

# The Sacrament of Baptism

## Introduction

As Orthodox Christians, the Sacrament of Baptism is our entry into the Church as members of the Body of Christ. It is the “new birth” by which we die to the world, and are raised with Christ to eternal life. It is through Baptism, that we are mystically born into spiritual life. The Holy Sacrament of Baptism serves as the door leading into the Kingdom of Grace, and grants access to participation in the other Sacraments of the Church. Even before the establishment of the Sacrament of Baptism, Christ indicated its absolute necessity in his conversation with Nicodemus: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” When Nicodemus expressed his perplexity, “How can a man be born when he is old?” the Savior replied that this new birth is accomplished by water and the Spirit: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is truly born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.” (John 3. 3-5)

In Baptism, man receives, in place of the old existence he had, a new existence and life, and becomes a child of God, a member of the Body of Christ and the Church, and an inheritor of eternal life. Baptism, therefore, is indispensable for all, including infants, so that growing in body and spirit one might grow in Christ.

## The Great Commission

Christ appeared to the eleven disciples after the Resurrection and commanded them to “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...” (Matthew 28.19) The annotations of the Orthodox Bible explain this passage further, “if we observe the context for the Lord’s command we see that the making of disciples cannot be done in the strength of man, but only in the power of God. The reality of the Resurrection refers not only to its historicity, apostolic witness, and necessity for faith, but also its power in our Christian life and mission. The resurrected Son of God, living in us and energizing us, makes possible the salvation of all.”

The second part of what is known as the Great Commission is found in the next verse, “...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28.20) By stating that He is ‘with you always,’ Jesus means that His Resurrection is not just the past, nor the future. It is always present in our lives through the Holy Spirit. We know Him directly, here and now, in the present, as our Savior and our Lord. ‘To the end of the age’ does not imply that we are to be separated from Him at

some point in time, but rather that He will be with us forever, even unto the ages of ages.

### **The Early Church**

Fifty days after the Resurrection of Christ, while the disciples were gathered together 'in one accord in one place,' (Acts 2.1) to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit appeared to them as 'divided tongues of fire and sat upon each of them.' (Acts 2.3) It should be noted that on this first Christian Pentecost, the Holy Spirit appears while the Apostles are gathered together 'with one accord in one place,' meaning that they are gathered as an assembly of faithful. Their unity creates an environment in which the Holy Spirit appears.

It is during his sermon following their 'baptism of the Holy Spirit' that the Apostle Peter exhorts, "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, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call." (Acts 2.38-39.) Peter's call to respond to the gospel requires specific actions that define Christian life within the Church. We must first, repent; second, be baptized; and third, receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. To this day, people come to Christ in precisely this same manner in the baptismal service of the Orthodox Church. They first, repent, renouncing the devil; next they are baptized by immersion in water for the remission of sins; and finally they are chrismated (anointed) thus receiving the Holy Spirit.

During the first and second century, after the Resurrection of our Lord, the majority of those being baptized as Christians were adults. The candidates for Baptism, called catechumens, were progressively introduced into the life of the Church by special rites that included exorcisms, prayers, explanations of the Scriptures, etc. This period of preparation, which according to local customs lasted anywhere from one to three years, involved the entire community, which was preparing itself for the reception of new members. It was during this time that each catechumen chose a sponsor (godparent) who would assist the Apostles and/or Priests in teaching them about Christianity. The sponsor would then stand as a witness to the sincere intentions and belief of the person to be baptized. vile spirits so that having found mercy with You, (God), they may be found worthy of Your immortal, heavenly mysteries and offer up glory to You O God...."

The Priest then asks God to bless the soon to be baptized Christian with a guardian angel to guide, guard and protect them all the days of their life. This is followed by a dialogue between the Priest (representing the Church) and the

person being baptized (if this is a child - the godparent is called to respond on their behalf). The dialogue begins with our backs to the altar and the questions “Do you renounce Satan...?” and “Have you renounced Satan?” The questions and answers “I renounce him” and “I have renounced him” are repeated three times. These statements of repentance are followed by the instructions to “blow and spit upon him (Satan).” With this act of defiance of ‘spitting on the devil’ the group then turns towards the altar (towards God) and continues the dialogue.



