

VII. A. HISTORY AND THEOLOGY OF BAPTISM

The theology of Baptism is covered in detail in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Based on # 977, 1213ff, 1275, 1279 and by paraphrasing the Glossary # 867 it can be summarized for our purposes here. Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life. It is the first of the seven sacraments and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Baptism is the first and chief sacrament of forgiveness of sins because it unites us with Christ, who died for our sins and rose for our justification. Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist constitute the “Sacraments of Initiation” by which a believer receives the remission of original and personal sin, begins a new life in Christ and the Holy Spirit and is incorporated into the Church, the Body of Christ. By Baptism, we are made sharers in her mission of justice and love and made sharers in the priesthood of Christ.

“Baptism imprints on the soul an indelible spiritual sign, the character, which consecrates the baptized person for Christian worship. Because of the character Baptism cannot be repeated (cf. DS 1609 and DS 1624).” (CCC #1280) Baptism does not presuppose any human merit for it is a grace and a gift from God.

The ritual pattern for Baptism developed over the course of the first two centuries. At that time, it was a more common practice to prepare adults (rather than children) for the sacrament. Children were prepared for the sacrament with their parents, when entire families embraced Christianity.

In the third century, Tertullian called for Easter to be the ideal time for Baptism with the bishop serving as the one who baptized. The preparation period for the sacrament resembled what we now call the period of purification and enlightenment (Lent) and the celebration of the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil (RCIA process). During this period in Church history, the celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism included Confirmation and reception of the Eucharist. Those baptized were mostly adults, with some children and infants being baptized along with their parents.

The catechumenate process took shape during this time. “In the baptismal catechumenate, formation was articulated in four stages:

- *the pre-catechumenate*, (RCIA 9-13) characterized as the locus of first evangelization leading to conversion and where the kerygma of the primary proclamation is explained;
- *the catechumenate*, (RCIA 14-20; 68-72; 98-105.) properly speaking, the context of integral catechesis beginning with ‘the handing on of the Gospels’; (RCIA 93; cf. MPD 8c.)
- a time of *purification and illumination* (RCIA 21-26; 133-142; 152-159.) which affords a more intense preparation for the sacraments of initiation and in which the ‘the handing on of the Creed’ (RCIA 25 and 183-187) and ‘the handing on of the Lord’s Prayer’ take place; (RCIA 25 and 188-192.)

- a time of *mystagogy*, (RCIA 37-40; 35-239.) characterized by the experience of the sacraments and entry into the community. (GDC #88)

In the fifth century, due to Augustine's teaching on original sin and to a large number of infant deaths, parents began to bring their children to be baptized. With the dramatic increase in the number of children being baptized, the number of adults being fully initiated into the life of the Church dwindled.

Further changes occurred in the sixth century when priests were given the authority to baptize but the bishop retained the right to confirm. This was due to the growth of the Church and the inability of the bishop to be everywhere on Easter and Pentecost. This led to a separation of the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. Since the Sacrament of the Eucharist was to be celebrated as the culmination of the sacraments of initiation, reception of First Communion was deferred until after Confirmation. These changes, in addition to the ever increasing number of infant baptisms being performed, further weakened the unity of the sacraments of initiation. Within a century, the whole understanding of Baptism as a celebration of entrance into a community following a period of preparation, formation and prayer, gave way to the understanding of Baptism as a way of removing original sin.

This understanding of the sacrament prevailed for more than thirteen hundred years, until Pope Paul VI, after the Second Vatican Council, called for a re-examination of the original meaning of Baptism and the celebration of the sacrament. The Council called for the restoration of the catechumenate for adults and a revision of the rites for baptism of adults and infants. It called for a Rite for Reception into full Communion with the Roman Catholic Church to be drawn up. The rites have been drawn up and officially ratified.