

## The biblical and theological roots of the BAPTISM

### TO SUBMERGE IN THE BAPTISMAL ROOTS

### FROM EASTER TO PASCHAL MYSTERY

What the Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us:

*"Baptism is the gateway to the other sacraments. It is necessary for salvation that it be actually received or at least desired and by which human beings are freed from their sins, regenerated as children of God, configured to Christ by an indelible character and incorporated into the Church".*

#### Introduction

#### “Who of you remembers the date of his/her baptism”?

This is the question that Pope Francis asked the crowd in St. Peter's Square on Wednesday, November 13th, 2013. It is an important question. It should remind us of the place that Baptism has in our human and Christian existence, in our own personal history. This first sacrament is part of the sacramentality of the Church. And we know that even today the Church welcomes requests for Baptism: for babies, children, adolescents, but also for young adults, the elderly, the poor, the rich, the rural, city dwellers, men, women, French people, foreigners... and each one, if he or she makes it to the celebration of the sacrament, will be marked for life by this transforming event (hence the importance of a long preparation that requires time for a journey). (Acts 8:26-40).

#### I- What is the meaning of the Word: To baptize?

This word comes from the Greek verb "baptizein" which means: "to sink, to immerse". And from there: to baptize. It is used 76 times in the NT. The name "baptisma" (baptism) is found 20 times.

Originally, baptism was more than just a little water on the forehead. The baptisteries of the first centuries (Poitiers) were rather large vats, often in the form of a cross. The catechumen would come down a ladder on one side and immerse himself in the water three times: thus baptized in the name of the Father, in the name of the Son and in the name of the Holy Spirit. Then he would come out on the other side and receive the white garment as a sign of change.

Then, one understood better how baptism is at the same time:

- an immersion in the death and resurrection of Christ, we are incorporated into Him, into Christ, and with Him we participate in the life of the Trinity (Rom.5:5).
- A new life in Christ under the action of the Spirit. Taking away the "old man" and putting on the "new man" (Christ) (In Eph. 3 to 5 we can also point out the oppositions "before" , "now"... "you are no longer"... "you are").
- a passage, like the Hebrews at sea, when they came out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses.

The oldest Christian text that speaks of baptism is found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. (It was probably written around 56 A.D.) The comparison that comes naturally to the Apostle Paul is

that of the departure from Egypt at the time of the Exodus under the guidance of Moses. (1 Cor 10:1 and 2).

Baptism thus appears as a departure for a new Exodus.

The central mystery of Christianity is, in fact, that of the Passover lived by Jesus in his death and resurrection. Through baptism we enter into the Passover of the Lord, we are associated with his death and resurrection.

Phil 2:6-11: "He who was of divine condition did not covet to be equal with God... He stripped himself... He humbled himself... Even to the cross... Therefore God exalted him and raised him up... and gave him the name..."

The Christian Easter has its roots in the Jewish Passover whose origins go back to the Exodus. A few words about the Exodus: It is the founding event of the chosen people: The road was long, forty years. This path is inscribed between two water crossings:

- The crossing of the Red Sea at the beginning
- The crossing of the Jordan River at the arrival.

Between the two, a long road, a time of "trial, of temptation", a time when the people must prove their fidelity. God accompanies his people, gives them food and drink. The Covenant concludes at Sinai and the Word of God becomes the rule of conduct for the tribes of Israel.

Now, if we look at the Gospels, we realize how much their authors liked to make the connection between the life of Jesus and the adventure of the Hebrews.

- Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River, in the place where the tribes entered the Promised Land. (Mk 1:7-11)
- Immediately the Spirit led him into the desert, where Jesus remained for forty days. This is the moment of temptation. (Mk 1:12-13)
- Jesus also speaks of the new baptism he will receive, referring to his death (Mk 10:38).
- At the moment of the Transfiguration, Jesus speaks with Moses and Elijah about his exodus that was to take place in Jerusalem (Lk 9:31).
- In St. John, Jesus is the new Moses who gives the living water (Jn 4:10).
- St. Paul, when speaking about the exit from Egypt, states: "These events have become an example for us... They were written to instruct us who are approaching the end of time (1 Cor 10:1-11).

For Paul, the life of the baptized must be conceived as a new Exodus. Baptism is then seen as a way out. The path he makes us take is that of true freedom. Jesus, as a new Moses, leads the new people of God.