“Do you join yourself to Christ?” “Have you joined yourself to Christ?” The questions are once again asked three times, and responded to three times, with the following confession of faith: “I do join myself to Christ” “I have joined myself to Christ.” A final question is asked, “And do you believe in Him” and answered “I believe in Him as King and as God.” The godparent then recites the Creed paying

further witness to the faith and teachings of the Church. It is for this reason that the sponsor must be an active member of the Orthodox Church and becomes from that moment the spiritual brother or sister of the parents.

### **The Godparent**

With the appearance and prevalence of infant baptism between the mid second and fifth centuries, there has been a subtle change in the role of the godparent. Instead of acknowledging the sincere intentions of the person who is seeking to be Baptized, the sponsor is given the honor by the Church to assist the parents in the spiritual nurturing and upbringing of the child. It is the role of the godparent, during the Baptismal service to respond on behalf of their godchild to the questions posed by the Church.

### **The Service of the Catechumens**

The Sacrament of Baptism is divided into two distinctive services. The first service takes place in the Narthex of the Church and is known as The Service of the Catechumens. It is during this service that several things occur, first, three prayers of exorcism are read, asking God to “empower,” the soon to be baptized Christian, “to triumph over Satan and his vile spirits so that having found mercy with You, (God), they may be found worthy of Your immortal, heavenly mysteries and offer up glory to You O God...”

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### **The Sacrament of Baptism**

The Blessing of the water begins with a Doxology (Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and forever and unto the ages of ages) that announces the Kingdom of God as the theme, the content, and the ultimate goal of Baptism. The Sacrament of Baptism begins the spiritual journey of the soon to be enlightened Christian, and the initial doxology reveals and announces its final destination: the Kingdom of God.





Following the initial petitions and prayer that bless the water, the pre-baptismal anointing with olive oil takes place. Oil has always been a religious symbol. It is a natural source of light and joy, and in ancient times was primarily used as medicine. In the case of baptism, it is the sickness of sin from which we are being healed. Oil is also known as the symbol of

reconciliation and peace. The priest says a prayer of thanks to God for the oil and asks God to accept the offering and make it a gift of healing, a gift of peace, a gift of spiritual power and life. The priest makes the sign of the cross in the water with the oil three times and anoints the person who is to be baptized on their brow, their breast, their ears, their hands, their feet and their back. The candidate is then baptized with the triple immersion in the name of the Holy Trinity, during which the entire Church “seals” each action with an “Amen.”



### **The Sacrament of Holy Chrismation**

Immediately after Baptism, the newly baptized receives the Sacrament of Chrismation, the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit. This sacrament is the



fulfillment of Baptism and signifies the participation of everyone who is baptized into the Spirit of Pentecost, consecrating the person as the Temple of the Holy Spirit. From earliest times, the church has practiced chrismation immediately following baptism and the roots of this sacrament are clear in both the Old and New Testaments.

In his sermon on Pentecost, Saint Peter quotes the well known prophesy of Joel, “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.” (Acts 2:17; Joel 2:28) The Orthodox Study Bible reminds us that this ‘prophesy is significant because under the Old Covenant, the gift of the Holy Spirit had been given only to a few - the patriarchs, the prophets, and some of the judges.” Joel, however, prophesied that the Holy Spirit would be given to all of God’s people; this was fulfilled at Pentecost. The Prophets Jeremiah and

Ezekiel also speak about the same promise of the Holy Spirit and Ezekiel's passage ties together the water and the Spirit in a prophetic vision of baptism and chrismation. (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27)

Jesus repeatedly promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to his disciples and stated that the Holy Spirit would reveal truth to the Church. In fact, the last words of Christ before His Ascension include a promise: "John (the Baptist) truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit." (Acts 1:5) The promise of God includes both our union with Christ in Holy Baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit at chrismation.

