

# The Sacrament of Baptism<sup>1</sup>

## Part II: Baptism

### ***Few General Facts that should be known:***

- The preparation (discussed in part I) for the Sacrament of Baptism is similar to the Proskomedie for the Divine Liturgy. The order of the two rites after the proclamation by the priest: Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) is similar. This will be seen during the explanation of the rubrics of the rite.
- The catechumen is ready to enter into the kingdom. But now, it is time to make the matters (water and oil) used for the baptism ready and pure to receive the catechumen into its womb, which will become the tomb of the old life and the womb of the New Life.
- Water has 3 essential dimensions in our life. The first is cosmological; there can be no life without water (Gen 1:2) *“and the spirit of God was moving on the face of the waters.”* The second is a symbol of destruction and death; Noah Flood and the annihilation of Pharaoh and his army. And the third is a principle of purification, cleansing and cleaning; the baptism of Jesus Christ in the river of Jordan.
- These 3 principles of water permeate the whole biblical story of: creation, fall and salvation (resurrection). Therefore, baptism in water is cosmological, ecclesiological and eschatological. Water becomes the sacrament of the New Creation, of the Church and of the Kingdom.
- Oil on another hand is known from the old time as a medicine (healing), as an agent for light and joy, and as a sign of peace and therefore forgiveness and mercy.

### **The Liturgy of Baptism:**

#### **The Blessing of Water:**

- First thing is done after the catechumen is prepared, is the censing around the font that is containing water as the priest is announcing the entrance into the kingdom of God by the proclamation: Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit...
- Then a great litany, parallel to the great litany of the Divine Liturgy, begins. This litany addresses the celebration of the sacrament. It is regarding the water. It is, therefore, a prayer, a petition from the Church, to God to sanctify the water by the effectual operation of the Holy Spirit to restore it as a means of creation.
- This petition involves the whole Church, the assembly who is present to celebrate the born from above. It is led by the priest, but the people acknowledge it by demanding loudly, after each petition, in their answer: Lord, have mercy.
- It is a progressive prayer which begins by praying peacefully for the peace of the above to come and dwell among the Church. Then praying for the sanctification of the water in order to

---

<sup>1</sup> Most of references and the order of this explanation were taken from Alexander Schmemmann, *Of Water and the Spirit*, SVS Press, Crestwood, NY, 1995. These notes should be read along with the prayers of the Sacrament of Baptism.

become the tool of the salvation of the catechumen, of the life eternal, through his death and resurrection in the water with Jesus Christ.

- The Holy Spirit, as in the beginning (Genesis 1:2) of creation changed chaos into order, sanctifies the water, which is set for the baptism of the catechumen and transforms it from a tool of destruction, a place of demonic powers, into a tool of regeneration.
- The water (matter) is not a neutral element in the fallen world. It requires the sanctification of the Holy One in order to become the means of regeneration. Like Jesus Christ entry into the water of Jordan was to sanctify the water by His pure body in order to make it a power of redemption.
- The Baptism of Jesus Christ was the epiphany of the Holy Trinity and therefore, here the baptism of the catechumen is the epiphany of the unceasing power of the Trinity. So the petition is acknowledging the power of the Undivided Trinitarian God, the One Who was proclaimed in the Creed, the Symbol of Faith.
- This Holy Trinity's sanctifying operation of the water may illumine us all. It is the cosmological action of the Holy Spirit on the water and on the church, the assembly of the faithful including the catechumen. (This petition is in the plural sense).
- The restoration of the water is the first step towards the restoration of the "to be baptized."
- Who through the water becomes worthy into the entry into the kingdom to come; through the kingdom of the Church (ecclesiological) to the Kingdom of God (eschatological).
- Through the water, the catechumen may become a child of light and an heir of the kingdom. He becomes a member of the church who can partake of the Death and the Resurrection of Christ.
- He, therefore, should prove himself as a faithful and a servant of God by keeping his baptismal garment clean and pure, and by living his baptism every day of his life.
- So this water may become a laver of regeneration unto remission of sins (sins in plural). Baptism, the entry into this sanctified water, is the forgiveness of the sins which have been committed and that which will be committed. It is the entry into God's grace, the grace of Repentance.
- This petition is the desire, the wish and the request of the catechumen, the assembly and the clergy to God to fulfill their prayers and admit this catechumen who deemed worthy by the church and his sponsors into the body of Christ. This is the first part of every sacrament; the request of the people is proclaimed loudly, witnessed (*Martyreia*) and is lifted up to receive God's compassionate grace of mercy.

