

Baptismal Authority

Recently I decided to jot down some thoughts about baptism based on personal need and experience. I mention need since as time passes by and I get older, I find it helpful to return to basics. Baptism is as basic as you can get when it comes to the sacramental life of a Christian. I had mind to do this for some time but found myself fumbling around with how to go about it. At issue was an unrealistic desire to come off with something whole and entire like it just popped out of the oven. This led, if you will, to a stiffening of the mind, a stiltedness which got me nowhere. At least I learned an important lesson, namely, to be aware of this malaise when starting a project no matter how small it happens to be.

Yes, it took some time to discover that the desire to produce something bordering on perfection is in fact a dead end. While I may have had intimations of that obvious fact earlier, I had to undergo several attempts at writing a few other articles before I had learned my lesson. However, in the end what I did learn was to allow free reign to thoughts which I could easily modify at a later time. Just go ahead and write minus concern of the result. Fixing what comes out turns out easier than first imagined. Not only that, in some instances I came out with fairly acceptable material.

As with baptism, the topic at hand, I quickly I caught myself from trying to take more than two avenues at the same time. I learned to refrain from what I thought was inspiration which turned out to be a jumble of disconnected thoughts. The thoughts in themselves were fine. They were simply out of place with regard to the topic at hand and needed to be put in order. Allowing time to pass by instead of trying to get them out all at once had made all the difference. Indeed, this is another instance of trying to produce something whole and entire.

Another obstacle that created what I call a stiffening of the mind is fear of writing about something about which I have limited knowledge. The case at hand is a perfect example. While I have some familiarity with the sacrament of baptism, I lack the proper knowledge and skill to do it real justice. That's why at the beginning of an article as this one I like give advance warning to the reader knowing that what's presented here is done by an amateur. Still I have great interest in the subject at hand and an even greater desire to put down my reflections. If had refrained from doing so, I would have missed out on a genuine educative experience regardless of the results.

Because the rite of baptism is so concise (regardless of which Christian denomination), I

figure it's best to start off by presenting the formula. The following is the most basic form though I believe some additional prayers, similarly short, usually are added: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, in the name of the Son and in the name of the Holy Spirit." If you're not paying attention, the sacrament is over in a blink of an eye. Though the Trinity is mentioned and nothing else, at first glance it looks pretty difficult to do anything with this formula. That scarcity gave rise to some fear and hesitation when I was thinking of writing about the sacrament.

I may be wrong about this, but though all Christian denominations recognize the importance of baptism, my impression over the years is that once done, it's pretty much left behind. Deliberately I chose this commonplace way of presenting such an observation because it's partly false and partly true. Partly false in that theologically all sacraments are of equal value and partly true in that it can be perceived as playing a kind of second fiddle for more "advanced" sacraments...almost like getting over and done with.

I find the second half (partly true) among Catholics and presumably Orthodox Christians who both have a total of seven sacraments. While six of them take place later in a person's life and have baptism as their foundation, no doubt they receive more attention. After all, we commonly associate baptism as occurring shortly after birth. On the surface the sacraments of first communion and confirmation look more exciting than pouring water over an infant's head while saying one brief sentence. As for the other three sacraments of matrimony and ordination topped off with final anointing, in a way they can be perceived as optional. No everyone partakes of them.

The sad state of affairs is that nowadays these sacraments are increasingly left by the wayside. The time when they signified important rites of passage was just a generation ago, not much longer. Be that as it may, the sacraments remain objectively just as valuable as they had been for centuries. Divine grace remains the same and is not subject to human whims and fancies. It's my hope by focusing upon the sacrament of baptism in a concrete way greater interest may be aroused as to its unique character.

One certainty we can claim about baptism and the six sacraments which flow from it is that they are at the heart of our need to worship. Most people don't think of worshipping a transcendent reality as a need. Instead, it comes across as an obligation and one that's increasingly no longer viable within a religious context. Nevertheless, we see plenty of examples to counter this. Consider common experience such as the way sports figures, those in the entertainment industry including people who are important in our lives are treated. Spontaneously we give them our full allegiance, and in extreme cases allow them to govern our lives. This is something we do without the slightest compulsion.