The material of the Holy Chrism is made of 49 aromatic substances that symbolize the infinite Gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is prepared every ten years on Holy Thursday in a special service at the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in the presence of representatives of all the Orthodox Patriarchates of the world.



#### **Gift to God**

The priest also cuts hair from the infant's head in the form of a cross. This is done on behalf of the child who offers a gift to God, to thank Him for the great gift of eternal life that he has just inherited. The newly baptized Christian is then dressed in a white baptismal garment, symbolizing purity and righteousness. The priest then places a cross around the child's neck while repeating the words of Christ: "He who wishes to follow me, let him pick up his cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24)

#### **All Those Who Have Been Baptized**

The celebrant then leads the newly baptized with their sponsor(s) in a circular procession around the baptismal font, while the congregation chants the verse from Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (3:27) "All those who have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ forever, Alleluia!" This is followed by the reading of the Epistle (Romans 6:3-11) which speaks about our new life in Christ, and the Gospel (Matthew 28:16-20) which contains the Great Commission of Christ commanding us to "Baptize all nations...."

#### **The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist**

Finally, the newly baptized partakes of the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. By partaking of Holy Communion, the child becomes part of the Church or Ekklesia. Here, everyone gathers to participate in



the baptismal liturgy and to witness the Sacraments of Baptism, Chrismation and Holy Eucharist in celebration of the 'new life' offered in Christ to the newly baptized. This gathering serves also as a reminder that each of us is continually renewed through the partaking of Holy Communion and we, along with the newly baptized, are continually offered 'new life' in Christ!

### **Baptismal Names**

It is the practice of our Church to give the name of a saint to a newborn child. By accepting/choosing the name of a Saint, we honor and express our gratitude to a Holy Person for their exceptional contributions to our faith and provide the newborn with an example worthy of emulation. The Saint then becomes the Patron of the child protecting it from all danger. Through their prayers, God will grant the child the necessary illumination to become an ardent follower of Christ.

### **Holy Communion and on-going life in the Church**

Following the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Chrismation, the newly-baptized child is immediately given Holy Communion, the Body and Blood of Christ. This is a central act in the spiritual life of the child from that day forth, for Jesus has told us that "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you." (John 6:53)

It has become a tradition to have the Godparent accompany the child, after their Baptism, to the Divine Liturgy on the following three Sundays and to bring him/her for Holy Communion with the lit Baptismal Candle. It is important, however, that the child come forth for Holy Communion not just for the traditional following three Sundays, but each Sunday as he/she grows in the life and grace of the Lord.

Our Church provides many opportunities for young children to experience the fellowship and nurture of the Faith. There are various programs including: our religious education program with church school, seminars, vacation church school and retreats; and SOYO (Society of Orthodox Youth Organizations) for 12-18 year olds; and summer camp.



Of course, the Church can only offer these ministries in hopes that the parents will help their children participate in them. Naturally, the child will learn a great deal from the example set by the parents and from participation in the educational and overall life of the Church. This is why it is so vitally important to the life and

salvation of children for the entire family to participate in the worship life and activities of the Church. In the words of Solomon the Wise: “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” (Proverbs 22:6) It is prudent for the parent or godparent to assure the child a proper spiritual education through enrollment in our church Sunday School Program and culturally through our Greek School Program and our Odyssey Cultural Dance Group.

### **How long should you wait to baptize your child?**

Since an unbaptized child has not yet received the fullness of the gifts and promises spoken of by Christ, it would seem to be a logical and spiritually prudent decision to baptize him/her soon after the churching. This often takes place when the child is anywhere from 3 to 9 months old. In all cases, parents are encouraged to give the life, health and salvation of the child top priority over all other social circumstances so as not to delay this important event for sake of less important matters.

### **What to bring to the Baptism**

- 1 large non-white towel to wrap child before baptism
- 1 large white towel to wrap child after baptism
- 1 small white towel
- Baptismal cross (often a gift by the sponsor)
- White Baptismal garment