:9). Saint Augustine writes: “As we call everyone ‘Christians’ in virtue of a mystical anointing, so we call everyone ‘priests’ because all are members of only one priesthood.”

### ***The Grace of Baptism***

The grace imparted by Baptism has two simultaneous aspects: the forgiveness of sins (both original and personal) and the infusion of sanctifying grace (with the other gifts that accompany it). These two aspects can never be separated, for sin is forgiven precisely by the infusion of sanctifying grace and charity. Remission of sins and the infusion of grace thus constitute two sides of one coin.

These two aspects are sacramentally represented by immersion into the water of Baptism. The catechumen descends into the water, symbolizing participation in Christ’s death, and then rises out of the water, symbolizing participation in Christ’s Resurrection, according to Romans 6:4: “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.” As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1214 states, “the ‘plunge’ into the water symbolizes the catechumen’s burial into Christ’s death, from which he rises up by resurrection with him, as ‘a new creature.’”

Since the sacraments accomplish what they symbolize, the sacramental sign of washing and immersion into

Christ's death accomplishes the spiritual washing which is the forgiveness of sins, and our dying to the "old man." This could be called the negative aspect of Baptism: purification from sin. Similarly, the sacramental sign of rising with Christ out of the waters of Baptism signifies and accomplishes the recreation of man as a "new creature" through the infusion of sanctifying grace. This is the positive side of Baptism: justification and sanctification. As the CCC 1227 states, "Through the Holy Spirit, Baptism is a bath that purifies, justifies, and sanctifies."

It is proper to Baptism to work the forgiveness of original sin, as well as all personal sins. The state of original sin in which all the descendants of Adam and Eve by natural generation are born is essentially a privation of original justice. Privation means a lack of something that ought to be present. Original sin causes the privation of the supernatural gifts of sanctifying grace, faith, hope, and charity, and of the preternatural gifts of infused knowledge, immortality, immunity from suffering, and integrity. Although these gifts are not due to our nature, they were due to God's plan to elevate man to the supernatural end of the beatific vision. Baptism provides a complete remedy for original sin, but the restoration of the preternatural gifts will not be experienced until the general Resurrection. Baptism, however, immediately restores original justice with regard to its supernatural gifts of sanctifying grace and the supernatural gifts that accompany it, such as faith, hope, and charity. The Council of Trent states this in a magnificent way:

If anyone denies that by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ which is conferred in baptism, the guilt of original sin is remitted, or says that the whole of that which belongs to the essence of sin is not taken away, but says that it is only canceled or not imputed, let him be anathema. For in those who are born again God hates nothing, because there is no condemnation to those who are truly buried together with Christ by baptism unto death, who walk not according to the flesh, but putting off the old man and putting on the new one who is created according to God, are made innocent, immaculate, pure, guiltless and beloved of God, heirs indeed of God, joint heirs with Christ; so that there is nothing whatever to hinder their entrance into heaven.<sup>4</sup>

Luther and Calvin, on the contrary, assert that Baptism does not set us free from original sin or remedy any of its consequences, but only forgives the punishment due to it.<sup>5</sup>

4 Council of Trent, Fifth session (1546), Decree on Original Sin, section 5, in *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. H. J. Schroeder (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1978), 23.

5 See John Calvin, *Institutes*, bk. 4, ch. 15.10, p. 863: "It is now clear how false the doctrine is which some long ago taught, and others still persist in, that by baptism we are exempted and set free from original sin, and from the corruption which was propagated by Adam to all his posterity, and that we are restored to the same righteousness and purity of nature which Adam would have had if he had maintained the integrity

The preternatural gifts are not restored in this life so that we can experience redemptive suffering in union with Christ and fight the Christian combat. St. Thomas states:

Baptism has the power to take away the penalties of the present life yet it does not take them away during the present life, but by its power they will be taken away from the just in the resurrection when "this mortal hath put on immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:54).<sup>6</sup>

The fact that the preternatural gifts are not restored by Baptism enables us to merit more grace through the difficulty of fighting concupiscence.<sup>7</sup> The Council of Trent explains:

But this holy council perceives and confesses that in the one baptized there remains concupiscence or an inclination to sin, which, since it is left for us to wrestle with, cannot injure those who do not acquiesce but resist manfully by the grace of Jesus Christ; indeed, he who shall have striven lawfully shall be crowned. This concupiscence, which the Apostle sometimes calls sin, the holy council declares the Catholic Church has never understood to be called sin in the sense that it is truly and properly sin in those born again, but in the sense that it is of sin and inclines to sin. But if anyone is of the contrary opinion, let him be anathema.<sup>8</sup>

### Conditions for Adults for the Fruitfulness of Baptism

In addition to the intention to receive the sacrament, fruitful reception of Baptism by adults must include two other conditions. They must make an act of faith, and an act of contrition for past sins that includes the firm purpose of amendment to avoid grave sin in the future. On Pentecost, Peter exhorted his listeners to "repent and be

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in which he was created. . . . Now, it has been previously shown [bk 2, ch. 1.8], that original sin is the depravity and corruption of our nature, which first makes us liable to the wrath of God, and then produces in us works which Scripture terms the works of the flesh. The two things, therefore, must be distinctly observed—i.e., that we are vitiated and perverted in all parts of our nature, and then, on account of this corruption, are justly held to be condemned and convicted before God, to whom nothing is acceptable but purity, innocence, and righteousness. And hence, even infants bring their condemnation with them from their mother's womb; for although they have not yet brought forth the fruits of their unrighteousness, they have its seed included in them. No, their whole nature is, as it were, a seed of sin, and therefore cannot but be odious and abominable to God. Believers become assured by baptism, that this condemnation is entirely withdrawn from them, since (as has been said) the Lord by this sign promises that a full and entire remission has been made." It should be noticed that Calvin misrepresents the Catholic position by saying that it holds that "we are restored to the same righteousness and purity of nature which Adam would have had if he had maintained the integrity in which he was created." We are restored to the same righteousness with regard to the supernatural gifts, but not with regard to the preternatural gifts.

6 St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 69, a. 3.

7 Ibid.

8 Council of Trent, Decree on Original Sin, section 5, Denzinger 792.

baptized” (Acts 2:38). The act of faith and of contrition are included in the rite of Baptism. Faith is expressed in the profession of the Creed, and contrition and a resolution to avoid sin is expressed in the renunciation of sin and the snares of the devil.

The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* speaks very strongly on the need for repentance:

Another requisite is repentance for past sins, together with a firm purpose of amendment for the future. If anyone deliberately indulging some sinful habit should dare to approach the baptismal font, he should definitely be refused; for what can more obstruct the grace of Baptism than an obdurate impenitence? Baptism should be sought in order to put on Christ and to be united to him (see Gal 3:27). It is therefore obvious that he who intends to remain in sin should be denied access to it. If we recall that nothing pertaining to Christ and his Church is meant to be in vain, then that Baptism which can produce no sanctifying grace, because the recipient chooses to live in sin, is indeed in vain and must not be allowed to take place.<sup>9</sup>

If an adult receives Baptism in a state of mortal sin, without contrition or a firm resolution to avoid such sin in the future, then the grace of Baptism will be blocked. No one can be washed from the guilt of sin unless they interiorly renounce the sin itself. Otherwise there will be a contradiction between the sacramental sign and the reality of the heart. In such a case, character will be imprinted and the sacrament will be valid, however, as long as the person intends to receive the sacrament. The same applies to a case in which Baptism is received without faith (but with the intention to receive the sacrament). It will be valid but unfruitful.

What should be done in such cases? Baptism cannot be repeated, nor is there any need for that. Baptismal character opens up the door to the sacrament of Penance. If such a person comes to faith and repents and receives the sacrament of Penance, then the grace of Baptism will be received at that time.