#### **A Prayer of the Priest for himself:**

- The validity of sacraments does not, in any way, depend on the holiness of those who perform it.
- This prayer goes in parallel with the prayer that the priest says it for himself "*No one is bound...*" prior to the Great entrance, which concludes with "*let us lay aside all earthly cares.*"
- This prayer is a petition by the priest to God to disregard his unworthiness, his sins and desires of flesh, and to sanctify and to make him the administrator (the means) of the creating the

image of Christ in the catechumen and to implant him firmly in the Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church through God's sanctifying power.

- This prayer is similar to that was bestowed on the catechumen and water (exorcism).

### **The Blessing of Baptismal Waters:**

- The Great litany was a petition by the whole church for God to listen to their request of sanctifying this water. Then, after the priest asks God's power to sanctify him, he performs the consecration of the baptismal waters. This is too in parallel to the consecration of the bread and their transformation through the Holy Spirit into the Body and Blood of Christ.
- The consecration begins with "great art thou, O Lord..." A thanksgiving, Eucharistic, acclamation in which man reverses the non thankfulness of the First Man. It reverses Adam's disobedience into obedience by accepting freely the great works of God that no word may suffice to hymn God's wonders.
- Through this small sentence, the whole Church is called to stay astonished and wondered about the marvelous works of God.
- The prayer can be divided in six parts: 1) from "Great art Thou...[to] Thine ineffable glory," 2) from "For Thou, who art inexpressible, existing....[to] dragons who lurked there," 3) from "Wherefore, O king who....[to] terrible unto adversaries," 4) from "Let all adverse powers...[to] is about to be baptized," 5) from "But do Thou...[to] new birth through water and spirit, and finally 6) from "Wherefore, O Lord, manifest...to the end."
- The first prayer resembles the prayer by the priest in the Divine Liturgy prior to the Trisagion hymn "*Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord of Sabaoth....*" It is called the foundation, the Preface. Thanksgiving is this Christian foundation, which on it all things become possible and get built. It is the action on behalf of the freed man, and henceforth, the catechumen who is freed from all the attachments, by giving grace to the Creator Who in His return, bestows on all the assembled the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- From the Preface, we move to the Anamnesis, the remembrance of God's work in the salvation of mankind; the Creation, the Fall, the prophets, the Incarnation, the Baptism, the Crucifixion and Death, the Resurrection and the Ascension. This also resembles the piece of prayer that says after the Trisagion hymn: "*Together with those blessed powers....*"
- The 3<sup>rd</sup> part of the prayer is the invocation of the Holy Spirit upon the water to consecrate it. The same happens in the Divine Liturgy. The priest invokes the Holy Spirit to transform the earthly elements of bread and wine into heavenly vessels of Salvation.
- Then, in part 4, the priest dips his fingers with the sign of the Cross, or he dips the Cross into the water to liberate it from the demonic powers. It is similar to the exorcism made to the catechumen. In the Divine Liturgy, the same is done above the bread and wine after the invocation of the Holy Spirit "*and make this bread....*"
- Part 5, is where the consecration of the baptismal water takes place. "*And show this water*" that resembles "*and show this bread as the very precious Body...and show this wine....*" Therefore, this water was not replaced by something supernatural, but it was restored to its beauty and purity before the Fall. This consecration is the manifestation of the end, the eschatology.

- The water is re-created and the person who will partake into the immersion of the water may have the eternal life. The same that will occur to those who partake of the body and Blood of Christ. But Baptism is not an end means, a *cul de sac*. It is always considered as the first step into the kingdom of God. The person, henceforth, has to prove himself worthy of this great gift. This is what part 6 prays about and the conclusion of the meaning of this important prayer. All participants are restored, transformed, to their intended usage from the beginning when they were created and God saw that *“they are good.”*
- In conclusion, the prayer of the baptismal water is the re-creation of the matter, and thus of the cosmos, in Christ. Here God is fulfilling the request of the Church.

