

~ The Mystery of Baptism ~

Baptism is the first of the Holy Mysteries. It is through baptism — a washing with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, accompanied by the prayers of the Church, for the forgiveness of sins — that a man, woman, or child becomes a true follower of Christ and a member of the Church.

Water is both a means of physical cleansing and a symbol of spiritual cleansing. It was used in the Law of Moses to represent spiritual purification; and those who became converts to Judaism underwent a ritual bath, or baptism (from the Greek word *baptizo*, "to dip, immerse") which marked their beginning of a new way of life.

Thus, when John the Forerunner (also called John the Baptist) "went about the entire region of the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance which led to the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3), he was calling the people to prepare for the coming Messiah by making a new start, a new life with God. He told the people, "I am baptizing you in water, but there is one to come who is mightier than I... He will baptize you in the holy spirit and in fire."

In his preaching, our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ told his followers, "Unless a man is born of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). After his resurrection, He told his apostles:

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations. Baptize them 'in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.' Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you. (Mt. 28:19-20)

And when the Gospel (good news) of Christ's resurrection was preached to the people of Jerusalem, baptism was an essential part of that good news:

In those days, Peter addressed the people: "You must reform your lives and be baptized, each one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, that your sins may be forgiven; then you will receive the gift of the Holy

Spirit."... Those who accepted the message were baptized; some three thousand were added that day. (Acts 2: 38, 41)

Since the beginning of the Church, baptism of believers has been the beginning of life in Christ, and the Symbol of Faith chanted at each Divine Liturgy contains words which summarize its essentials: "I believe in one baptism for the forgiveness of sins."

The Meaning of Baptism

In baptism, we are born anew — that is, we begin a new life, through which we enter into the kingdom (or reign) of God. In order to be born anew, the "old man" in us — that fallen human nature which is chained by habit to evil-doing — must be put to death, so that Christ may live in us. This is beyond our power; it is only through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ that fallen human nature may be restored to its original beauty.

In baptism, we participate in Christ's death, dying ourselves to sin so that we may participate in Christ's resurrection. His victory over sin and death becomes ours as well, so that we may live a new life with him, in the light of heaven. This is the Paschal mystery: "God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, that whoever believes in Him may not die, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

In baptism, our sins and the inherent woundedness of our human nature are cleansed.

In baptism, we become adopted children of God, and heirs to the kingdom of heaven. We are enlightened — that is, we receive from God a gift of spiritual vision which enables us to see more deeply into the mysteries of faith and of our own lives. For this reason, baptism is sometimes called *enlightenment* or *illumination*.

In baptism, we become members of the Body of Christ, the Church.

The baptismal rites in the early Church

In the first few centuries of the Church's existence, when believers were subject to persecution, those who desired to become Christians would approach the Church, along with a Christian sponsor who could vouch for their sincerity and manner of life. Although the

details differed from one region to another, the prospective Christian (called a *catechumen*, from the Greek word for a person who receives instruction) would be taught the essentials of Christian conduct, and prepared for holy baptism.

This preparation generally involved prayer and fasting, as well as instruction. At the end of the preparatory period, the catechumen would be scrutinized to determine if he or she were ready for baptism. In the early days of the Church, the baptismal service may have been very simple. We hear in the early Church document called the *Didache*, or the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (c. 90 AD):

Concerning Baptism — baptize in running water. But if you do not have running water, use whatever is available. Pour water on the head three times, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Christian initiation consisted of baptism, followed by chrismation ("sealing with the Holy Spirit"), and the reception of the Holy Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ. (See the article on Chrismation of further discussion of this order.)

With the legalization of the Church, there was a great development in her liturgical worship. The service of baptism, too, was enriched with hymns, prayers, and ritual which added to the depth and symbolism of Christian initiation. The service of baptism was often held on specific days of the church year, such as the feast of the Nativity of the Lord (December 25), Theophany (January 6), or on Lazarus Saturday (one week before Pascha). But the most solemn time for baptism was on the night of Great and Holy Saturday, the eve of Pascha, the night on which the faithful commemorated the resurrection of the Lord.

