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Those who step into the baptismal waters do so trusting the new life that Baptism brings.

Leaving Behind the Old, Embracing a Spirit-Filled Life

Ronald Patrick Raab

May this water receive by the Holy Spirit
the grace of your Only Begotten Son,
so that human nature, created in your image
and washed clean through the Sacrament of Baptism
from all the squalor of the life of old,
may be found worthy to rise to the life
of newborn children
through water and the Holy Spirit.
—Excerpt from the Blessing of Baptismal Water

On Holy Saturday morning, I reflect on the gift of Baptism. I pray in solitude for those who will be born in the Holy Spirit in our community as well as communities around the world. The elect's stories and decisions that searched the heart to enter the sacred font bring me to tears. This personal ritual during the Triduum centers me on the mystery of our people who ache for God, their families, and the communities that welcome them. I weep for our newborns. The tears come from the anticipation of how these lives will be liberated in the gift of the Holy Spirit. My tears begin from my gut. I am still an expectant father, a priest in the Church that aches for the Holy Spirit for those who will be soaking wet with hope on Saturday evening.

A PEOPLE WHO DIE AND RISE

My prayer prepares me for the dramatic moment when the blessing of the ancient waters will pour from my mouth. My tears arrive from many years of walking with people to the font. To prepare for the sacramental moment during the Easter Vigil, I imagine the baptismal water and see the hope that the Holy Spirit brings.

When I gaze into the baptismal font in my mind's eye, I see again the Vietnamese refugee family that was baptized when I was first ordained. Even though language was a barrier, the Holy Spirit translated the sheer joy and love in those Baptisms.

I view again the young woman who entered the font with emotional rigidity and stepped out of the font with a wide smile and exuberant laughter. Her Baptism was indeed a second birth. My heart goes back to see the middle-aged man who held members of the staff at knifepoint a few days before his Baptism. His mental illness told him that he should be the new pastor. With many graces and medications, he joined us in time for the Easter Vigil.

Memories are stirred of a post-graduate who clung to his drug addiction more than faith. On Palm Sunday, he had overdosed, yet with much help he found his way to the evening waters on Holy Saturday. I perceive again the young man preparing for marriage who was never sure if the Church was for him. I see the

old man who still struggles with many Church teachings. I view the handsome family united even more closely when the waters were poured over the parents and youngsters. I ponder those who struggled with sexual identity or the paperwork for an annulment. I glimpse the naïve and those who earned degrees in theology. These memories float to the top. These are the people who are still attached to my prayer, no matter where they are in life today.

This paragraph from the blessing of water at the Easter Vigil invites us as pastoral ministers to reflect on the Sacrament of Baptism for our people. These simple words help us form our people into the dying and rising of Jesus well before the waters are poured. This prayer invites us to shape the sacramental moment around people's experiences as well as the Paschal Mystery. We stare more deeply into the mystery of blessed and flowing water.

As pastoral liturgists, catechists, and clergy, we gaze into our fonts and view the deep reflections of our people born anew. We are usually so exhausted from our ministries in the Triduum that by the time the water is blessed, we glaze over the graces bestowed on our people. We deserve to sit next to the font in quiet and deep prayer sometime before the Easter Vigil. The liturgy invites us to dip our memories into the waters of new birth so to reclaim our lives in the Holy Spirit. We cannot let these moments slip by, no matter how many responsibilities we have in the liturgy and the preparations for Christian initiation.

A CHANCE FOR REBIRTH

The memories are worth our prayer time and may provide light moments and laughter as well. A joyous memory that arises in my heart is of a woman who arrived at the parish community while I served in the inner city. She insisted on washing her glazed donuts in the baptismal font. I was never sure why she needed to do this ritual, but she clearly understood a need for a daily blessing. She became a source of love in that community once we all surrendered to her mental illness and to her profound faith and commitment to Jesus.

On Holy Saturday, our elect have come to full term before being born again. The anticipation for a second birth overflows in our fonts and in our hearts. We wait for waters to break as the blessing invites us into further meaning. Our deep and passionate reflection helps us all come to terms with the stories, decisions, and circumstances of our people. We understand especially on Holy Saturday that we cannot control people's lives or change their life decisions or even heal their pasts.

Not every person feels called to Baptism and to this new life at this time. How difficult it is on Holy Saturday to listen to our people who have cold feet, who are reluctant to enter the mystery of Christ's dying and rising. Sometimes during Holy Week some of the elect will turn away from the shore of Baptism. Our prayer steadies our lives and guides our people to their place in life, no matter their decisions.

This is the squalor of human nature and the grace that rises up in the lives of our people. People come to Baptism with much grief about leaving their former lives behind. Alcohol and drug addiction, previous marriages, old patterns of comfort, the choices that other family members do not support cloud the

baptismal waters with uncertainty. Our prayer and reflection for our decisions and choices need to be grounded on the surety of Jesus' passion, death, and Resurrection.

The squalor of life may never be completely left behind. Moving toward the riches of Baptism requires a leap of faith. Conversion takes time and much grace. Sin and heartache leave permanent scars. Lives burdened by depression and anxiety, codependency or long-term grief may not change with Baptism. Baptism will not be a substitute for therapy or medication for mental illness. Baptism is not a pain reliever or a powerful drug that wipes away the past so that tough decisions no longer need to be made. We simply must give our people to this mystery, that in whatever ways God wishes, death gives way to life.

UNITED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

Baptismal grace cannot be controlled. Once an individual is baptized, the Holy Spirit remains in the person. The Holy Spirit will not leave people lost in doubt and uncertainty. Many people give up on the Church or give up on God because they believe that God has abandoned or punished them. They hold on to the notion that they can never be worthy of God or worthy to receive the Holy Spirit in their human and frail lives. They also give up on Baptism because of the insincerities and scandals within the Church. They do not see that our lives are changed in Baptism. These issues are part of the squalor of life, part of the ways in which we cannot control what happens to our people in Baptism.

We help build a Church on water. This foundation is ironically strong and vital. The Holy Spirit does not dry up, it is not slippery, nor does it puddle up for the benefit of the privileged. As ministers of this sacrament we do all that we can with our people so that they can begin to trust God and the new life the sacrament brings. This trust is the beginning of their lives of prayer as Christians but also the foundation of our rituals and futures. Trusting God to receive our lives born in the Holy Spirit is a lifelong spiritual journey.

On Holy Saturday night, this blessing prayer is an invitation that we are no longer alone in our quest for God. The squalor of the past, the bad choices of our youth, the lack of hope from our burdened hurts are embedded in the mystery of Jesus' dying and rising. As pastoral liturgists, we are witnesses to such grace and love by God. We are the people who stand at the font with open hands and hearts to receive our people who are now born of water and the Holy Spirit. During this moment of blessing and baptizing, we are creating the memories and hope for the Church well after our ministries are completed.

As we ponder the redemptive beauty of Baptism, the memories of Easter Vigils past, we stand among those preparing for the gift of new life. We are all expectant parents. The birthing process of love, community, and hope is well underway. In Baptism, we entrust our lives to God, whom we will love and serve well beyond the font on Holy Saturday night. ♦

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