St. Thomas presents the relation between the imprinting of character and the infusion of sanctifying grace as that of cause and effect. Baptismal character causes the infusion of sanctifying grace and sacramental graces, as long as there is no obstacle of attachment to mortal sin blocking that infusion. Baptismal character gives a title, so to speak, to sanctifying grace.<sup>10</sup>

Since Baptism is efficacious *ex opere operato*, its effect does not depend on the holiness of the minister, for he is just an instrument for Christ, who is the principal agent. However, the degree of the effect does depend on the disposition of the recipient. St. Thomas compares the

disposition of the recipient to the degree of proximity to a fire. The fire is equally hot in itself, but different things will receive its heat in different degrees according to how close they are to it.<sup>11</sup> The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* makes the same point: “These effects of Baptism, as far as the efficacy itself of the sacrament is concerned, are common to all who are baptized. But if we regard the dispositions with which this sacrament is received, it is no less certain that the actual measure of these effects is by no means equal in all of us.”<sup>12</sup> Those who receive Baptism with greater contrition and fervor will receive more grace.

For all those below the age of reason who receive Baptism, on the other hand, the effect of grace is equally given, because children cannot block its effect, not yet being capable of mortal sin or resisting grace. Babies receive sanctifying grace at Baptism, together with all the habitual supernatural gifts that accompany sanctifying grace, such as faith, hope, and charity. They cannot do the acts of the supernatural virtues until they reach the age of reason, but they already have virtues in habitual form as potencies, in readiness for the time when they can be used and become the source of meritorious acts.

### Baptism of Infants

It is necessary to baptize infants for two fundamental reasons. First of all, Baptism is the ordinary way established by Christ for the forgiveness of original sin, which is necessary for salvation. Adults can be saved by baptism of desire, and so Baptism can be deferred for the sake of fuller instruction and a more solemn ceremony, but infants are not capable of Baptism of desire, for that would require the use of reason. Secondly, infants should be baptized so they can be incorporated into the supernatural life of the Church and grow up in a state of grace and with the aid of the sacramental graces of Baptism.

The Creed of the People of God, promulgated by Paul VI in 1968, states: “Baptism should be conferred even on infants who are yet unable to commit any sin personally, in order that, having been born without supernatural grace, they may be born again of water and the Holy Spirit to divine life in Christ Jesus.” The *Code of Canon Law*, canon 867, obliges Catholic parents to baptize their infants in their first weeks: “Parents are obliged to take care that infants are baptized in the first few weeks; as soon as possible after the birth or even before it, they are to go to the

<sup>11</sup> St. Thomas, *ST* III, q. 69, a. 8: “Since all children are equally disposed to Baptism, because they are baptized not in their own faith, but in that of the Church, they all receive an equal effect in Baptism. Whereas adults, who approach Baptism in their own faith, are not equally disposed to Baptism; for some approach thereto with greater, some with less, devotion. And therefore some receive a greater, some a smaller share of the grace of newness; just as from the same fire, he receives more heat who approaches nearest to it, although the fire, as far as it is concerned, sends forth its heat equally to all.”

<sup>12</sup> *The Roman Catechism*, part 2, ch. 1, §58, p. 191.

<sup>9</sup> *The Roman Catechism*, pp. 182–83.

<sup>10</sup> St. Thomas, *ST* III, q. 69, a. 10.

pastor to request the sacrament for their child and to be prepared properly for it. An infant in danger of death is to be baptized without delay.”

Today the objection is sometimes made that Baptism ought to be deferred so that the child can decide for himself whether he wishes to be baptized or not. This objection is based on a false understanding of human freedom that equates liberty with complete autonomy. Baptism immensely increases human freedom because it liberates the recipient from the tragedy of original sin, bringing him into the glorious freedom of the sons of God. The instruction *Pastoralis actio* 21–22 addresses this objection, and responds:

Some people also object that baptizing infants is a restriction of their freedom. They say that it is contrary to the dignity of the children as persons to impose on them future religious obligations that they may perhaps later be led to reject. In this view it would be better to confer the sacrament only at an age when free commitment has become possible; until then parents and teachers should restrain themselves and avoid exercising any pressure.

Such an attitude is simply an illusion: there is no such thing as pure human freedom, immune from being influenced in any way. Even on the natural level, parents make choices for their child that are essential for its life and for its orientation towards true values. A so-called neutral attitude on the part of the family with regard to the child’s religious life would in fact be a negative choice that would deprive the child of an essential good.