By the fourth century, the process of development was largely complete, with an instructional period or catechumate; baptism, chrismation, and reception of the Eucharist on one of the church's feast days; and (in some places) a further period of instruction for the newly-enlightened Christians. We possess sermons and catechetical lectures of several of the Fathers of the Church which were originally talks given to catechumens, or to those who had just been baptized, explaining the services that they had recently experienced.

The baptismal rites in the Byzantine Catholic Church

The following sections describe the service of holy baptism as performed in the Byzantine Catholic Metropolia of Pittsburgh. For music and practical advice for cantors, see the article on Singing the Baptismal Services.

Texts and sources

The official order of service in Slavonic can be found on pages 25-71 of the *Malyj Trebnyk* (Small Euchologion), printed in Rome in 1952. A 32-page English service book, *The Order of Baptism and Confirmation*, was published by the Byzantine Seminary Press in 1952. Although this booklet was labeled "for private use only", it remained the standard text used in the Byzantine Catholic Eparchy (later, Archeparchy) for many years.

In 1994, the Byzantine Catholic Eparchy of Parma (Ohio) published a provisional *Order of Holy Baptism and Holy Chrismation* (86 pages), based on the 1952 *Malyj Trebnyk* (in Slavonic) and the Greek Euchologion of Jacobus Goar (Venice, 1730). This new book added the prayers for mother and child after childbirth, a service for the adoption of a child, and the restored rites for the order of baptism of an adult, with the catechumenate.

A revised version of this book became the official order of baptism for the Eparchy of Passaic in 1997; the bishop of Passaic promulgated the service in the form of a priest/deacon's book and a booklet for the faithful. This edition is widely used in the other eparchies of the Byzantine Catholic Church; the descriptions below follow the 1997 order of service.

The Baptism of Adults

The baptismal services, even those for infants, make the most sense when seen in the context of a formal preparation for baptism, or *catechumenate*. Therefore, we will first go through the complete order of Christian initiation of an adult.

Reception into the catechumate

When one wishes to become a Christian, he should see a priest to make arrangements for instruction in the Faith, and holy baptism.

To enroll the candidate for baptism in the catechumenate, the priest, in his vestments, meets the candidate in the narthex (vestibule or porch) of the church. He sets the candidate facing east, toward the rising sun, the sanctuary, and (symbolically) "toward the Lord", and breathes three times on his face, an ancient form of exorcism. Then he marks the forehead and chest of the candidate three times with the Sign of the Cross, places his hand on the candidate's head, and says this prayer:

In Your Name, O Lord, the God of Truth, and in the Name of Your only Son and of Your Holy Spirit, I lay my hand upon your servant *N.* whom you have deemed worthy to take refuge in Your holy Name and to be protected under the cover of Your wings. Free him (her) from the ancient deceit, and fill him (her) with faith in You, with hope in You and with love for You, that he (she) would know that You and Your only-begotten Son and Holy Spirit are the only true God. Grant that he (she) may walk in the way of all Your commandments and do what is pleasing to You, for "the one who observes the law shall live by it." Inscribe his (her) name in Your book of life, and unite him (her) to the flock of your inheritance, so that Your holy Name be glorified in him (her), together with the holy Name of your beloved Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and of Your life-creating Spirit.

Let Your eyes always look mercifully upon him (her), and let Your ears hear his (her) supplications. Let him (her) rejoice in the work of his (her) hands and in all his (her) posterity, that he (she) may confess You, by worshipping and glorifying Your great and most exalted Name, and may praise You all the days of his (her) life.

For all the powers of heaven sing praise to You, and Yours in the glory, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and ever, and forever.
And the candidate and the faithful respond, "Amen."

Instruction and Exorcisms

If catechumens are to be baptized at Pascha, then on the first Sunday of the Great Fast, after the Gospel, the deacon (or priest) announces this fact, and encourages the faithful to assist in the instruction of the catechumens, and set a good example for them. The instruction of the catechumens normally takes place on the weekdays of the Great Fast.

At the Divine Liturgy, and at the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, a special litany for the catechumens may be offered. During this litany, the faithful pray for the catechumens. Beginning on Wednesday of the fourth week of the Great Fast, the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts has a litany "for those about to be enlightened" (that is, baptized).

