

Walking into a Catholic Church today you may see a baptismal font much larger than the one in which you were baptized. It may have a raised bowl large enough for the immersion of an infant. It may occupy an area on the floor wide, long and deep enough for adults to enter for their baptism. For Catholics used to a long tradition of baptism by pouring a short stream of water across the head and into a shallow bowl, the switch is surprising.

For some Catholics, it may even be troubling. They associate baptism by immersion with some other Christian denominations. They are proud of their Catholicity, and they don't want to compromise their faith. They don't want to adopt beliefs and practices contrary to the tradition in which they were formed.

Actually, immersion is a very Catholic way of baptizing, even though it has not been broadly practiced in the Roman Rite. Eastern Catholic Churches have been baptizing by immersion for centuries. It is one of two methods for baptizing that have long been permitted for use even within the Roman Catholic Church.

The increasing popularity for baptizing by immersion is probably related to a liturgical principal favored by the Second Vatican Council: the expressive use of signs. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal says that good signs "will more effectively foster active and full participation and more properly respond to the spiritual needs of the faithful" (20). This is why we promote such ideas as wearing noble vestments, reading from a beautiful Book of the Gospels, and receiving communion under both kinds. All these signs, when used richly, respond to the spiritual needs of the community.

The same is true of robust singing, a sincere exchange of peace, a well-placed crucifix – and the method of baptism. Immersion is a very expressive sign and it can uplift our faith in the meaning of this sacrament.

So what is that meaning? Many Catholics learned that the main reason for baptism was to take away original sin. Baptism does that, but its meaning is much larger. A definition of baptism published in the afterglow of the Second Vatican Council stressed other aspects of this sacrament. According to "Christian Initiation: General Introduction," which opens the official ritual books for Catholic baptisms, "Baptism incorporates us into Christ and forms us into God's people." That's a very different starting point from original sin. After that it says, "This first sacrament pardons all our sins, rescues us from the power of darkness, and brings us to the dignity of adopted children, a new creation through water and the Holy Spirit. Hence we are called and are indeed the children of God" (2).

Catholics had to learn about baptism's effect on original sin because almost everyone being baptized was an infant. Infants do not commit personal sin. Baptism takes away all sin, but for infants the only sin to confront was the one called original.

However, many adults get baptized, particularly in countries where Christians are few. In the decades before Vatican II, missionaries requested a more developed process for baptizing adults – one that would include extensive catechesis marked by stages of initiation. The Church recognized the value of this development, so the Council called for the restoration of the catechumenate. In the first few centuries of Christianity, the catechumenate prepared people for initiation in the Church, but it had fallen into disuse in Christianized countries where most of the candidates for baptism were infants. Infants did not require extensive formation, and their parents were anxious for them to be baptized.

By restoring the catechumenate, the Council fathers needed a definition of baptism that would cover all the ages at which a person might be presented. So, yes, baptism cleanses infants from original sin, but more broadly it incorporates us into Christ and forms us into God's people. It represents a complete change of status. It can be effectively symbolized by a total immersion in water and a complete change of clothes.

For this reason, the Catholic Church not only permits baptism by immersion, it encourages the practice. The same General Introduction says, "As the rite for baptizing, either immersion, which is more suitable as a symbol of participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, or pouring may lawfully be used" (22). The Catechism of the Catholic Church says, "Baptism is performed in the most expressive way by triple immersion in the baptismal water" (1239). The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults says, "Either immersion or the pouring of water should be chosen for the rite, whichever will serve in individual cases and in the various traditions and circumstances to ensure the clear understanding that this washing is not a mere purification rite but the sacrament of being joined to Christ" (213). In the United States, the National Statutes on the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults say, "Baptism by immersion is the fuller and more expressive sign of the sacrament and, therefore, is preferred" (17). Our national statement of church architecture, *Built of Living Stones*, says, "*The font should be large enough to supply ample water for the baptism of both adults and infants. Since baptism in Catholic churches may take place by immersion in the water, or by infusion (pouring), fonts that permit all forms of baptismal practice are encouraged*" (69/2). At first glance, the Code of Canon Law seems to offer no preference: "Baptism is to be conferred either by immersion or by pouring" (854), but when the Code offers two options, the preferred one is generally listed first.

