



WHY DO WE NEED BAPTISM?

The world we experience and know is one of coming and going, generation and corruption, life and death. We are born and set out to perfect ourselves and the world around us. It is similar in the Christian life. It is something we must be born into. There is a beginning that marks the start of the great adventure of perfecting ourselves in Christ and bringing the Christian message to the world. This “birth” or “beginning” is the sacrament of Baptism. But what exactly is Baptism, and why do we need it?

Water has been used in many religious rites throughout the course of human history to signify spiritual cleansing and renewal. This was true of the Jewish people even before the time of Christ. The prophet Ezekiel speaks of the water of God cleansing His people: “I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from your idols I will cleanse you” (36:25). God desires to cleanse us, to purify us and make us holy. At the time of Jesus, there were groups such as the Pharisees and the Essenes who had extensive purification rituals. Or think of the baptism of John in the Jordan River, which could at least provide an occasion for repentance and conversion. When Jesus comes on the scene, then, there is already a foundation in human religiosity for a rite of water signifying spiritual cleansing. But the sacraments of the New Law are uniquely powerful: they give what they symbolize or signify. In other words, Christian Baptism not only points to spiritual cleansing but brings it about by divine power.

If Jesus’s entire earthly ministry concerned the Kingdom of God, Baptism is our way into this Kingdom. Our Lord says as much when speaking to Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:5). Notice: not water alone, but water and the Holy Spirit. God alone can give this water, as Jesus tells the Samaritan woman: “The water I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn. 4:14). But the paradox is that we must die to self and to sin if we are to live with Christ. In fact, we must die with and in Christ if we are to share in His life (Rm. 6:4). Jesus commands His Apostles to teach and to baptize in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:19), and His followers understood the urgency and necessity of this beautiful sacrament: “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.’” The same great Apostle will write in his first letter, “Baptism...now saves you” (1 Pt. 3:21). May it save us even today.

BAPTISM:

- Gives us God’s grace and makes us members of His Church
- Cleanses us of all sin, original and personal
- Frees us from all punishment due to sin
- Bestows an indelible mark, conforming us to Christ