Also beginning in the fourth week of the Great Fast, after the instructions to the catechumens, the priest, in his vestments, meets with the catechumens in the narthex of the church, and prays a prayer of exorcism over them — that is, a prayer to remove from the hearts and minds of the catechumens any influence of the fallen angels. The Church teaches the existence of these forces as a reality, and in fact the casting out of these forces was a part of our Lord's earthly ministry, which was continued by the apostles. From the time of the early Church, when those coming to Christ from paganism had willingly subjected themselves to all manner of spiritual influences, such exorcisms have been seen as a powerful help in supporting those who are entering the life in Christ.

There are special prayers of exorcism for the fourth, fifth, and sixth weeks of the Great Fast. During the third and final exorcism, the priest breathes upon each candidate three times in the form of the Cross, saying each time:

Drive out from him (her), O Lord, every evil and unclean spirit hiding and making its lair within his (her) heart:

and concludes:

the spirit of deceit, the spirit of wickedness, the spirit of idolatry and all greed, the spirit of lying and every impurity brought about by the prompting of the devil. Make him (her, them) a spiritual lamb of the holy flock of Your Christ, a worthy member of Your Church, a son (daughter, children) and an heir (heirs) to Your kingdom; that living

according to Your commandments, preserving the seal (of the cross) untouched and keeping his (her, their) baptismal robes without stain, he (she, they) may obtain the happiness of the saints in Your kingdom.

Through the grace, the mercies and the love of mankind of Your only-begotten Son, with whom You are blessed, together with Your all-holy, good and life-creating Spirit, now and ever, and forever.

And the catechumens and the faithful respond, "Amen."

If the catechumens are to be baptized at some time other than Pascha, these exorcisms take place at an appropriate time during the catechumenate.

Profession of Faith

If catechumens are to be baptized at the Vigil Divine Liturgy on the night from Holy Saturday to Easter Sunday (Pascha), then at noon on Good Friday, the catechumens gather in the narthex of the church to make a profession of faith. The priest instructs them to stand and make the sign of the cross, then gives them a final exhortation, reminding them of the important of what is to take place.

The catechumens turn to the West (that is, away from the altar), raise their hands, and renounce Satan, his works and his service.

Then, turning to the East (that is, toward the altar), they declare that they have united themselves to Christ and believe. Having done so, they repeat the words of the Symbol of Faith (the Creed).

Once again, the priest asks them if they have united themselves to Christ, and tells the catechumens, "Then worship Him!" The catechumens bow and say:

I worship the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the Trinity one in substance and undivided.

The priest concludes:

Blessed is God, who wishes all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth, blessed is He now and ever and forever. Amen.

Then he gives a final warning to the catechumens that their profession of faith must be lived out in their lives, and leads them in prayer:

O Lord, our Master and God, call your servant(s) *N.(s)* to Your holy enlightenment and count him (her, them) worthy of this great grace of Your holy baptism. Wash away his (her, their) old self (selves), and renew him (her, them) for everlasting life. Fill him (her, them) with the power of Your Holy Spirit, in union with Christ Your anointed one; that he (she, they) may no longer be a child (children) of natural descent, but rather a child (children) of Your kingdom.

Through the good grace and pleasure of Your only-begotten Son, with whom You are blessed, together with Your all-holy, good and life-creating Spirit, now and ever, and forever.

Then each of the catechumens receives the priest's blessing.

If the catechumens are to be baptized at some time other than Pascha, this profession of faith takes place during the week before baptism.

Baptism

The Vigil liturgy (vespers with Divine Liturgy) on the night of Holy Saturday is especially appointed as a time for baptism. The hymns and readings of the service are rich in references to the Paschal mystery: the Passover of the Lord, the redemption of the faithful from bondage, and the Lord's victory over death.

If catechumens are to be baptized at this service, then petitions are added at the Litany of Peace for the blessing of water to be used in baptism, and for those about to be baptized. Then the Lamp-lighting Psalms and their hymns are sung, ending with the festal entrance into the holy place, and the singing of the Hymn of the Evening, "O joyful light."