Above all, those who claim that the sacrament of Baptism compromises a child’s freedom forget that every individual, baptized or not, is, as a creature, bound by indefeasible duties to God, duties which Baptism ratifies and ennobles through the adoption as a child of God. They also forget that the New Testament presents entry into the Christian life not as a form of slavery or constraint but as admittance to true freedom.

### **Baptism Remits All Temporal Punishment for Personal Sins**

In addition to remitting the eternal punishment for original sin and personal mortal sin, Baptism also remits all temporal punishment for personal sin committed prior to Baptism. St. Thomas explains:

The Passion of Christ is communicated to every baptized person, so that he is healed just as if he himself had suffered and died. Now Christ’s Passion . . . is a sufficient satisfaction for all the sins of all men. Consequently he who is baptized, is freed from the debt of all punishment due to him for his sins, just as if he himself had offered sufficient satisfaction for all his sins.<sup>13</sup>

This privilege is unique to the sacrament of Baptism and the baptism of blood. The sacrament of Penance does not have this privilege, nor does baptism of desire, which we will speak about below. Baptism of blood, on the other hand, grants the same grace and full remission of temporal punishment as the sacrament of Baptism, but character is not imprinted.<sup>14</sup>

### **Trinitarian Dimension of Baptism: Entrance into the Trinitarian Communion**

By infusing sanctifying grace, Baptism brings the recipient into an intimate relationship with each of the divine Persons. The baptized person is made a son of the Father, a member of the Son of God, and a temple of the Holy Spirit, whose Indwelling is received. That Baptism works an entrance into the Trinitarian communion is prefigured in the Trinitarian theophany that accompanied Christ’s Baptism in the Jordan. The Father Himself declared Jesus to be His Son in whom He is well pleased, the Holy Spirit was manifested in the form of a dove, and the heavens were opened. At every Christian Baptism, the recipient is adopted in Christ as a son of the Father in whom the Father is well pleased, and he then receives the Holy Spirit and His gifts. As a result of this entrance into the Trinitarian life, the heavens are opened and the neophyte becomes an heir of heaven. We can see how it is thus extremely fitting that entrance into the Trinitarian communion be initiated in the name of the blessed Trinity in the essential form of Baptism.

### ***Necessity of Baptism; Baptism of Desire and Baptism of Blood***

The necessity of Baptism for salvation was solemnly proclaimed by Jesus in His nocturnal dialogue with Nicodemus:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, 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.”

Baptism is necessary because it is the ordinary means instituted by Christ for His disciples to receive the life of the Spirit, which is supernatural grace. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1257 explains: “The Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation. He also commands his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to all nations and to

13 St. Thomas, *ST* III, q. 69, a. 2.

14 St. Thomas, *ST* III, q. 68, a. 2, ad 2.

baptize them. Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament.”

The necessity of receiving Baptism is incumbent on all those “to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament.” This text has been carefully worded to allow for invincible ignorance and for the fact that no one is bound to what is impossible.

### **Necessity of Precept and Necessity of Means**

With regard to the necessity of Baptism for salvation, it is useful to distinguish two ways in which something can be said to be necessary. Something may be necessary by a necessity of precept, because it has been made obligatory by a positive law commanded and promulgated by a legitimate authority. A law of this kind is binding only after its promulgation and only on those who ought to know about it. An example of this kind of necessity would have been the ceremonial precepts of the Mosaic Law, such as circumcision, the feasts of Israel, the dietary laws, and laws of ritual purification. These laws were obligatory only on the children of Israel, and only after they were promulgated on Mt. Sinai, and only until the promulgation of the Gospel. In a similar way, the sacrament of Baptism is necessary after its promulgation by the Apostles and their successors. This necessity of precept is binding on those who ought to know about it.