**As with Jesus, our life develops as a long journey between two baptisms:**

- The first is celebrated in the rite of water, (like the passage through the Red Sea);
- The second is carried out at our death, it is the final Easter, the one that takes us to the Kingdom. However, we are already gradually entering the Kingdom of God through the first baptism if we consider that baptism is an invitation to live more and more every day according to God's ways in our relationships, and to bring the Kingdom now.

- Between the two comes the time of the desert, the time when we are to prove our faithfulness. We live the Covenant in the light of the Word of God.

The Spirit is given to lead us, he is the source of living water.

This is the dynamic vision of a baptism that is no longer seen as a point of arrival, nor as a simple purification from sins like John's baptism.

To be baptized in the Spirit is to live in a completely new freedom. It is to banish fear and shame and go out into the ways of the world to be a witness to Jesus Christ. It is a new birth. It is like a call to another dimension of life.

To speak of the Spirit is also to speak of the Church. The Spirit of the Risen One embraces the believer in the baptismal gesture that connects him to the Church. The baptism in the Spirit puts a distance between John and Jesus, but also between Israel and the Church. It is a new people that is born on the day of Pentecost. We enter into it through faith in Jesus who died and rose again through baptism.

Because Jesus, who is the way, has called us to follow him, we dare to immerse ourselves in the paschal mystery by uniting our own death and resurrection to his. This is the good news! There is life in the midst of death, there is freedom in the midst of oppression.

Life and freedom exist now and will continue to grow until all creation is renewed, until salvation has reached the ends of the earth.

Baptismal life is, therefore, a passage, an "Easter" from infidelity to fidelity. It is a response to the resounding call of Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry:

"Repent and believe the Good News."

This call to "believe" must be manifested in all that we live, that is, faith must be seen in what we are, in all that we say, in all that we do.

Our baptism, our baptismal consecration is therefore both an EVENT and a WAY OF LIVING in the world.

## II- To baptize in the name of Jesus Christ

**The book of the Acts of the Apostles sees the opportunity to speak several times about baptism "in the name of Jesus Christ. Baptism is based on the authority of Christ and finds its foundation in Him. (Acts 8:16 or Acts 19:5). The rite of baptism leads to Him because Christ is its goal. Like all the sacraments, baptism makes man a participant in the life of God.**

Let us remember what Vatican II says:

**"By baptism men are incorporated into the paschal mystery of Christ: dead with him, buried with him, risen with him, they receive the spirit of adoption of the sons (of God)". This anthropology linked to the sacraments has two essential axes: the corporal dimension and the historical dimension. There is no sacrament without a body (corporeal presence, Body of the Church) nor without a historical dimension (the Memory of the Foundational Event, the inscription in time and temporality, and the openness to hope). It is all our life that is gathered in the sacrament, in which our vocation acquires its full dimension: that of the Covenant. Baptism, like all the sacraments, is therefore an encounter with and an experience of God, inscribed in our human history. It is Christ who is the center of this Covenant that has been fulfilled and renewed. It is Christ who carries out this saving action for man. And it is Christ**

**himself who acts in the sacraments: how can human action give God's salvation? When someone baptizes, it is Christ who baptizes".**

### **III- Baptism in Saint Paul**

St. Paul, in the course of his experiences and writings, explores different facets of the mystery of baptism.

1- In the First Letter to the Corinthians, baptism is a search for the unity of the Corinthian community, designating not the belonging of the baptized in the minister who baptizes (Cephas, Apollo or Paul (1 Cor 1:10-17), but belonging in Christ through his cross (1 Cor 3:23). For Paul, it is baptism that will become the sign of belonging to Christ that makes the unity of all, and no longer circumcision, as belonging to the chosen people, baptism becomes accessible to all: Jews, Greeks, Gentiles, slaves, free men (1 Cor 12:13). Through baptism we enter into a universal dimension that is reconciled by Christ. This unity, realized by Christ in the baptism received, is confirmed in the letter to the Ephesians: (Eph 4:4-6) when Paul speaks of "one Lord, one faith, one baptism".

Through baptism we then find the bond of unity of the ecclesial Body: the baptized form the Church as a Body whose members are necessarily united among themselves and with the Head (1 Cor 12:12-13).

