

Baptism: The Spirit of Adoption

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In the darkness of the worship space, a parish community gathered for the Easter Vigil. The time had come for an entire family to be initiated into the Christian faith. They had waited and prepared for a long time for this night. Their journey was rocked by persecution in another country. They had found refuge in the United States and in this parish community. Their faith journey would be up and down, as the effects of former persecution left them suspicious of outsiders. It took a while before they were ready for initiation.

The worship space was dark, lit only by the baptismal candles of the gathered assembly. The mother would be the first to enter the font and participate in the Sacrament of Baptism, Confirmation, and finally share in the Eucharist. After her, it was planned, the rest of the family descending in age. As she approached the font, ready to enter the newly blessed water, along with the presider, the youngest son ran up to the mother and presider and yelled, “Don’t drown my mother!” The presider, in a joyous tone, yelled to the assembly, “He gets it! He gets Baptism!” Then he comforted the child, and was invited to stand and hold his mother’s hand as she entered the font. He was excited, and then he participated in Baptism. Baptism, for this family, meant not only a newfound faith but also a new context to live life free of persecution. Baptism marks and effects the journey of faith from all that is not of God (sin) to a new life in Christ. This is the Paschal Mystery: our participation in Christ’s death and life. Death is transformed into something new: life.

Like all sacraments, Baptism embodies the saving presence of the Triune God who leads persons from sin to new life. Two ancient images of the baptismal font make this journey more practical: a womb and a tomb. As a tomb, the person enters the font, is washed clean (of Original Sin) in the forgiving mercy of God and emerges with new life in Christ Jesus. The person enters the “tomb” and dies to the old ways, and then she or he rises from the “womb” with new life. This new



life means a new way of relating to the world. We are gifted with Christ which makes us his disciples—Christians—who embody his very presence, and through the power of the Holy Spirit we are empowered to practice God’s mission of reconciliation in our lives, cities, and neighborhoods. This mission is to witness to Christ’s life-renewing presence.

Discipleship begins at Baptism. It is not only about a new life but also about a new relationship to God and with Christ. This new relationship is understood in Paul’s image of “adoption.” The Letter of Paul to the Romans states:

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, “Abba, Father!” The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. (Romans 8:14–17)

The Spirit gives us the presence of Christ and adopts us as God’s own children. We share with Christ in this new life and new relationship, but on different levels. Christ Jesus is true man and true God. He is fully God and fully human, and fully one (consubstantial with) God. In Baptism, God “adopts” us as his children: we are given God’s very Spirit in Baptism, and are invited to grow as his children by responding to the Spirit within us.

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