Another and stronger kind of necessity is referred to by philosophers as necessity of means. The indispensable means to an end are clearly necessary to the attainment of the end. If the only way to get to the moon is in a rocket ship, then the rocket ship is necessary for getting to the moon by a necessity of means. In order to live, I must first be conceived, by a necessity of means. Necessity of means differs from necessity of precept because the former is completely indispensable, while the latter admits dispensation and exceptions, and is only binding on those who ought to know about it.

Is there anything necessary for salvation by an indispensable necessity of means? Yes, sanctifying grace and the theological virtues are necessary for salvation in this way. Sanctifying grace is the seed of glory. No one can be born to heavenly glory who does not die with the seed of glory, which is grace. This necessity for the seed of glory is similar to the physical necessity according to which no oak tree can grow without first having been an acorn.

Another thing necessary for salvation by a necessity of means is the forgiveness of original sin and personal mortal sin. As seen above, this is the other side of the coin of the necessity of sanctifying grace, for the forgiveness of original and mortal sin implies the infusion of sanctifying grace. Since the forgiveness of sins was merited by Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary, the accomplishment of that sacrifice

and the application of its merit to us are also necessary for salvation by a necessity of means.

Furthermore, for those with use of reason, certain acts are also necessary by a necessity of means, and these are prayer, faith, hope, and charity. Prayer is necessary because it is the means by which we order ourselves to God and ask for the graces we need. And if a person is aware that he has committed a mortal sin, then an act of contrition is also necessary for salvation by an indispensable necessity of means.

In summary, sanctifying grace, the theological virtues, and the forgiveness of original sin—merited by Christ’s Passion—have always been necessary for salvation by an indispensable necessity of means.

Is actual reception of the sacrament of Baptism intrinsically necessary in the same way as sanctifying grace and the theological virtues? No, for if it were, it would have been necessary from the beginning of the human race, as grace has always been necessary. Christ instituted the sacraments—and Baptism in particular—to be the *ordinary channels in the New Covenant by which we obtain sanctifying grace*. We could say that the sacrament of Baptism is the ordinary (but not intrinsically indispensable) means to receive the indispensable means. Or to put it another way, *the effect of Baptism is indispensable for salvation, but not the sacrament itself*.

As the ordinary channels of His grace, the sacraments are binding on us by a grave necessity of precept. God’s power to infuse grace, however, is not limited to these ordinary channels. In other words, the grace given by Baptism is absolutely necessary for salvation, but that same grace could be received in an extraordinary way outside of the sacrament. Thus grace was received extra-sacramentally in three ways in Scripture. First, the good thief on the cross through his contrition and faith, the centurion Cornelius through his faith and charity, and the saints of the Old Testament received what is called the baptism of desire, which can be either explicit or implicit, as will be explained below. Second, John the Baptist in the womb at the Visitation, and Mary at her conception, received an extraordinary Baptism directly from God. Third, the Holy Infants, the seven Maccabee brothers and their mother, and all the prophets who were murdered in fulfilling their mission, received what is called a baptism of blood.

### **Explicit Baptism of Desire and Baptism of Blood**

Baptism of desire is simply a desire, spurred by a movement of actual grace, for the sacrament of Baptism as offered by the Catholic Church. The baptism of blood is martyrdom, which means suffering death for the sake of Christ. Let us look at some of the sources for this doctrine.

The practice of the early Church in baptizing children shortly after birth, but delaying the baptism of adults until

the Easter vigil, and only after the completion of a lengthy catechumenate, shows that adults were not considered to require Baptism with the same urgency as infants. This implies recognition that the grace of Baptism could have been supplied in case of sudden death by the very desire of the catechumen for Baptism.<sup>15</sup>

St. Ambrose asserts the existence both of baptism of blood and baptism of desire in his *Funeral Oration for the Emperor Valentinian II*, who died as a catechumen (possibly by murder) in the year 392 after he had asked St. Ambrose to come to Gaul to baptize him. In his funeral oration, St. Ambrose holds that the Emperor received the grace of Baptism through his desire for the sacrament. He writes:

He frequently addressed me when I was far from him, and let it be known that he wished to be initiated into the sacred mysteries, preferably by me. . . . I was already crossing the ridges of the Alps when, lo and behold, there came news, bitter for myself and everybody, of the death of so great an emperor. . . . I have lost him whose father in the Gospel I was about to become. But he did not lose the grace which he had demanded.<sup>16</sup> . . . His state is now such that you have no need to fear for him.<sup>17</sup> . . . Grant therefore, O holy Father, to your servant the gift that Moses received because he saw in spirit.<sup>18</sup> . . . But if it really is a cause for worry that the mysteries have not been celebrated, it follows that not even martyrs receive crowns, if they are catechumens; for (on that assumption) they cannot be crowned unless they have been initiated. But if the martyrs have in fact been baptized in their own blood, then Valentinian's piety and intention have in effect baptized him too.<sup>19</sup>

St. Ambrose uses the doctrine of baptism of blood as a well-established doctrine, and argues from that to the baptism of desire.

St. Augustine speaks about baptism of desire in his treatise *On Baptism against the Donatists*. Reflecting on the salvation of the good thief, he writes:

That the place of baptism is sometimes supplied by martyrdom is supported by an argument by no means trivial, which the blessed Cyprian adduces from the thief, to whom, though he was not baptized, it was yet said, "Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise." On considering which, again and again, I find that not only martyrdom for the sake of Christ may supply what was wanting of baptism, but also faith and conversion of heart, if recourse may not be had to the celebration of

the mystery of baptism for want of time. For neither was that thief crucified for the name of Christ, but as the reward of his own deeds; nor did he suffer because he believed, but he believed while suffering. It was shown, therefore, in the case of that thief, how great is the power, even without the visible sacrament of baptism, of what the apostle says, "With the heart man believeth unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." But the want is supplied invisibly only when the administration of baptism is prevented, not by contempt for religion, but by the necessity of the moment.<sup>20</sup>

The Council of Trent speaks of Baptism of desire in the Decree on Justification, chapter 4. After the promulgation of the Gospel, one cannot become a son of God except through Baptism "or a desire for it."

The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* teaches baptism of desire when speaking about preparation of adults for Baptism. Unlike infants, adults are not to be baptized immediately (except in danger of death), but only after a fitting preparation. The *Catechism* explains: "This delay does not carry with it the same danger that we saw in the case of infants, for if any unforeseen accident should deprive adults of Baptism, their intention to receive it and their repentance for past sins will compensate for it."<sup>21</sup>

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church 1257–1261* treats the issue of Baptism of desire and blood. The Baptism of blood is defined in CCC 1258: "The Church has always held the firm conviction that those who suffer death for the sake of the faith without having received Baptism are baptized by their death for and with Christ. This Baptism of blood, like the desire for Baptism, brings about the fruits of Baptism without being a sacrament."

The *Code of Canon Law* mentions the necessity of Baptism and baptism of desire in canon 849, which defines the sacrament: "Baptism, the gateway to the sacraments and necessary for salvation by actual reception or at least by desire, is validly conferred only by a washing of true water with the proper form of words."

The sacrament of Baptism adds to desire for Baptism in two ways. First, the sacrament adds baptismal character which makes one a visible member of the Church. Second, the sacrament of Baptism removes all debt of temporal punishment for sin. Furthermore, a desire to receive the sacrament of Baptism when possible (at least with an implicit desire in the case of invincible ignorance), is a necessary element of the baptism of desire.

The efficacy of the desire for Baptism has interesting counterparts in three other sacraments. St. Thomas argues

15 See St. Thomas, *ST III*, q. 68, a. 3.

16 St. Ambrose, *De obitu Valentiniani* 23, 26, 29–30, in *Ambrose of Milan: Political Letters and Speeches*, trans. J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 2005), 374–78.

17 *Ibid.*, ch. 41, p. 383.

18 *Ibid.*, ch. 52, pp. 387–88.

19 *Ibid.*, ch. 53, p. 388.

20 St. Augustine, *On Baptism, against the Donatists* 4.22, in NPNF 1, 4:460. St. Augustine gives the same teaching in *Questionum in Heptateuchum Libri Septem* 3.84 (on Lev 21:15), in PL 34:713.