### **The Anointing with the Oil; the Oil of Gladness:**

- The oil is another kind of matter that is used in the Liturgy of Baptism. It is put on the catechumen who has already renounced his old man. It is used as the oil, which is poured on the gladiators who are ready for the fight. The catechumen is anointed with the oil as a sign of joy and as a sign of combating all adverse powers which cannot get hold of him. He is in a joyful combating mood.
- The same oil is poured on the water, as to protect the water from adverse powers and to make a smoothing entry of the catechumen into the water, a smoothing immersion.
- The oil<sup>2</sup> is known for its use as a soothing and healing agent, as a medicine. Remember the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Oil is used also as a source for light. It is a sign of joy *“when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face”* (Matthew 6:17), reconciliation and peace (the olive branch that was brought by the dove at the end of the flood), which signifies God’s mercy (*ἐλαία*, oil, *ελέησον*, mercy) and forgiveness.
- This oil is not as the myrrh (chrism) that is used for Chrismation, confirmation, the sealing of the Holy Spirit. This is a natural olive oil, which the priest exorcises (blesses) it before its usage.<sup>3</sup>
- The priest breathes and makes the sign of the cross thrice over the vessel containing the oil which is the exorcism of the oil to restore it to its natural use. Then, he continues praying in form of *anamnesis*, remembering the meaning of the oil in the history of salvation and he asks God’s blessing of the oil through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit (*epiclesis*), and at the end, he renders Thanksgiving for God’s grace of restoring, re-creating, the oil to become once again a gift of healing, peace and life.
- It is a very joyful moment that everything is prepared and made ready. While the people joining the priest by chanting the exploding hymn Alleluia (praising God), the priest makes the sign of the cross thrice on the water, then he anoints with the oil by making the sign of the cross on the brow, breast and between the shoulders, saying: the servant of God is anointed with the oil of gladness in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. Then he anoints the breast, the ears, the hands and the feet while asking God that this anointment may become *unto the*

---

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed meaning please consult my article *“On Mercy”*, that may be found on [www.orthodoxoasis.com](http://www.orthodoxoasis.com) under the Vitamin tab.

<sup>3</sup> Some churches may use the oil that was blessed during the Holy Wednesday prayer over the oil.

*healing of soul and body, unto the hearing of the faith, and the works of God's hands may walk in the way of God's commandments.*

- As such is the re-creation of Man, the catechumen. Now, both the person and the font that will be used as a tomb of the old life and as well as the womb of new life are ready to proclaim the climax of the liturgy of Baptism; *"as many as have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ."*

**Baptism; the Immersion into Water, the Death and the Resurrection:**

- The immersion into water is where the personal faith (desire) is fulfilled by Christ's faith. It is Christ's faith that saved the word from destruction. So, the personal desire to be in Christ allows the putting on Christ's faithfulness to his ministry, through His Death and Resurrection.
- As such, it is the desire of Christ to be obedient to the Father's will that He was crowned with victory over death and the demonic power. *"O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will."* (Matthew 26:39). And as such, is the desire of the catechumen to be obedient to the teachings of Christ that he is crowned with victory over his unrighteousness as Psalm 32 prays right after the elevation from the water.
- In this obedience to the will of God the Death and the Resurrection of Christ will become *for me* personally. And only as such, the faith will become personal and personified.
- Baptism and all the Sacraments are above all, Gifts of Grace. No one is worthy to be a partaker. No age and no personal faith will entitle the person of such participation. It is only because this grace was fulfilled through Christ's faith, first and foremost, that the one who wishes to obtain it has to be obedient throughout all his life. He has to relive his baptism, his commitment, every moment of his life and as such Pascha will become his baptism, his death and his resurrection.
- The personal fulfillment of our baptismal commitment is attained only at our deathbed. Throughout our daily life we may foretaste the eschatological crowns. We are living in the Pentecostal era, and through the *Ecclesia*, we may attain here on earth the things of the above.
- Every moment is a baptismal moment; it is either becomes Pentecostal for the Eschatological things, or it may rest dominated by the demonic powers. It is the U turn moment from the West (darkness) to the East (Light).

**Prepared by Fr. Jean el-Murr<sup>4</sup>, through the Grace of God, to the West Island Bible Study Group**

---

<sup>4</sup> I am much in debt for the late Fr. Alexander Shmemann and Metropolitan George (Khodr) of Mount Lebanon.