

Baptism

RITUALS AND TRADITIONS

The First Sacrament

Of the seven sacraments the Church has received from her Lord, the first is Baptism. It is the door of the Church. Through it, we are born again; through it, we enter the household of God; through it, we are given the right to approach the other sacraments and, above all, to stand at the altar of the Eucharist. Every Christian life in the Orthodox Church begins here, at the edge of a baptismal font that is, in the eye of faith, nothing less than the Red Sea, the Jordan, and the open tomb of the risen Lord all at once.

We will begin with the Lord's own institution of the sacrament, move to the question of how baptism actually saves us, watch the Old Testament prepare the waters in six great types, listen to the Scriptures distinguish Christian baptism from the baptism of St. John, ask what it is that makes baptismal water different from ordinary water, receive the form of the sacrament from the Greek word for “baptism” itself, answer honestly the common questions about infants, and close with the one confession the Creed itself places in our mouth: “We confess one baptism for the remission of sins.”

A Door Made of Water

Baptism is the holy sacrament by which we are born again. The font is a womb, the water is both tomb and birthing pool, and the new life that rises from it has the Name of the Holy Trinity written over it. The Church has always defined the sacrament in the simplest terms the Lord Himself gave: an immersion, three times, in water, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. It is the door through which we enter into the Church — not a building, but the Body of the Lord Jesus Christ — and only the one who has passed through this door has the right to draw near to the altar and partake of the rest of the sacraments.

It is worth pausing on the word “sacrament” for a moment. By it the Church means more than a ritual. She means a visible sign given by the Lord Himself, through which an invisible grace is truly imparted. The water that touches the body is ordinary water; the grace that touches the soul through that water is the grace of the Resurrection. When we speak of the sacraments as the “mysteries” of the Church, we are not being decorative; we mean that the Lord has hidden, in the smallest and most tangible of things — water, oil, bread, wine — the greatest of His gifts. Baptism is the first of these mysteries because it is the one that opens the rest.

And because baptism opens the rest, it is also the sacrament that shapes the servant's whole vision of the Christian life. Every child who is brought to the font is being welcomed into a kingdom that began to bloom long before he drew his first breath; every convert who steps down into the baptismal water

is stepping down into the burial of his old man and into the resurrection of the new. A servant who has understood this will never preside at a baptism casually, and will never teach about it without the trembling of one who knows that he himself is the fruit of the same water.

How Baptism Saves: Dying and Rising with Christ

The Lord instituted this sacrament after His Resurrection, at the very moment His redemption of the world was complete. “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:18–19). And to the same circle of eleven He said, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). The necessity He Himself had pressed earlier upon Nicodemus in the darkness: “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

How does baptism save us? The Scriptures answer with a single, sober word: by death. “Without shedding of blood there is no remission” (Hebrews 9:22); salvation is made available to us through the redeeming death of Christ upon the Cross, and we who would have a share in that salvation must share in His death and resurrection. “That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Philippians 3:10). Unless a person undergoes this death, he will not be saved.

And how can we, who live on this side of the Cross, undergo this death? Through baptism. St. Paul speaks plainly: “Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3–4). “For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection... now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him” (Romans 6:5–8).

The salvation that begins in our burial with Christ continues in us by the same shape. We were buried with Him once in the water; we are now to keep our bodies dead to sin every day, that the newness of His Resurrection may be the air we live in. As long as the old man is kept dead, salvation lives in us; when the lusts of the flesh rise again from the grave the font gave them, we put our own salvation at risk. This is why the Apostle can speak of baptism in the aorist (“you were buried”) and of the Christian life in the continuous (“reckon yourselves dead indeed to sin”, Romans 6:11). The sacrament is given once; the way of life it inaugurates is given every day.

The Old Testament Prepares the Waters

Because the work of God in history is one work, the Old Testament has already made the font ready for the New. The Fathers have never seen baptism as an invention of the last chapter; they have seen it everywhere in the first. Six great types, in particular, the Church has placed in the hand of the servant who is called to teach the sacrament.

