

## **BACK TO THE WATER -** **BAPTISM AS THE PRESENT REALITY IN WHICH WE LIVE**

The fourth and fifth centuries were a time of great change for the Church. At the beginning of the fourth century, the Church went from facing the worst empire wide persecution it had ever seen under the Emperor Diocletian, to being the favoured religion under the Emperor Constantine who himself became a Christian. By the end of the century, it had become the official religion of the Roman Empire under Emperor Theodosius.

These changes provided the setting in which the Church found herself receiving large numbers of people into her membership. This presented a challenge as the Church worked to receive a much larger volume of people, while still teaching people the faith and forming them to understand what happens in the worship service

In order to handle this situation, the Church modified the process of the catechumenate. She created a process for catechumens that began on Ash Wednesday at the beginning of Lent, and that ended at the Vigil of Easter on Holy Saturday. At the Vigil, the catechumens received Holy Baptism and then received the Sacrament of the Altar for the first time. A person could become a catechumen, but in order to become a full member of the Church who received the Sacrament of the Altar, they had to go through the Lenten process leading to baptism.

However, it soon became clear that this had created an unintended consequence. A person who was a catechumen, but who had not yet entered into the Lenten process leading to baptism was considered to be part of the Church in a general way. At the same time, since the Church still practiced a rigorous process of church discipline for communing members, including public penance; and because it was recognised that baptism forgave all sins, people were becoming catechumens and then waiting years before they actually received baptism.

The logic of this was that individuals who had the status of being a catechumen were considered part of the Church – even if they weren't yet in full fellowship. At the same time, they were exempt from any form of church discipline, and so they could do what they wanted. And by holding off on Holy Baptism, people believed that they had the guarantee of forgiveness for whatever they did while they were a catechumen.

The most famous example of this was St. Augustine. He became a catechumen as a young man, and then it was many years before he was actually baptised. He said of this time that his prayer was, "Give me chastity . . . but not yet." And once he became a bishop, he found out what it was like to be on the other side of the process. Like all bishops of this age, he found himself during the time leading up to Lent urging people to present themselves for the Lenten process that led to baptism.

There was in this abuse of the system, a fundamental misunderstanding of baptism and what it means for our life. Romans 6 makes it clear that baptism calls us to a life that turns away from sin. As the apostle Paul says, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death?" (Romans 6:1-3).

Baptism connects us with the saving death of the crucified Lord and risen Lord. It brings about rebirth by the same Spirit who raised Christ from the dead (Romans 8:11), and there-fore it means that the resurrection of power of Christ is already at work in us. As Paul goes on to say, "We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

Yet the very fact that Paul has to write these words indicates that baptism does not bring about an end to sin. After all, he writes to baptised Christians in our text and tells them, "Let not sin therefore reign

in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness” (Romans 6:12-13).

We know this from our own experience as well. We are baptised Christians, and yet so often Paul’s words in the next chapter describe our own life: “For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Romans 7:15). We know that we fail to fear, love and trust in God above all things. We know that we fail to call upon God’s Name as we should and faithfully to receive His Word. We know that we fail in the vocations where God has placed us. We know that we hate and covet and gossip.

So what are we supposed to do? The answer is that as baptised Christians we go back to the water. This doesn’t mean that we need to be baptised again. Instead, it means that we return to our baptism and what it means for us. We return in faith and listen again to what God’s Word tells us about baptism. We trust in faith that this is in fact true. And strengthened by the Spirit through this we go forth to live as the forgiven child of God baptism has made us to be.

We return to the fact that through baptism we have died with Christ. Paul says, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death” (Romans 6:3-4). Through baptism you shared in Jesus’ death and therefore you are forgiven. And what is more, in baptism God has begun to put to death the old Adam in us. Paul writes, “We know that our old man was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin” (Romans 6:6)