

Catholic

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Sacraments of Initiation

GOD'S 'I LOVE YOU'

A REDEMPTORIST PASTORAL PUBLICATION

Many wish they knew more about the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The four gospels only tell about the last few years of his life. What did he do those first thirty years?

Since we don't know what went on during that time, we can let our imaginations fill in the blank spots: Jesus getting up each morning and going off to work in the carpenter shop; Jesus and his dad making piano benches and TV cabinets (or whatever carpenters did in those days). Then, one day, some rich folk down by Jericho order a dinette set. Jesus is delivering their table and chairs when he comes upon John baptizing at the Jordan River.

Jesus sets down the table and chairs and listens to John preach. Then Jesus goes into the water, he hears the voice telling him that he is loved, and he comes up changed.

As far as we know, he never went back to the carpenter shop. And some rich family in Jericho was left waiting for their table and chairs!

This is a fanciful account, but perhaps it will help illustrate the pattern for our Christian sacraments of initiation: 1) we go down into the water; 2) we hear the voice that we are loved; 3) we come up changed, and something gets left behind. Let's explore this model or pattern.

BAPTISM OF JESUS TAPESTRY FROM OUR LADY OF THE ANGELS CATHEDRAL,
LOS ANGELES/CNS PHOTO/GREG TARCZYNSKI

1) We go into the water

We frequently go into the water and wash off by taking a shower or a bath. But baptism is different from these ordinary washings. Baptism is a sacrament—something we see through.

Perhaps you've had your picture taken for your parish directory. There is usually a free eight-by-ten so you buy a nice frame and insert the picture. But the picture is difficult to see clearly. You realize that there is a protective coating on the glass that must be removed so you can see *through* the glass to view the picture. Otherwise, your eyes just rest on the surface of the glass.



CNS PHOTO/MICHAEL MCARDLE

Baptism is our entry,
our birth,
into God's plan
for the world.

Sacraments are something like that—they help us see *through* to the important part. Baptism is like the glass in the picture frame. Faith enables us to remove that protective coating so that we can see *through* the water bath—the *symbol*—and get to the important part, the spiritual reality.

Baptism is not just a bath; it is a birth! Baptism is a birth into a whole new realm of possibilities, *God's* possibilities.

All of creation is an expression of the Divine Artist. The love that is God's inner Trinitarian life spills over into creation. We see this most clearly in God's masterpiece, Jesus, who is "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (Hebrews 1:3 NRSV).

If sacraments are something like that glass of the picture frame which we look through to see the deeper reality, there is no more perfect sacrament than Jesus himself. Jesus "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15). In Jesus "we see our God made visible and so are caught up in love of the God we cannot see" (*Mass of Christmas, Preface I*).

Baptism is our entry, our birth, into God's plan for the world. We go down into the water, we put on Christ and we are taken up into the mystery that is God's inner life of Trinitarian love—a love that burns away all guilt; a love that heals all shame. We are *Christ-ened*, or in the language of the East, we are divinized (*theosis*). We hear, "You are my child! I love you."

2) We hear the voice

At baptism we hear the voice of God assuring us of our deepest reality: We are beloved of God. At baptism, as with all the sacraments, the ritual expresses a moment that extends beyond the ritual itself.

Take the Sacrament of Marriage as an example. Those of you who are married heard the voice of your spouse during the sacrament telling you that he or she loves you—and would love you and honor you all the days of their life. But that ritual moment was not the first time you heard that voice say, "I love you"! There were many "I love you" moments leading up to the sacrament—and there have been many, many more following the wedding ritual.

It's similar with the sacrament of baptism: adult baptism is preceded by a period of preparation, the catechumenate, during which the members of the Christian community help the candidate prepare to hear the voice—to realize in an ever more profound way that they are beloved by God. That is why the Sacred Scriptures, the Holy Bible—the story of God's love for us—plays the central role in this preparation.

After our baptism we continue to hear the voice again and again throughout our Christian lives. We hear this voice of love primarily through the Christian community which assures us that we are beloved with a love that cancels out all feelings of shame or insufficiency and empowers us for mission. The community is essential to being Christian.

3) We come up changed

Jesus, at his baptism, went down into the water, heard the voice, and came up changed. Would we know anything at all about Jesus (or even care, for that matter) if he hadn't come up changed? What if he simply came up out of the Jordan, delivered the table and chairs, and then went home to the carpenter shop to continue life as usual?

That didn't happen; Jesus came up changed. That has to happen to us also: We have to come up changed. Otherwise there is no point. We go into the baptismal pool as carpenters, teachers, mothers, bankers, nurses, clerks, etc.—and we come up as *lovers*! Whatever our vocation in life before baptism, afterwards we are *lovers*, proclaiming the God who is Love itself.

The voice we hear at baptism is a special kind of communication. It is not merely information; it is a symbolic exchange.

Let's use weather as an example. Before leaving on a trip, we can call up a weather report on our phone or computer so we know whether we need to take a coat or umbrella. This is simply information; it requires no particular response. On the other hand, if you meet a friend in the corridor and say, "Good morning!" and he simply passes by without any acknowledgment or response, you would feel hurt or snubbed! You were not giving a weather report; your "Good morning" is *symbolic* communication, and it demands a response.

God's baptismal "I love you" is just such *symbolic* communication. It demands a response. We must come up changed.

Something gets left behind, too. Maybe it's not a table and chairs, but it might be prejudice, egotism, greed, selfishness. Once you "hear the voice" you will begin to see what it is that you will have to leave behind.