The first is at the creation. At the very opening of Genesis, where “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2). Both a symbol and a prophecy, this verse fixes in our imagination the pattern of every Christian baptism that will follow: water beneath, Spirit above, and a new creation rising where the two meet.

The second is the ark of Noah. St. Peter places the parallel in our hand himself: “The divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us — baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:20–21). Eight souls were saved through water, and the Church has never failed to notice that the Lord's Resurrection Himself fell on “the first day of the week” (John 20:1) — the eighth day, the day that has no end, the day of the new creation. Baptism is our ark; the new creation is her cargo.

The third is circumcision. “You were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God who raised Him from the dead” (Colossians 2:11–12). Circumcision was the seal of the Old Covenant; baptism is the seal of the New. God had spoken of the uncircumcised child, “That person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant” (Genesis 17:14) — and the Lord has spoken of the unbaptized, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). The covenant has deepened; the seriousness has not lifted.

The fourth is the crossing of the Red Sea. “All our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Corinthians 10:1–2). The Fathers have seen here the whole theology of baptism in miniature: the sea is the baptismal water, which draws its saving power from the Blood of the Lord (and which bears, providentially, the name “Red”); the cloud is the Holy Spirit, who broods over those waters; and Pharaoh, the prince of the old tyranny, is the enemy who is drowned once for all by the Cross of Christ in those same waters.

The fifth is the laver of the priests. Aaron and his sons could not enter the tabernacle to minister until they had been washed with water (Exodus 29:4); a great basin of bronze stood between the tent of meeting and the altar (Exodus 30:18), and every priestly step passed through it. The washing of the priests prefigures the washing of the royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9), of which every baptized Christian is a member.

The sixth is gathered from the prophets and historians of Israel. The sacrifice of Elijah was accepted only after water had been poured upon it three times (1 Kings 18:34). Elijah himself did not ascend into heaven until he had crossed the waters of the Jordan (2 Kings 2:8). The Israelites did not enter the Promised Land until they had passed through those same waters (Joshua 3). And before the throne of God in the Apocalypse there is “a sea of glass, like crystal” (Revelation 4:6). The pattern is the Spirit's own: there is a water we must pass through to reach the company of God. That water, in our time, is the font.

The Baptism of St. John

Before we take up the question of what gives baptismal water its efficacy, it is worth clearing a small but important corner. The New Testament distinguishes very carefully between the baptism of St. John and the baptism that the Risen Lord has instituted. St. John himself drew the line: “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3:11). The baptism of St. John, and even the baptism that the disciples administered during the Lord's earthly ministry (John 4:2), was preparatory: it was a baptism of repentance, but the Cross had not yet been climbed, the gift of the Holy Spirit had not yet been poured out (John 7:37–39), and the power that unites us to the death and Resurrection of the Lord was not yet available in the water.

Once Pentecost has come, the distinction is drawn with unmistakable clarity. To the Ephesian disciples St. Paul says, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” — and when they answer, “We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit,” he inquires further, “Into what then were you baptized?” They answer, “Into John's baptism.” He explains that John's baptism pointed ahead to the Christ who has now come, and then baptizes them in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:1–5). Even at Pentecost itself, St. Peter does not exempt those who had already received St. John's baptism: “Let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). There is no such thing as a Christian life that has not passed through the Christian font.

Water and the Spirit: the Efficacy of the Sacrament

The honest question rises quickly: what does mere water do when a person is immersed in it? And the answer of the Church is that mere water does nothing. Baptismal water is not mere water. It is water united, by the epiclesis of the Church, with the power of the Holy Spirit; and in that union it becomes a true channel of regeneration and cleansing.