Consider what's involved with the dynamics of worship. First, something or someone attractive grabs our attention. At once all the energy within us is mobilized and directed to one goal, submission. The first thing that strikes us is a sense of unity along with relief of being liberated from pressing obligations. More importantly we enjoy a sense of worth that can't be satisfied by any other means. This is a focus that can continue over an extended period. When it ceases, we feel dropped into the everyday world which feels so alien. The result? We're left pretty much as orphans. Yet we persist in keeping present the original experience. Though it has past, we attempt to recreate it. I'd say this is where idolatry comes into play.

In this instance memories re-present us with images of what had happened which can be more real than the actual event. Because memories are second-hand or copies, their very nature means they cannot in full replicate the experience. Though we know our memories are copies we allow ourselves to be taken in by them. So when we try to replicate our experience, our images can create an unnatural strain compared with those instances when in an act of worship we had been unified and thus relaxed.

There is a practical, immediate way out of this predicament into which we have fallen. It has a way of filling in the cracks, if you will, or those occasions when we're aware of God's presence and when we're not. The latter times are more frequent in our modern world due to the infinite amount of distractions that assail us. Even more recent generations never had so many. In fact, I venture to say the number is literally infinite. This alteration becomes increasingly painful with the passage of time. Nevertheless, it turns out to be a beneficial experience because—and I'm disinclined to use such language but momentarily have no choice because it seems a bit didactic—it keeps us humble. It might be better to call this grounded.

Keeping in line with the theme of this essay, the easiest way we can be present to God is by making the sign of the cross. It's identical to the baptismal formula and runs simply as follows: "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." So every time we make this gesture, you could say we're making present our baptism. That word, by the way, means a dipping or emersion as in water. You'd be hard pressed to get any better than this.

So when we make the sign of the cross we're making present our rite of initiation into the life of the Trinity, that is, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is both as simple and as profound as could be. Because we are the ones who've been baptized, the gesture of making the sign of the cross is strictly personal. It can't be transferred to another person and remains under the guise of our personal authority. At first, looking at baptism in terms of authority might seem strange, but when you think of it, there is indeed

considerable truth to that observation.

If you wish to exercise this authority given to those of us who've been baptized shortly after birth but rarely if ever exercised, consider those moments when we find ourselves in either some undesirable state or difficult circumstance, temptations included. Instead of remaining passive to what's assailing us, we have the ability...the duty...to step up and take action. At first it might come across as presumptuous, but such an attitude is required and long overdue. The unfortunate part is that all Christians are baptized—dipped into the Father, Son and Holy Spirit—yet remain unaware of this authority bestowed upon them which is ready to be applied at once.

We have to apply our baptismal authority often which means we don't have to constantly string out either verbal or mental utterances of the formula. Discreet intervals are best, not worrying if our efforts are at first clumsy. As the expression goes, practice makes perfect. After a while things smooth out and we may not need to make the gestures as often as at first. The spaces between each one fill in by themselves without our effort. A bit later we discover that in actuality there are no gaps.

I recall a conversation with an elderly monk who's familiar with all this. He told me that never in this life the gaps will be filled in. He spoke of this in traditional terms, that is, the fall attributed to our first parents. Whether one thinks in such terms or not, each one of us knows something is truly lacking. To realize this is just the nature of things, so get used to it. In light of this again I thought of baptism...*baptizo*...as an emersion, not just a casual sprinkling of water here and there. Every time we make the sign of the cross we immerse ourselves, if you will, into the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We can bring this same emersion to the application of the authority bestowed upon us, not simply applicable here and then there.

After a while our awareness of baptism becomes more a kind of platform where we engage or activate our faculty of *anamnesis* or recollection. *Anamnesis* is an inbuilt faculty that existed before baptism where we recall eternal, absolute truths and ideas independent upon physical existence rather than acquiring brand new information. While new information is important, it pales in comparison to being aware of what is eternal within us. So if you dip (*baptizo*) or immerse our faculty of *anamnesis* in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the result is that faculty has become divinely enhanced.

It may be difficult to accept that the simplicity of the baptismal formula can bring this about. Apparently anyone—non-believer and Christian alike—can administer baptism. Often it's within a life or death situation. All other sacraments must be administered by

a deacon of a priest, so this universal nature of the sacrament fits in neatly with *anamnesis*. After all, you have to be a human being to have this faculty. Armed with this information of being signed with each Person of the Trinity, we have everything we need.

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