If the church has a baptistery (that is, an area set apart for baptisms), then during the singing of "O joyful light" and the chanting of the readings that follow, the priest and deacon, the candidates for baptism, their sponsors, and the cantor go to the baptistery and celebrate the rite of baptism:

First, the priest blesses water, asking God to grant it "the grace of redemption and the blessing of river Jordan", and blesses oil, that it may be "an anointing of incorruptibility, a weapon of righteousness, and renewal of soul and body"

Then, singing Alleluia three times with those present, he pours some of the oil upon the water, and exclaims:

Blessed is God who enlightens and sanctifies everyone coming in the world, now and ever and forever.

Taking some of the oil, he anoints each of the candidates on the forehead, breast, ears, shoulders, hands and feet, explaining as he does so the spiritual meaning of each anointing. For example, the ears are anointed that they may...be ready to listen to the teachings of faith, and accept the words of the divine Gospel.

Then he baptizes each candidate, either by immersing them in water three times, or pouring water over their heads three times, saying each time:

The servant of God *N.* is baptized in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

and each time, those present respond, "Amen."

When the baptisms are complete, the priest washes his hands.

Clothing each baptized person in a white robe, he says:

The servant of God *N.* is clothed in a robe of righteousness, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

and the cantor leads the people in singing the following troparion: "O most merciful Christ our God, who clothe Yourself with light as with a garment, grant me a robe of light."

Finally, the priest presents each newly baptized person, or his (her) sponsors, with a lighted candle, saying:

Receive this lighted candle, and during your entire life strive to shine with the light of faith and good deeds, so that when the Lord comes, you may be able to meet him with light together with all the saints, and enter unhindered into the court of His heavenly glory and reign with Him through all eternity. Amen.

Then the priest chrismates each newly baptized Christian.

During this time, in the nave of the church, the reader has been chanting a series of Old Testament readings recounting the events of salvation history — as many readings as are necessary. At the close of the final reading (Daniel 3:1-90), the priest exclaims from the baptistery, "For you are holy, our God, and we render glory to You, Father Son and Holy Spirit, now and ever and forever." The cantors respond "Amen", and begin the singing of the hymn, "All you who have been baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. Alleluia!" During the singing of this hymn, those in the baptistery go in procession back into the church, and the Divine Liturgy of Great and Holy Saturday continues as prescribed.

If the church has no baptistery, then the baptisms take place in the middle of the church, immediately after the final reading, from the book of Daniel; after the baptisms are concluded, the clergy, the newly baptized and their sponsors, and the cantors go in procession once around the church, and the service continues normally from that point on.

If the baptism of adults is celebrated within the Divine Liturgy on another day (than the night of Great and Holy Saturday), then the Divine Liturgy begins with the service of baptism and chrismation, replacing the antiphons, entrance hymn, troparia and kontakia of the day. The hymn, "All you who have been baptized" is sung in place of the usual Trisagion ("Holy God"), and a special prokeimenon, Epistle,

Alleluia, and Gospel for baptism are sung (except on feasts of the Lord or the Theotokos, or on Sundays from Pascha to All Saints, in which case the readings for the feast or Sunday are used).

At Holy Communion, the newly-enlightened (that is, the newly baptized Christians) and their sponsors are the first to receive Holy Communion, after the priest and deacon.

The Baptism of Infants

Throughout the history of the Church, it has been customary to baptize not only children and adults, but even infants (assuming that they are to be raised as Christians). At the present time, most baptisms conducted in non-missionary territories are those of the children of believers. In this case, there is no formal instruction, and the various ceremonies of the catechumenate are celebrated immediately before the rite of baptism.

However, the service books of the Byzantine Rite do provide prayers for a mother after childbirth, as well as for the naming of the child and imprinting with the sign of the cross, which was traditionally done in church on the eighth day. The latter service contains prayers which look forward to the child's baptism.

Baptism outside the Divine Liturgy

For many years, it has been customary to see baptism as a "pastoral office" - that is, a service celebrated in the presence of the priest and the family of the one to be baptized. For this reason, baptism came to be celebrated apart from the other services of Church, such as the Divine Liturgy. This is the form of the service which is assumed in the Slavonic *Malyj Trebnyk*, and in the 1955 service booklet for baptism. This service of baptism is still used under some circumstances.

Note that the child being baptized is presented by sponsors (i.e. godparents) during the baptismal ceremony, though the family as usually present as well.