Two stories from the Scriptures illustrate the pattern. Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army, was a leper. The prophet Elisha sent him to wash seven times in the Jordan, and when at last he obeyed in humility, his flesh came back to him “like the flesh of a little child” (2 Kings 5:14). The waters of the Jordan were no more healing than any other water; what healed him was the Word of the Lord working through the waters. The same pattern repeats with the man born blind: the Lord sends him to wash in the pool of Siloam, and he comes back seeing (John 9:11). Water plus the Word of the Lord. Water plus the Spirit of the Lord.

This is precisely the formula the Lord gave Nicodemus: “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:5–6). And the Apostle John, in his first epistle, closes the circle: “There are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one” (1 John 5:7–8). Water alone is only water. Water with the Spirit and the Blood is the mystery of our salvation.

Three Immersions in One Name

The Greek verb the Church received from the Apostles is baptizo. It does not mean “to sprinkle” or “to pour.” It means, literally, to immerse, to dip under, to submerge. From the very word itself the form of the sacrament is already given: the Orthodox Church baptizes by triple immersion — three times, one for each Person of the Holy Trinity — “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

The New Testament itself confirms the form. When St. Philip baptized the eunuch, “both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. Now when they came up out of the water...” (Acts 8:38–39). Had baptism been a sprinkling, Philip could have carried water from the stream to the chariot. St. Paul's own language is even clearer: “We were buried with Him through baptism” (Romans 6:4); “buried with Him in baptism” (Colossians 2:12). One is not buried by having a spoonful of earth sprinkled on one's forehead; one is buried by being placed under the earth. The same holds for the water. Baptism is called a “washing” (Titus 3:5; Acts 22:16; 1 Peter 3:18–21; Ephesians 5:26), and a garment cannot be washed by the flicking of a few drops upon its surface; a garment is washed by being immersed in water.

Because baptism is necessary to salvation and must not be delayed when life is in danger, the Church does permit, in very limited circumstances, baptism by sprinkling. A newborn infant in an incubator with a fatal condition cannot be immersed; in such a case the Church does not refuse the gift of the sacrament because the ideal form is impossible. In the absence of a priest, any Orthodox Christian — male or female — may, in an emergency, baptize by anointing the infant with water three times with the Trinitarian formula, that the child may not die unsealed. If the child lives, the baptism is not repeated; the child is afterward anointed with the Holy Myron to complete the initiation. The emergency case does not set aside the rule; it is, as St. Gregory the Theologian says, the exception the Father's mercy makes for His children in distress.

Why We Baptize Our Children

No question is more often put to a Coptic servant than this one. Our Lord said, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5) — and the pronoun is without qualification. Infants are not exempt. They are born, as we all are, into a nature bent by the first Adam's fall; and the gift of baptism is the door by which the second Adam welcomes them into His own Kingdom.

Scripture itself gives us four quiet reasons to baptize our children. The first is the analogy of circumcision. In the Old Covenant, God commanded that the male child be brought into the covenant on the eighth day, long before he could answer for himself; St. Paul has already taught us that baptism is the new circumcision, “the circumcision made without hands” (Colossians 2:11–13). If the Father welcomed the children of Israel into the old covenant at eight days old, it is strange reasoning that would now forbid the children of the Church from the new.

The second is the crossing of the Red Sea, which St. Paul has taught us to read as the type of baptism (1 Corinthians 10:1–2). There is no reason to suppose the Israelite infants were left on the near shore. They crossed with their fathers and mothers, and so the children of the New Israel cross with theirs.

The third is the promise of Pentecost. “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children” (Acts 2:38–39). St. Peter, on the very first Christian day, opens the door of the sacrament to children. The fourth is the practice of the Apostles themselves, who are recorded baptizing whole households — the household of Lydia (Acts 16:14–15), the household of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:33), the household of Stephanas (1 Corinthians 1:16). It would be remarkable, given the sense of “household” in the ancient world, if no child had been among them.

And behind all four reasons stands the face of the Lord Himself. “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:14); “Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 18:10). Nowhere in Scripture are we forbidden to baptize a child. Everywhere, we are invited to bring them to Him.

