

Set free from sin: Baptism and reconciliation

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Ask a typical Catholic, “What does baptism do?” and you’ll probably get this answer: “It washes away original sin.” The answer is correct, but it is only part of the answer, and arguably not the most important part.

When the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) introduces its section on baptism, it first states that baptism is “the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit. . . and the door which gives access to the other sacraments.”¹ Then it says, we are freed from sin through baptism and reborn as God’s children. The same paragraph goes on, “[W]e become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission.”²

The framework for baptism is the whole Christian life. It leads us to life in the Spirit and to the other sacraments. It also forgives sins, but this purpose should accent the bigger picture. Baptism is not just about forgiving what went wrong. It is about setting a person on the proper footing for life.

So, if the forgiveness of sins is secondary, why do so many people say that’s what baptism does? The Catechism of the Council of Trent listed forgiveness first among the effects of baptism.³ Today’s catechism still lists it as the first effect in the section entitled “The Grace of Baptism.”⁴ Generations of young Catholics learned about baptism from these catechisms. Still, the liturgy of baptism emphasizes more: baptism incorporates a person into Christ and his body the Church.

Having said all that, one should not throw out the baby (so to speak) with the bath water. Baptism does indeed forgive sins. Today’s initiation catechists like to stress other purposes of baptism based on other elements of the ritual (notably the anointing with chrism, which expresses a sharing in the priestly, prophetic and royal ministry of Jesus). Still, they would never want to lose this awesome teaching: Baptism forgives sins.

¹ CCC 1213.

² Ibid.

³ *Catechism of the Council of Trent for Parish Priests*, trans. John A. McHugh and Charles Callan, (New York: Joseph F. Wagner, Inc., 1934), p. 183.

⁴ CCC 1262-1263.

The rites of baptism

This carries immense practical and spiritual benefit in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). Adults who approach the waters of baptisms will have all their sins forgiven. All of them. This is no small matter. A typical adult has amassed enough sins to displace the water of Lake Ontario. Yet the bit of water in which adults are immersed, or which is poured over their head, frees them from all sin. This is fantastic. An unbaptized person should need no more encouragement than this to run headlong into the arms of Christian catechesis. God will wipe away the guilt of the past. It really is that simple.

The scrutiny rites prepare for this mystery of forgiveness. They are intended to complete the conversion of those chosen for baptism.⁵ For example, in the first scrutiny we pray for the elect with intentions such as these: “Free them from the spirit of deceit,”⁶ and “Free them from the slavery of sin.”⁷ These prayers are accompanied by the laying on of hands, an action traditionally associated with calling upon the Holy Spirit. To be precise the scrutinies do *not* pray for forgiveness; they pray that those not yet baptized may be free from “the cunning of Satan.”⁸ It is not the role of the scrutinies to free them from sin; that is what baptism does. But the scrutinies will pry Satan’s fingers off the waist of those chosen for Christ, so that their minds and actions will be purified. In this way, after they are forgiven in baptism, they will have additional strength to fight temptation because of the scrutinies.

Infants, however, are another story. They are not guilty of personal sin. But the baptism they receive is the same as the baptism that adults receive, one of whose properties is the forgiveness of sins. For centuries, Catholics have explained that in the case of infants, they are freed from original sin, not personal sin. Original sin is the condition into which every human being is born (except, Mary the mother of Jesus, whose Immaculate Conception preserved her from sin from the moment she was conceived.) Every human being is deprived of original holiness and justice. Original sin is “contracted”, not “committed.”⁹ Baptism sets us free from this sin, as is made clear in the case of infants. As they mature, they still deal with an inclination to evil.¹⁰ All of us still succumb to sin, but for one brief shining moment, we are free, pure, and holy – the way we shall be when we enter God’s eternal presence at the end of time.

⁵ RCIA 141.

⁶ RCIA 154A

⁷ RCIA 154 B.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ CCC 404.

¹⁰ CCC 405.

The words “original sin” show up in the Rite of Baptism for Children (RBC) in the prayer that concludes the intercessions. “We pray for these children: set them free from original sin, make them temples of your glory, and send your Holy Spirit to dwell within them.”¹¹ That prayer is sealed by anointing the child with the oil of catechumens or through the laying on of hands.¹² These signs – the prayers and the imposition of hands – show that the baptismal rites accomplish the forgiveness of sins. But there’s more.