In his letter to the Romans, the mystery of baptism is developed under other aspects. Paul compares it to a new exodus that finds its fulfillment or model in the passage of Christ's resurrection: "Buried in Christ, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we might have new life" (Rom 6:3-4). Baptism is, therefore, a participation in the death of Christ and the anticipation of life in the Risen One.

The rite (baptism) of a few means the passage of all. This dynamic is taken up again in the First Letter to the Corinthians, when it is argued that baptism is an assimilation into the death of Christ and, in the name of the way of death-resurrection that Jesus lived, a promise of future resurrection.

"We have been given a new life with Christ," he will say again in Colossians 2:11-15. The letter to Titus also speaks of baptism as a "bath of the new birth" (Titus 3:3-7), a bath from which one comes out "clothed in the new man" (1 Corinthians 1:17).

See: 1 Cor 6:11.

Heb 10:32; 6:2; 6:4;

Ef 4:5; 5:26

Tite 3,5

Col 2, 12; 2, 20; 3, 3

1 Cor 10, 2; 15, 29

### **IV- Baptism is an ecclesial act: through, in and for the Church**

**If baptism is an event received in an individual history, it is intimately linked to the dimension and life of the Church. According to Acts 2:41, "in that day about three thousand souls were added", the newly baptized are added to Christ, in whose name they are baptized, as well as to the community.**

**Baptism is performed by the Church and in the Church, because "no one can have God as his Father unless he has the Church as his mother," St. Cyprian tells us, and a vision of the constitution of the Church.**

**Not only for the purpose of constituting and expanding a local community, but with the whole universal Church (even if the baptized person becomes a member of a particular confessional Church).**

Celebrated in obedience to our Lord, baptism is a sign and seal of our common commitment as disciples. Through their own baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, among themselves and with the Church of all times and places.

Our common baptism, which unites us to Christ in faith, is a fundamental bond of unity. We are one people and are called to confess and serve one Lord, in every place and in the whole world. Our one baptism in Christ is therefore a call to the churches to overcome their divisions and to manifest visibly their communion" (Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry).

The litany of the saints on the day of baptism reminds us of the inscription of the newly baptized in the cortege of all those who wanted to follow Christ. The baptized person is incorporated into the Church, in and for which he or she will have to implement his or her own charisms under the action of the Holy Spirit, thus participating in the ministry of the whole Church in its prophetic, royal and priestly functions.

The Confirmation comes to fulfill this ecclesial incorporation, tending to make the Eucharist the nourishment of the baptized day by day to make him grow in the life of communion with his brothers and sisters and with Christ, and in his apostolic life.

#### **IV- To be baptized to become a Christian: It is a life in the Spirit.**

**It is not enough to be baptized one day... it is necessary to become a Christian day after day. Baptism is not limited to a feast, however beautiful it may be, a day in time. It is the first day of a new life that makes us live in a truly different way: as a Christian, as a disciple of Christ. It is not a static element, but a dynamic of life that is realized every day by welcoming the Spirit, feeding on prayer, the Word and the shared Bread, living fraternity according to the model and example of Jesus. We know the difficulties experienced by newly baptized adults in passing from the end of a journey (the catechumenate) to the life of a confirmed baptized Christian.**

**This life as a Christian is not limited to participate in parish life. Life in Christ goes far beyond the participation in the parish. It is the whole of man's life, social, relational, affective, political, family, physical, intellectual... that must enter into the dynamic of the Spirit.**

**How can we make those we meet discover this dimension of Christian life? How do we ourselves receive the witness of those who try to live this Christian life beyond the walls of our church? And how do we encourage and train ourselves in this daily journey?**

**Our Pope Francis invites us to go to the frontiers, to the peripheries of the Church. What does this mean?**

#### **Conclusion**

**You have this experience of life as baptized people. Although each one of you could have said in your own way what you perceive of the mystery of baptism and of baptismal life. No**

**doubt there would be other elements to add, and many other questions to ask in order to welcome, listen, accompany and celebrate the demands of baptism in the fairest way. I am thinking of the question of the relationship between baptism and faith: Is it faith that gives access to baptism, or is it baptism that makes us immerse ourselves in faith and receive it? The expression "in the name of Jesus Christ" as we find it in the book of Acts can raise questions on this subject.**

**Sister Chantal RABIER**

**Daughter of Wisdom**