“One Baptism for the Remission of Sins”

Each week in the Creed we confess, with the whole Church of all ages, “We confess one baptism for the remission of sins.” The confession is weighty in both its parts. The baptism is one, and it is not repeated — because birth is not repeated (one is born once, and one is born again once), and because the death of Christ into which we are plunged is not repeated (“He died once for all,” Romans 6:10). “One Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5). The Church who receives us at the font places upon us a seal that is never effaced and that does not need to be renewed.

And the baptism is for the remission of sins. The font is not a decoration on the front of the Christian life; it is the place where our sins are forgiven, where the old Adam is buried, and where the new man is raised with the Risen Lord. This is why a Christian who has fallen after his baptism is not re-baptized; he is absolved, through the sacrament of Confession, into the baptism he has already received. The font gives the life; Confession keeps returning us to the font when we have wandered from what it made of us.

A last word, on a question that touches every pastor's heart: what of the infants who die unbaptized through no fault of their own? The Church does not answer by shrinking the Lord's command; but she does not answer by shrinking His mercy either. The Fathers have taught with great care. St. Gregory the Theologian speaks for many of them when he says of those who are unsealed by the sacrament “on account of infancy, or some perfectly involuntary circumstance,” that they “will be neither glorified nor punished by the righteous Judge, as unsealed and yet not wicked, but persons who have suffered rather than done wrong.” Our duty is to bring our children to the font without delay, as the Church has always done. Where the sacrament has been truly impossible, we place the child into the hands of the One whose mercy is full of justice and whose justice is full of mercy — and we trust Him.

May the Lord who was Himself baptized in the Jordan, to sanctify the nature of the waters that every one of us would pass through, accept our own baptism and the baptism of every child we bring to His Church. May He keep the grave that was opened for us in the font closed always against the return of

the old man. And may the Resurrection He gave us in that water be the air our souls breathe every day until He comes.



Review Questions

1. What are the three elements necessary for baptism? (Answer: faith, spirit, and water)
2. What are some symbols of Baptism in the Old Testament? (A: Crossing the red sea, Elijah crossing the waters of the jordan river, circumcision.)
3. We obtain salvation through death and our bodies must always remain dead in relation to worldly lusts. True or false? (A: True)
4. Unless a person undergoes this death, he/she will not be saved! How then can we undergo this death and share in the death of Christ? (A: Through Baptism)
5. When did Christ institute the sacrament of baptism? (A: After his resurrection)
6. Baptism is the Holy Sacrament through which we are born again by being sprinkled by water three times in the name of the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. True or false? (A: False, we are immersed by water)
7. Why is the sacrament of Baptism the first among the seven holy sacraments?
(A: Because it is the door through which the individual enters the Church (as a congregation) and is given the right to partake of the rest of the Sacraments.)



Books & References

Scripture: Matthew 28:18–19; 3:11; 19:14; 18:10 • Mark 16:16 • John 3:3, 5–6; 7:37–39; 20:1 • Acts 2:38–39; 8:38–39; 16:14–15, 33; 19:1–5; 22:16 • Romans 6:3–11 • 1 Corinthians 1:16; 5:7; 10:1–2; 15:50 • Ephesians 4:5; 5:26 • Philippians 3:10 • Colossians 2:11–13 • Titus 3:5 • Hebrews 9:22 • 1 Peter 2:9; 3:18–21 • 1 John 5:7–8 • Revelation 4:6 • Genesis 1:2; 17:14 • Exodus 29:4; 30:18 • Joshua 3 • 1 Kings 18:34 • 2 Kings 2:8; 5:14

Further Reading:

- H.H. Pope Shenouda III, The Seven Sacraments of the Church.
- H.G. Bishop Mettaous, The Sacrament of Baptism.
- St. Gregory the Theologian, Oration 40: On Holy Baptism.
- St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures (especially Lectures III, XIX–XX).
- St. John Chrysostom, Baptismal Instructions.
- The Didache, chapter 7.

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.