

Tonight I want to look at the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation from two perspectives: our own lives, and our world's history. Sometimes it's hard to really understand the meaning of something and "why it is like it is" unless you understand its development in your own life and in the world around you. I think that the sacraments are such a rich element of life, that this certainly pertains to them.

Baptism Existential

Sometimes we can feel a bit alienated. Even though it goes against our theology and beliefs, it is sometimes possible to feel a bit alienated even from a loving and accepting God. We feel an inner reality that our being human makes us imperfect. We feel that the evils present in our society somehow have a bearing on our souls. We feel separated from God.

Everyone feels a need to belong. Whether it's a need to feel like people in this room want me to be here, or that my family loves me, or that I can make a valid contribution to a cause. The need for belonging is built into our human psyche. Most established groups formalize their initiation ceremonies. Be it the Raccoon Lodge on the Honeymooners or the Catholic Church. There's a desire to formalize and celebrate the inclusion of a new member into the community of Faith.

And furthermore, there's a desire to say that on such and such a day, I began to do one thing or another. We want to mark our beginnings. This is especially true for those things that are significant to us. And there are few things more significant or true to ourselves than our Faith History. It's important to mark that event with a special celebration.

History

Baptism has pre-Christian origins. It grew out of Judaism's purification and initiation rites, and the more formalized baptisms of John the Baptist. Baptism was practiced outside of Jesus' circle during his lifetime, but it was not until Pentecost that the outpouring of the Holy spirit was associated with it, along with conversion, repentance, the forgiveness of sins and the call to mission. This theology is worked out in the writing of Paul, John and Peter, but none of them give much detail on the actual rite, rather they focus on baptism incorporating us into the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, into "life with him." Sacraments were a lived experience, and not much effort was spent in trying to explain their details.

It didn't take long before this lack of detail was challenged by the particulars of life. Two controversies helped to shape the modern understanding and rituals of baptism and to move the Church into reflection on the elements and meanings of the sacraments. The first was the Donatist Controversy. It said that if the minister of the sacrament wasn't in a state of grace or was from another church, then the sacrament didn't have effect. This led to the second controversy, which was called the Pelagian controversy (which sounds like the title to a Robert Ludlum book) that rejected the necessity of the sacraments for salvation. Augustine responded that on the one hand, there is only one baptism and if validly performed, it is effective, and that, on the other hand, Baptism is necessary for salvation. Thus, infants could be fit subjects for Baptism, and furthermore, they placed no obstacle to its effectiveness. Up until then, the early church focused on initiating adults into the faith. But it wasn't long at all before families desired to come into the faith together so that they all could be

saved. Thus the rites of initiation into the church took into account infants, and could only be performed once. This was clarified by the Council of Nicea that wrote the creed we say on Sundays: "we believe in one baptism for the forgiveness of sins."

The church continued to practice and preach this perspective on Baptism up through the council of Trent in the early 16th century. But at about that same time, recent geographical discoveries of the great explorers began to cause another problem with baptism. If Baptism were necessary for salvation, what was to become of all the people who had been living in these recently discovered regions of the earth who had no knowledge of Jesus Christ. In response to this dilemma, many of the early explorers took it upon themselves to baptize with a fervor all the peoples they could find. This led to a zealous conquering of many peoples and the subjugation of many cultures. But another perspective arose at the same time, that of "Baptism by Desire," which was tantamount to implicit faith in Christ. If the individual had tried to live their life by values that were consistent with Christ's then they were saved. This approach was officially adopted by the Holy Office in 1949, and probably accounts to a large degree for the non-evangelistic nature of the contemporary Church. Other Christian faiths do not all believe in "Baptism by Desire" and so they hold that salvation is not possible outside their faith.

And yet another difficulty arose: what if a child was found and it was unknown whether it was baptized or not. Since Baptism couldn't be repeated and there was the possibility that the child might have already been baptized, some argued that Baptism could not be performed on the child. Yet if the child didn't get baptized, it could not be saved. And so, the concept of "conditional baptism" arose. The child could be Baptized again, conditionally. If the child had already been baptized, then the conditional baptism wouldn't have any effect. But if the child hadn't been baptized, then Baptism would occur.

This goes back to why it's so important to understand history in order to make sense of the rules we see today. Why was such a strange rule concocted? Because Baptism changes the very character of our soul. Once you're a member of the Body of Christ, you're a member forever. But the Donatists were concerned that a sinful priest could have baptized and that baptism wouldn't take effect. So they argued for repeated baptisms in order to guarantee that somewhere along the line a valid baptism would take place. The Church saw the errors of this argument and its potential to dilute the meaning of the sacrament, so they decided that certain sacraments could not be repeated as a way to indoctrinate the truth that the state of the minister has no effect on the validity of the sacrament. However, down the line, this truth caused other difficulties that had to be indoctrinated into the faith through still other rules, a bit more separated from the central meaning of the sacrament than the one that preceded it.

Today

- Due to the split, we have infant baptism and adolescent confirmation
- Parents and Godparents represent the infant as proxies
- They give the child a name

Sign, Symbol and Sacrament

The sacrament of baptism both gives us grace and takes away original sin. It removes the punishment of the temporal life and brings us to eternal life. It changes who we are by marking our souls with the sign of Christ. It incorporates us into the community of the Church, and it marks a beginning of a new stage of our faith-history. But how does it do that? Through the rite itself.