We go into the water (sacrament, liturgy, worship); we hear the voice (Word; Sacred Scripture); and we come up changed (mission, ethics). In this pattern we find 1) worship, 2) Sacred Scripture, and 3) ethics, what have been called the three pillars of Christian life.



CNS PHOTO/GREGORY A. SHEMITZ

Initiation Sacraments

If you have seen adults (and/or children of catechetical age) baptized at the Easter Vigil, you know that baptism (the water bath) is part of a larger ritual process. The candidate goes into the water (baptism), and is anointed with oil (confirmation), and is welcomed into table fellowship (Eucharist). Christian initiation comprises three sacraments: baptism, confirmation and Eucharist.

The New Testament frequently speaks of table companionship as initiation into the company of Jesus. Indeed, one of the images for the culmination of the Mystery—God's plan for creation—is the image of a great banquet where all are seated at table with the Trinity! "Many will come from the east and the west, and will recline with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob at the banquet in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 8:11).

What do you do when you are invited out to eat? Probably you 1) wash up, 2) dry off and get dressed, and 3) go to dinner. Our sacramental rituals for those Churches which follow the liturgical customs of Rome were influenced by the cultural context of the Mediterranean countries in which they evolved.

In the first and second centuries, after bathing, Romans would rub their bodies with oil to moisturize the skin and to dry off. In our sacramental system 1) the bath of baptism is followed by 2) the oil of Confirmation. Then, anointed with the Holy Spirit and clothed in Christ, we are invited to 3) the

eucharistic table. At that table, we not only hear the voice that we are loved, we experience *communion with God*. We feast on the divine flesh and are thus ourselves divinized!

We who eat and drink the Body and Blood of Christ are taken up into that Body and we become *Christ's Body*. The divine food does not merely empower us to *imitate Christ*. It enables us to live *in Christ*.

This didn't happen to me!

The rituals as described here were not the experience of many Catholics who were baptized as infants, received first holy Communion in grade school, and then were confirmed some years later.

How did the Roman Church move from baptism, confirmation and Eucharist in one ritual ceremony to three separate rituals, baptism, first holy Communion and then, later, confirmation?

The complex history of this change in ritual practice could occupy a large part of a graduate course on the Sacraments of Initiation. But, if you are willing to accept a "Three-Minute-History-of-the-World" (with all the simplifications that will entail), here is what happened.

In the early days of Christianity, infants began to be baptized along with their parents, who were being sacramentally initiated into the community. (Remember that one of the insights into the water bath was that this bath washed away all sin.)

Theologians asked, "If baptism washes away sin, how is it possible to baptize an infant who is not able to commit sin?" Good question!

Saint Augustine and others responded by explaining that while the infant could not commit any *personal* sins, by the very fact that he or she was biologically a descendant of Adam and Eve, the infant inherited *their* sin, Original Sin. Baptism washes away that sin. That's why it is possible to baptize infants! Good answer!

There is something in us that often makes negative things more intriguing than positive things. Most people can name more illnesses than wellnesses! Similarly, we have heard a lot more about original *sin* than about original *grace* or original blessing!

As the theological discussion began to focus more and more on original sin, original sin moved from the reason why infants *can* be baptized to the reason why infants *must* be baptized. And parents are instructed to have their babies baptized "as soon as possible."

At that time, initiation remained one unified process: the

infant was baptized, anointed and received the Eucharist. Sometimes, though, the infant would spit out the host, so the custom began to not give the host to infants. Instead, the infant was given only the Precious Blood, by placing a few drops of the consecrated wine onto the child's tongue.

Then in the fourth and fifth centuries, Europe experienced a ministry crisis. There were not enough bishops. At that time, Christian communities were led by an overseer (bishop) who was assisted in his ministry of catechesis and education, administration, care of the sick and social outreach by ministers (deacons) and by a "parish council" of elders (presbyters). A shortage of bishops meant a shortage of local leadership.

Various solutions to this problem were tried. Finally, in those churches that followed the liturgical customs of Rome, it was decided that, in the rural areas (daughter parishes), one of the presbyters would be authorized to preside at the Eucharist. He was also authorized to receive new members into the community. But the postbaptismal anointing was to be reserved for the bishop. This is the beginning of separating the washing up and the drying off as well as the source of our thinking about confirmation as a sacrament separate from baptism.

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when

Communion from the cup began to be denied to the laity, it seemed strange that only priests and infants received holy Communion with the Blood of Christ, and so Roman Catholic infants stopped receiving holy Communion at their baptism. That is how the three sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist came to be separated.

When Pope St. Pius X lowered the age for first holy Communion from early adulthood to the "age of reason" (interpreted as about six years of age) some children received the Eucharist before they were confirmed. The order of sacraments then became baptism, Eucharist, and confirmation.

With many oversimplifications, in a few paragraphs you have an idea of how the unified process of "washing up, drying off, and going to eat" became three sacraments: baptism, Eucharist, and confirmation.

When thinking of the meaning of these events, look to unified liturgies presented today in the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults. Those who wish to join the Christian community first go into the water and hear the voice. Then they are anointed by the Holy Spirit. Finally, they are changed forever in the Eucharist. They then live their lives renewed by the life of the Church, immersed in God's love.

DIG DEEPER

What are the three basic steps of Christian initiation?

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Why are the sacraments in a different sequence than they were in earlier times?

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Have you been changed by baptism?