

BAPTISM

(By the Rev. J. Golden.)

The Sacraments of the New Law are sensible signs instituted by Jesus Christ for the sanctification and salvation of the human race. St. Augustine designates them visible signs of invisible grace. They fall under our senses. We behold the actions and hear the words of the minister conferring them. They are composed of three distinct elements, namely, matter, form, and the actions of the ministering agent. The proper application of the matter and the form by the agent effects the sacrament, which produces graces in the soul by virtue of its divine Author, Christ Jesus. The application of water and the appointed words, which are the form, produces the Sacrament of Baptism. This great Christian rite, the first and most essential of the seven Sacraments, cleanses the soul of original sin, as also of actual sin in the case of adults, and the soul thus purified it clothes with sanctifying grace. Moreover, the baptised becomes a child of God, a new member of His Holy Church with a right to all her spiritual good and an heir to eternal life.

Baptism is one of the three Sacraments which imprint an indelible character on the soul, the others being Confirmation and Holy Orders. This mark the Council of Trent calls 'a seal,' whose impression is permanent, in consequence whereof the Sacrament producing it may not be repeated. However, for wise and sufficient reasons, conditional Baptism is of frequent occurrence in the Church. In such a case there must be serious doubt respecting the former Baptism. In a matter concerning the salvation of the soul doubt must be removed and certainty established, and this end is secured by conditional Baptism, which is conferred on non-Catholic Christians who come to the Church. It is an ascertained fact that many who go by the name of Christian do not regard Baptism as a divine rite essential for salvation. Hence arises the doubt as to the validity of their Baptism. Too often, perhaps, an empty ceremony and nothing more is meant. A distinguished convert, Father Benson, informs us that conditional Baptism was dispensed with in his own case, as there existed authentic proof of the validity of the rite respecting himself. This was a rare exception.

The Institution of Baptism.

Our Divine Lord claimed all power in heaven and on earth. In virtue thereof He commissioned His Apostles to evangelise all nations. And when the converts were duly instructed in the faith of Jesus Christ, they were to be initiated into membership of the Christian community through the sacred rite of Baptism. In the twenty-eighth chapter of St. Matthew we read the words of institution: 'All power is given to me in heaven and in earth. Going, therefore, teach ye all nations; baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.' In these words, spoken after the Resurrection, we find the warrant and authority of the Apostles and of their lawful successors in the ministry to instruct the nations, to lead them into all truth, and to baptise them according to the very form He Himself established. And as the commission was above human power and strength, He promised His own divine support and guidance: 'Behold, I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world.' He Who calls Himself the Way, the Truth, and the Life, hereby guarantees His Church divine inerrancy in her office of teaching and administering the Sacraments, the mysteries of the Kingdom of God.

Behold the institution of Christian Baptism. It is derived from Christ, the High Priest and Mediator of the New Testament. It is endowed by Him with life-giving power to purify and sanctify mankind. Both this and the other Sacraments He has invested in the Church as endowments to enrich and console the human race, from the cradle to the grave. How venerable and precious this Christian rite of Baptism! It is the door to the other Sacraments and the gate to the Church. There is no communion with the faithful of Christ without its valid reception. In the absence of this initial rite, this Laver of regeneration, other sacraments, if conferred, would be null and void. They are gifts for the children of the Christian family, and not for the unregenerated. Pearls must not be thrown to the unworthy and unfit. Membership with the Church must first be secured by the means instituted by Christ. Through Baptism, and not otherwise, is admission gained to the household of the faith. Thus is established a right and title to the abundant spiritual goods of the Kingdom of God on earth. Thus are the Church and heaven thrown open to the soul. Through this channel the graces of Redemption flow for the first time upon mankind, effecting a mysterious change on each recipient. Original sin is washed away by the Precious Blood; the soul is vested with a heavenly robe, sanctifying grace; a new Christian comes forth from the baptismal font; another child of God is associated with the faithful; an heir of the heavenly Father also and a joint-heir with Christ to life everlasting. How great and admirable the change! Yet this is all effected through the Sacrament of regeneration instituted by Our Blessed Redeemer, and administered: 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.'

The solemn discourse of Christ with Nicodemus furnishes another proof of the divine origin of Baptism. This

beautiful and touching address we read in the third chapter of the Gospel according to St. John. Our Lord insists on a new birth as an essential condition to 'see the Kingdom of God.' Nicodemus erroneously understands the words of Christ 'born again' in a carnal sense. Whereupon 'Jesus answered: Amen, Amen I say to thee, unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God.' And he vouchsafes to superadd another explanation so as to leave no rational doubt of His meaning. The new birth is not, He declares, 'of the flesh,' but 'of the Spirit,' and therefore a divine and spiritual regeneration. He leaves no question as to the 'finger of God' being here. The Christian rite under review and its supernatural effects are divine by the words of Christ. Once more. On the memorable day of Pentecost St. Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, addresses his first sermon to the admiring multitude, and gathered to the crucified and risen Saviour the abundant harvest of 3000 converts. When grace had stirred up 'compunction' in the hearts of these believers, they 'said to Peter and the rest of the Apostles: What shall we do, men and brethren?' But Peter said to them: 'Do penance, and be baptised every one of you . . . for the remission of your sins.' The inspired preacher, the spokesman and divinely appointed Head of the Apostles, St. Peter, 'confirmed' in the faith, continues with the significant and munificent promise: 'And you shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.' Behold, how Baptism precedes Confirmation and is made the condition for its reception. For Confirmation is the 'gift' in question. The Apostles had just received the Holy Ghost with a plenitude of His gifts, and St. Peter will now be the first Bishop in the Church to confer the rite of Confirmation. The record of these events St. Luke furnishes in his second chapter of the *Acts of the Apostles*. The same Evangelist relates of the new converts: 'They therefore that received his word were baptised: and these were added in that day about three thousand souls.'

St. Augustine defines Baptism the Sacrament of faith, because persons receiving it profess their faith in the doctrines of the Christian religion. The converts in question accepted the teaching of the Apostles; gave way to compunction in consequence thereof; anxiously asked for guidance: 'What shall we do?' and finally received the rite of Baptism. As all were adults, instruction was an essential condition, absent also to the doctrines propounded by the Apostles, and penance for their actual sins.

Such conditions the Church has ever demanded of converts before their Baptism, whether absolute or conditional. The god-parents make a profession of faith for infants, and pledge themselves to have a care for their spiritual welfare. The obligation of sponsors become grave and urgent if the parents die, or if they fail in their sacred duties to their offspring. Conscientious god-parents have been known to play a very important part in the education of their god-children. As to the action of Baptism on children, it implants the germs of divine faith in their souls, and in this sense it becomes for them also 'the Sacrament of faith.' Hence the reason why Catholic children manifest such an aptitude for acquiring and believing the doctrines of the Church. In due season the germs spring up, and are cultivated by instruction into a goodly Christian tree, to bear precious fruit. How confiding the hearts of little children when learning the rudiments of faith! And how important for them to come to the Catholic school as reason begins to dawn and develop! A Catholic boy attended a certain State school up to his tenth year. When with much ado he was won over to the Catholic school he told his teacher that he was sure there was no God, because he could not see Him. Behold the danger of the secular school. The boy in question had neither prayer nor faith. The poison had taken root in his youthful mind. Yet the parents seemed to care not, as they had no school fees to pay.

(To be continued.)

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