When I gave the talk about the RCIA process in September, I talked about the specifics of the symbol of water and the dunking of the person under the water to symbolize death to their old world, and their subsequent rising out of the water to represent a new and eternal life with Christ.

Other Symbols

We also shouldn't forget other baptismal symbols:

- oil
- candle
- white garment

Confirmation

Existential

We want to do more than simply belong. A life of pure observation is not a lived life. We feel a need to involve ourselves in those things which we feel are important to us. We want to do more than belong, we want to join in with the group in their mission.

But we also know that in the life of faith, joining in on the mission is no easy task. We need sustenance and a spirit that buoys us above the waves of life. We need something more than simply the community of faith to carry us through, because oftentimes we are outside that community when we're at work or in a store. Somehow we need to know that God is with us.

We also need to celebrate our coming into adulthood. We want to stand up and say "this is what I believe, not what my parents wanted me to believe." We want to take responsibility for our belief, not simply or passively accept who we are. We want to mold the clay, not just hold it. The adult faith needs to move from reacting to the world around it, to forming the world around it.

Society and History

The early church was very aware of the passing down of the faith directly from Christ to the Apostles. When the Apostles died, they left their churches in the hands of others, who in turn did likewise. But the Church was growing, and a growing church cannot long hold onto its simple origins. Thus, there came a time when the number of trained and competent leaders was not sufficient for each community of believers, and the role of bishop arose. The bishop was someone who represented a larger area of the church and who took special care of all the communities within that area. The post-baptismal rites (e.g. Confirmation) were reserved to the bishop. Since the norm of the Church was the initiation of adults, this posed little trouble. But once the Donatist and Pelagian controversies pressed the issue of infant baptism into becoming the norm, it soon became impossible for the bishop to be present to confirm at the same time as the baptism and the two sacraments began to split. An elaboration of this separate rite of Confirmation began in the 9th century, and it was only in the Middle Ages that a specific theology of Confirmation developed. This distinction was ratified by the councils of Florence and Trent.

In the West, this distinction was gradually made more clear by a separation in terms of years between the two sacraments until Confirmation no longer was the second sacrament given, but oftentimes the fourth, which lost the sense of Confirmation as a Sacrament of Initiation. In the recent history of the Church, it has gradually taken on an aspect of an adult acceptance of the faith. (*See who's been confirmed outside the RCIA. How old were they when they were confirmed?*) The separate rite of Confirmation allows one who was baptized as an infant to ratify that Baptism as an adult and to embrace freely and deliberately his or her missionary responsibilities within the Church. But while the sacraments are often celebrated at different stages of life, the Church does not have a sacrament of Puberty, like the Jewish Faith does. And that poses a problem. As recent reforms of the rite of initiation restore the unity of Baptism and Confirmation to where they were in the early church, especially by authorizing priests to be the ministers of Confirmation rather than just Bishops, another problem arises. Since the Church doesn't have a rite of puberty, and since all other sacraments are supposed to follow the sacraments of initiation, what happens to the aspect of Confirmation that has recently arisen?

Today

- Bishop comes to the parish
- Large group of adolescents receive the sacrament

Sign, Symbol and Sacrament

The sacrament of Confirmation furthers the grace given in Baptism by infusing us with the Holy Spirit in a special manner. The council of Trent saw it as arming us for our mission in the world and strengthening us by the Holy Spirit. Vatican II saw it as emphasizing our baptismal mission and a confirmation of our infant baptismal promise. Two modern theologians see it this way: Karl Rahner says it effects our participation in the Church's mission. Edward Schillebeeckx says it is our incorporation into the complete mystery of Christ, the Church. Both seem similar to what happens at Baptism.

The matter of the sacrament is the anointing with oil and the laying on of hands. The form of confirmation consists in the words which the minister speaks when he imposes his hands on the recipient and anoints their forehead with oil. Again that gives the matter a focus and meaning. Oil is a very interesting sign because it is so diverse. Oil restores softness, like baby oil on the skin. Oil beautifies in scent like perfume. Oil used to be seen as giving strength, like Sampson in the Old Testament, the gladiators in Roman days, and professional body builders today. And most importantly, oil was used to anoint kings. Combined with the form of the sacrament, the oil is a symbol of revitalizing our life in the mission of Church, beautifying our soul with the changing of its character (indelible mark), giving us strength through the infusion of the Holy Spirit, and bringing us to greatness through our full inclusion on the body of Christ.

Other Symbols

- New name
 - New Start in Life
 - Giving self name unlike in infant baptism
 - Simon became Peter when he knew Christ
 - Saul became Paul when he knew Christ
- Blessing with oil
 - Ephphetha: be opened

Questions

This one may take some time to reflect on, so if you want to skip it, feel free to. Think of some of the other symbols used in Baptism and Confirmation: white garment, candle, new name, blessing of eyes, ears, hands, etc. How does the use of these symbols enhance the celebration?

Does infant baptism *really* mean anything, or does it only affect us if we are baptized as adults?

What does *Baptismal Mission* mean?

When combined with the words of confirmation, what does the *laying on of hands* symbolize?

Should the sacrament of Confirmation be celebrated at the same time as Baptism (i.e. as an infant for most Catholics) or at a later date so as an adult we can assert our own faith?

What do I hope to get out of Baptism and/or Confirmation?