21 *The Roman Catechism*, p. 181.

that desire for Confirmation can anticipate the effects of Confirmation: “Yet, just as none receive the effect of Baptism without the desire of Baptism; so none receive the effect of Confirmation, without the desire of Confirmation. And man can have this even before receiving Baptism.”<sup>22</sup> St. Thomas also speaks about spiritual communion, which involves receiving the effect of the grace of Holy Communion, even though one cannot receive sacramentally, but only in desire. Thus he says that Jesus’ words in John 6:54 on the necessity of eating His Body and drinking His Blood so as to have spiritual life, are to be understood as “spiritual eating.”<sup>23</sup> Finally, an act of perfect contrition with the desire to receive the sacrament of Penance anticipates the effect of the sacrament, imparting the forgiveness of sins.

### Implicit Baptism of Desire

The desire for Baptism can be either explicit or implicit. An explicit desire to enter the Church presupposes knowledge of revelation and faith in the Church as the ark of salvation willed by God. This is the condition of catechumens. However, there can be a true *implicit* desire to enter the Church among those who are not aware that God has instituted the Catholic Church as the ark of salvation. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1260, explains the possibility of salvation for those with an implicit desire for Baptism:

“Since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partakers, in a way known to God, of the Paschal mystery.”<sup>24</sup> Every man who is ignorant of the Gospel of Christ and of his Church, but seeks the truth and does the will of God in accordance with his understanding of it, can be saved. It may be supposed that such persons would have desired Baptism explicitly if they had known its necessity.

In other words, the Church specifies that in order to obtain eternal salvation, “it is not always required that he be incorporated into the Church actually as a member, but it is necessary that at least he be united to her by desire and longing.”<sup>25</sup>

John Paul II touches on implicit Baptism of desire, stressing God’s universal salvific will, in *Redemptoris missio* 10 (italics mine):

The universality of salvation means that it is granted not only to those who explicitly believe in Christ and have entered the Church. Since salvation is offered to all, it must be made concretely available to all. But it

is clear that today, as in the past, many people do not have an opportunity to come to know or accept the gospel revelation or to enter the Church. The social and cultural conditions in which they live do not permit this, and frequently they have been brought up in other religious traditions. For such people *salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation. This grace comes from Christ; it is the result of his Sacrifice and is communicated by the Holy Spirit. It enables each person to attain salvation through his or her free cooperation.*

For this reason the Council, after affirming the centrality of the Paschal Mystery, went on to declare that “this applies not only to Christians but to all people of good will in whose hearts grace is secretly at work. Since Christ died for everyone, and since the ultimate calling of each of us comes from God and is therefore a universal one, we are obliged to hold that the Holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in this Paschal Mystery in a manner known to God.”

In 1949, the Holy Office (predecessor of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) wrote an important letter to the Bishop of Boston on the issue of salvation outside the Church. A priest of that diocese, Fr. Leonard Feeney, held a rigorist view on salvation outside the Church. The Holy Office affirmed the possibility of salvation for those outside the Church who have invincible ignorance and a true and efficacious desire to follow God’s will for their salvation. Such a desire would implicitly include a desire to enter the Church if they knew it was the ark of salvation. The Letter defines this implicit salvific desire as follows: “However, this desire need not always be explicit, as it is in catechumens; but when a person is involved in invincible ignorance God accepts also an implicit desire, so called because it is included in that good disposition of soul whereby a person wishes his will to be conformed to the will of God.”<sup>26</sup>

However, the Letter adds: “It must not be imagined that any desire whatsoever of entering the Church is sufficient for a person to be saved. It is necessary that the desire by which one is related to the Church be informed with perfect charity. And an implicit desire cannot have its effect unless one has supernatural faith.”<sup>27</sup> The document here quotes Hebrews 11:6: “Without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”

God grants sufficient grace to all men to begin and to sustain the process of conversion and sanctification, but not all choose to cooperate with the sufficient grace they

<sup>26</sup> Holy Office, Letter of August 8, 1949.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> St. Thomas, *ST* III, q. 72, a. 6, ad 1.