Grace through sacramental signs

One of the memorable lines among all the texts we use at baptism opens the first option for the blessing of water: “Father, you give us grace through sacramental signs, which tell us of the wonders of your unseen power.”¹³ We have all experienced God’s power. We have seen it in action in our lives. But God’s power is so wondrous that much of it is *unseen*. Sometimes we never have the grace to see it; other times we see only its effects. That can happen when this power is made manifest to us under sacramental signs, which give us grace.

The opening line sets the stage for a prayer of blessing that recalls many examples of God’s power at work: in the waters of creation, in the rescue of Noah from the flood, in the miraculous exodus through the Red Sea, at the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, in the blood and water flowing from the side of Christ as he hung upon the cross, and in the great commission Jesus gave his followers: Baptize all nations. The prayer of blessing lists all these examples of ways that God has unleashed mighty power on the world.

We remember these specific examples in this prayer because of their unifying theme: water. Apparently God likes to use water for working miracles. Still, the point of the prayer is not just to recite from a biblical concordance the uses of the word “water”. The point is to show that God exercises mighty power – and now we are asking God to exercise that power again. Through water. This baptism today is going to be the latest in the string of events showing God’s unseen power through water. It will give us grace through sacramental signs.

The priest or deacon concludes the prayer by touching the water with his hand. (At the Easter Vigil, he lowers the candle into the water instead.) Both gestures show to the eyes what our prayer reveals to the ears: our request that the Holy Spirit will infuse this water with mighty power.

¹¹ RBC 49. The alternative prayer also uses the expression.

¹² RBC 50-51.

¹³ RBC 54A.

God accomplishes many things through each baptism, and one of them is forgiveness of sins. Think about that. One of the effects toward which these signs point is the forgiveness of sins. Talk about mighty power. And as if that is not enough, God continues to make forgiveness available to us after baptism.

Reconciliation

The imposition of hands – one of the sacramental signs of God’s mighty power – appears also in the reconciliation of penitents. The priest extends his hands (or at least his right hand) over the penitent’s head while he says the words of absolution.¹⁴ This gesture evokes the coming of the Holy Spirit, our source of unity.

The sacrament of baptism is laden with symbols and paraphernalia: water, oils, garment, candle, hands, breast, ears, and eyes – to name a few. But the sacrament of reconciliation is considerably more low-tech. It takes two people: a penitent and a confessor. It requires an exchange of words and the lifting of hands. That’s it. Yet it accomplishes something wonderful. Through this sacrament, God forgives our sins.

People will say, “I don’t need a priest. I can go straight to God to have my sins forgiven.” Fine. Go. You should. Often. But in the Catholic Church we have lifted the liturgy of reconciliation to a status equal to that of the liturgy of baptism and the liturgy of the eucharist. Can you go straight to God to be a child of God? Yes. Can you go straight to God if you want communion with God? Yes. But we have sacraments that lift these events to another level. Reconciliation does the same. The signs are astonishingly ordinary: a conversation between priest and penitent. At its best, though, this conversation is heartfelt and dramatic. By extending his hands and pronouncing the words of absolution, the priest introduces into the event the sacramental signs of God’s grace.

It would be nice if we didn’t need confession. It would be nice if after our baptism we lived a perfect life, keeping that grace-filled glow in a polished shine. But we don’t. God understands this. After all, God made us. Our Maker therefore makes available to us this other means by which we may enjoy forgiveness and a grace-filled life.

How different are the emotions surrounding these two sacraments. Catechumens typically approach baptism with hungry anticipation. Penitents typically approach confession with fearful anxiety. Yet both sacraments accomplish the same goal, the forgiveness of sins. How wonderful it would be if

¹⁴ RP 46.

we each approached the confessional with the enthusiasm of catechumens striving toward the font.

Newly baptized adults are free from sin, but as new Catholics they also need to be introduced to the sacrament of reconciliation. One shouldn't be too quick to invite them from the font to the confessional, but at some point they should explicitly be made welcome to celebrate this sacrament of forgiveness for the times they fail after they are baptized.

Baptism washes away original sin. Indeed, it forgives all sin. Confession forgives subsequent sin. These sacramental signs show the mighty power of a merciful God who understands the condition of humans and offers them – again and again – the forgiveness they need on their journey to eternal life.

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