The priest meets the child to be baptized and his or her sponsors in the narthex of the church, and celebrates the rite of reception into the catechumenate. Then he performs two exorcisms, asking God to

deliver the child from any evil influence. (These are the same as the exorcisms used for catechumens during the fourth, fifth, and sixth weeks of the Great Fast; the second exorcism is always the one from the sixth week, with the prayer, "Drive from him, O Lord, every evil and unclean spirit hiding and making its lair within his heart").

Then the sponsors, on the child's behalf, make a profession of faith. The priest and the child's sponsors turn to the West (away from the altar); the sponsors hold the child a little raised up as they renounce Satan, this works and his service. Then they turn to the East (toward the altar), declare their intent to be united to Christ, and recite the Symbol of Faith. Once again, the priest asks the sponsors if they have united themselves to Christ, and tells them, "Then worship Him!" The sponsors bow and say:

I worship the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the Trinity one in substance and undivided.

The priest concludes:

Blessed is God, who wishes all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth, blessed is He now and ever and forever. Amen.

After a final prayer, in which the priest asks God to "call your servant N. to Your holy enlightenment and count him (her) worthy of this great grace of your holy baptism", the priest leads the sponsors with the child to the baptistery, or (if there is no baptistery) to the middle of the church, and candles are lit.

The priest gives the blessing that begins the Divine Liturgy, "Blessed is the Kingdom...." and the deacon leads the Litany of Peace, with petitions for the blessing of water, and for the child to be baptized.

Then the service of baptism is conducted just as it would be on the night of Great and Holy Saturday, beginning with the blessing of water and oil, and ending with the rite of chrismation. All those present sing the baptismal hymn, "All you who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Alleluia!"

The baptism is followed by a special prokeimenon for baptism ("The Lord is my enlightenment and my Savior, whom shall I fear?"), a

reading from the letter of Saint Paul to the Romans (Romans 6:3-11) on baptism, and a reading from the Holy Gospel (Matthew 28:16-20), in which Christ commissions his apostles to make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them "in the name of the Father, and the the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

The readings are followed by litany, including a petition "for the newly enlightened servant of God N." Then the newly baptized and chrismated child is given Holy Communion from the previously consecrated Gifts, and the priest gives the dismissal.

This same service could use used for an older child, or an adult, who is to be baptized without going through a formal catechumenate. In this case, the one to be baptized (rather than the sponsors) makes his or her own responses.

Baptism during the Divine Liturgy

When an infant is baptized in connection with the Divine Liturgy, the service begins just as in the previous case. The rites of baptism and chrismation replace the antiphons, entrance hymn, troparia and kontakia.

After the reading of the Gospel, the Divine Liturgy continues as usual. The newly-baptized child and his or her sponsors are the first to receive Holy Communion, after the priest and deacon.

Again, this same service could use used for an older child, or an adult, who is to be baptized at the Divine Liturgy without going through a formal catechumenate.

Baptism in an emergency

In an emergency (for example, if an unbaptized child of Christian parents, or an adult who desires to be baptized, is in danger of death), then a priest can perform the baptism in a shortened form. In the absence of a priest, any lay person may baptize.

The person to be baptized is immersed in water three times, or water is poured upon his forehead three times, once at the mention of each

person of the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in the following words which are said as the baptism is being performed: The servant of God *N.* is baptized in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

R. Amen.

If a priest baptizes in case of an emergency, and chrism is available, he also chrismates the newly-baptized person, saying:

The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If the person baptized in an emergency survives, then at a later date, the parts of the baptismal service that follow the rite of baptism (the readings litany) is celebrated in Church; the newly-baptized person is chrismated if necessary, and receives Holy Communion for the first time.

Recommended Reading

- *Baptism according to the practice of the Byzantine Rite.* Byzantine Leaflet Series, No. 48. (Pittsburgh: Byzantine Seminary Press, 1990).
- *Light for Life: Part Two, The Mystery Celebrated.* (Pittsburgh: God With Us Publications, 1996). Chapter Five covers the Holy Mysteries.
- Nicholas Cabasilas. *The Life in Christ* (Crestwood, NJ: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974.) Classic Orthodox explanation of the place of the Mysteries in the life of the Christian believer.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1213-1284: The Sacrament of Baptism.