<sup>23</sup> St. Thomas, *ST* III, q. 65, a. 4, ad 2. St. Thomas is drawing here on St. Augustine, *Commentary on John*, tract. 26, on John 6:54 (PL 35:1614). See also *ST* III, q. 73, a. 3 and *ST* III, q. 79, a. 1, ad 3

<sup>24</sup> *Gaudium et spes* 22.

<sup>25</sup> Holy Office, Letter to the Archbishop of Boston, August 8, 1949.

receive. It is important, however, to note the conditions that are necessary for someone to be saved outside the visible body of the Church (through implicit desire for Baptism). There must be *invincible ignorance, which excludes religious indifferentism, grave negligence and prejudice; there must be the sincere desire to do the will of God as known by conscience; there must be some supernatural acts of faith, hope, and charity; and there must be perfect contrition for grave sins.*

It must be borne in mind, however, that those who are outside the Church through invincible ignorance are lacking the fullness of the means of salvation that are present only in the Catholic Church. Pius XII addresses such persons in his encyclical on the Church, *Mystici Corporis*:

They who do not belong to the visible bond of the Catholic Church... [we ask them to] strive to take themselves from that state in which they cannot be sure of their own eternal salvation; for even though they are ordered to the mystical body of the Redeemer by a certain desire and wish of which they are not aware [implicit in the general wish to do what God wills], yet they lack so many and so great heavenly gifts and helps which can be enjoyed only in the Catholic Church.<sup>28</sup>

Generally, it is very difficult to know with moral certainty whether a person has invincible ignorance, for who can claim to have no serious culpable negligence or prejudice impeding their search for truth? The number of people who are saved in this way is “known only to God,” as stated in the Creed of the People of God, promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1968:

We believe that the Church is necessary for salvation, because Christ, who is the sole mediator and way of salvation, renders Himself present for us in His body which is the Church. But the divine design of salvation embraces all men, and those who without fault on their part do not know the Gospel of Christ and His Church, but seek God sincerely, and under the influence of grace endeavor to do His will as recognized through the promptings of their conscience, they, in a number known only to God, can obtain salvation.

Furthermore, even though invincible ignorance excuses one from culpability, it is still a tragic state of affairs, for it blocks one from achieving the full good—such as loving God and neighbor more deeply—that one could have achieved if one hadn’t been ignorant.

### **Recent Magisterial Texts Which Affirm the Possibility of Hope of a “Way of Salvation” of Infants Dying without Baptism**

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* addresses the question of the salvation of the unbaptized children who die before the age of reason. First of all, in no. 1257, it

affirms that the Church knows of no means other than Baptism to assure entrance into Heaven:

The Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation. He also commands his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to all nations and to baptize them. Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament. The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude; this is why she takes care not to neglect the mission she has received from the Lord to see that all who can be baptized are “reborn of water and the Spirit.” *God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments.*

Baptism is the ordinary means established by God for the forgiveness of original sin, to which He has “bound Himself.” Adults can attain the effect of the sacrament through an upright desire for it, but this would not (ordinarily) be available to infants.

Nevertheless, in no. 1261, the *Catechism* affirms that it is possible to hope that there is a “way of salvation” of those who die before the age of reason without Baptism:

As regards children who have died without Baptism, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus’ tenderness toward children which caused him to say: “Let the children come to me, do not hinder them,” allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism. All the more urgent is the Church’s call not to prevent little children coming to Christ through the gift of holy Baptism.

This possibility of hope is mentioned again in CCC 1283: “With respect to children who have died without Baptism, the liturgy of the Church invites us to trust in God’s mercy and to pray for their salvation.” John Paul II also alluded to this possibility of hope in the Encyclical *Evangelium vitae* 99:

I would now like to say a special word to women who have had an abortion. . . . *To the same Father and his mercy you can with sure hope entrust your child.* With the friendly and expert help and advice of other people, and as a result of your own painful experience, you can be among the most eloquent defenders of everyone’s right to life.

<sup>28</sup> See also Pius IX, *Singulari quadam*, 1854, Denzinger 1647.