Where does all this interest come from? Probably from a long tradition of baptizing by immersion, dating all the way back to the time of Christ. It is generally thought that John the Baptist took people to the River Jordan so that he could get them very, very wet. Many religious works of art show John pouring water over the head of Jesus, but they are showing the method of baptism with which the artist was familiar, not necessarily the one that John used.

A most influential biblical text comes from Paul's Letter to the Romans, which serves as the epistle for the Easter Vigil each year: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4). There is a very similar passage in Colossians 2:12: "When you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead."

Other biblical passages suggest that a great deal of water was used in baptism. Jesus tells Nicodemus, "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (John 3:5). 1 Peter 3:21 compares baptism with Noah's flood. In Galatians 3:27, Paul says that those who are baptized have clothed themselves in Christ – implying that a complete change of dress accompanied their entrance into the Christian way of life.

Practically speaking, how does baptism by immersion happen? It depends on a number of factors – the age of the one being baptized, the size of the font, and the depth of the water. A variety of practices has evolved.

For adult baptisms, the water in Catholic baptismal pools is usually a foot or two deep. If the pool is small, the person to be baptized enters alone, wearing a neutral, loose-fitting garment over any clothes he or she does not mind getting wet. The priest chooses one of two options. In the first, after the person kneels down in the water, the priest presses the head underwater three times while reciting the formula. Or, as the person remains standing, the priest scoops up a generous amount of water in a vessel the size of a pitcher, and pours it over the person's head three times while reciting the formula.

If the pool is large enough for two people, the priest may enter the water as well. In this case, he wears an alb over clothing he does not mind getting wet, removes his shoes and socks, and enters the pool. The same methods of baptism apply. It can be argued that the second method described above, pouring water over the head, is still baptism by pouring, rather than baptism by immersion. Immersion is more logically bringing the person into the water, whereas pouring is bringing water over the person.

There is another method, more generally practiced among evangelical churches, in which the minister and the one to be baptized both stand in the water, and the minister takes the person backward into the font three times while reciting the formula. This creates a sense of abandonment that heightens the experience of commitment and coming to new life. However, most Catholic pools are too shallow for a priest to execute baptisms this way. If baptizing a child, he may be able to do it. The rubrics say that one or both godparents should touch the person being baptized, which is often difficult to do. But if the pool is large

enough, a godparent could enter the water and assist the priest as he lowers the person backwards into the font three times, as long as the priest alone recites the baptismal formula.

For the baptism of infants, the font should be sufficiently deep – and the infant sufficiently small! Some priests and deacons place one hand under the child’s bottom and the other under the child’s head, and lower the infant three times while reciting the formula. It is not essential that the head touch the water, but it is a good idea. It is probably not a good idea to completely submerge the child’s face. Another technique is for the priest or deacon to grasp the far arm and leg of the child as the child rests in his arms. Then he scoops the child through the water, top of the head first, three times, while reciting the formula. It would be prudent for the minister to discuss the method of baptism with the parents beforehand.

Baptism by immersion is being practiced in many countries around the world, though it does not seem to be attractive to any one cultural group. In some third-world countries, immersion is discouraged for sanitary purposes: baptizing one infant after another in the same water can pose a health risk.

Popes have baptized at the Vatican and while on pilgrimage around the world, and they do it by pouring, rather than by immersion, probably for reasons of practicality. But if the pope ever starts baptizing the way the liturgical documents prefer, the interest for baptism by immersion in Catholic circles would increase sharply.

If you see one of those new, generous baptismal fonts and wonder what is going on, rest assured. What is going on is a stronger commitment to the meaning of baptism. If you have never witnessed baptism by immersion, you might be surprised at how breathtakingly beautiful it is. If your parish does not offer the option, you might ask why. And be sure to attend the Easter Vigil next year so you can witness baptisms in your own community. They are one of the signs of the resurrection, and they will help you remember why Easter matters, and how completely its promise brings life to all who believe in Christ.

[Sidebar]

The lambent flames reflected on my brown eyes depicting the dance between the wind and fire. A couple strands of hair unwove themselves from my French braid as the wind twisted them this way and that. I silently nudged my brother, Matthias, who was also being initiated that night, and gave him a toothy grin. The crisp breeze slipped through the brown garment over my swimsuit, raising goose bumps wherever it touched my skin. Nervousness swelled in my chest as Father Paul lit the candle from the fire. Later that night, I was no longer cold. A warmth like I had never felt before filled my soul. At that moment, I realized how much I had yearned for God’s acceptance of me into his holy community.

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