

The Baptism of the Lord
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Fr. Tom Elliott

The Sacrament of Baptism

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7
Psalm 29
Acts 10:34-38
Matthew 3:13-17

My academic advisor in college signed me up for a class called, “Metaphysics.” I mistakenly assumed that, because the word “physics” was in its name, “Metaphysics” must be a science class. For the first three weeks of the class, I was completely confused and dumbfounded! The professor kept carrying on about *unseen things* and we had yet to go to the science lab to do any work! Shortly after I had accepted the fact that my professor had lost his mind, a classmate explained to me that the class had nothing to do with *science*, but it was a *philosophy* class and that the professor was, in fact, sane.

Metaphysics literally means “beyond the physical works.” It is a term that can be applied to anything that is beyond our sensory knowledge, including spiritual things like the Sacraments. In fact, a Sacrament is metaphysical by its very definition; it is a *visible sign of an invisible reality*. A Sacrament, then, has a physical, as well as a metaphysical, component.

Today, we celebrate the baptism of Christ. His baptism was important, not so much for Him, but for all of us. We believe that Christ did not need baptism, but rather, His Baptism sanctified and prepared all future Baptisms. While Christ did not need the spiritual, metaphysical effects of Baptism, all of us do. Through Christ’s Baptism, the effects and meaning of Baptism were transformed from the prior practice in Judaism.¹

There were forms of baptism in Judaism and among the pagan religions. In Judaism, circumcision was the main practice by which people became “chosen,” and received the promises of being God’s people. In addition to this practice, however, the Jews had many ritual purifications involving water. These were sacramental from the standpoint that the Jews would physically wash those who were unclean while believing that there was a metaphysical cleaning that was taking place in their relationship with God and the community. The baptisms that John performed in the Jordan River are great examples of this ritual. His baptisms used something tangible—water—yet did something invisible, or metaphysical—forgive sins.

In the New Testament texts, we see very clearly that Christ instituted a new form of baptism. His baptism was not merely a forgiveness of sins, but it was and is the fountainhead for salvation. Jesus told Nicodemus that, “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit” (John 3:5). Also, Jesus made Baptism a part of the Christian mission to bring the Good News of the Gospel to the world, saying, “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” (Matthew 28:19).

¹ For more detailed information about the Sacrament of Baptism, visit:
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02258b.htm>

Because of these teachings, as well as those in the New Testament letters, the Church has consistently taught that baptism is necessary for salvation. This usually leads people to ask the questions, “Does that mean that non-baptized people go to hell?” and “Where does an unbaptized baby go after death?” These questions are important and theologians have spent a lot of time working out answers that are consistent with Sacred Scripture. Their answers though are often very complicated and difficult to understand. A simple way to answer these questions is to say—God has given us a roadmap for salvation in Sacred Scripture and it includes baptism. However, God is not bound by or obligated to follow Sacred Scripture. The truth of the Bible is meant to be a source of direction and peace for all of us in our relationship with God and is not intended to limit God’s mercy and salvation.

Now, some people will undoubtedly say, “But that’s not fair!” indicating that God should be limited by what’s contained in Scripture. To such a statement I quote Matthew 20:15, when Jesus asked, “Are you envious because I am generous?” God’s generous love and mercy cannot be bound by *anything*, including our understanding of Sacred Scripture! Scripture was given to us so that *we could be free*, not for *God to be limited*. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains this idea very specifically regarding the death of a baby before it is baptized—

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.

--Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992, ¶1261

If God’s mercy can reach out to people who haven’t even been baptized yet, why does the Church advocate and encourage baptism? Those who receive the Sacrament of baptism are eternally marked for God with a mark that cannot be erased. All of their sins are forgiven. They are given the new Spirit of Jesus Christ, along with His grace. And, they are admitted into the Body of Christ, the family of faith. These are the effects of baptism and the reason why the Church holds baptism in such high regard.

As we celebrate the baptism of Jesus today, we celebrate what it has done for us in opening for us the door of salvation and grace. May God help us every day to faithfully live our baptismal vows!

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

- ✚ Spend some time reflecting on the following questions and sharing your answers with God. What day were you baptized on? Do you celebrate the anniversary of your baptism each year? Do you still have contact with your godparents? How has their participation in your life and/or their example helped you to live your baptismal vows? What does your baptism mean to you personally? Have you ever thanked God for the gift of your baptism?