



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Baptism as the foundation of Christian life

1. According to Mark's Gospel, Jesus' final instruction to his disciples presents faith and baptism together as the only way to salvation: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (16:16). And in recounting the missionary mandate Jesus gives the Apostles, Matthew stresses the connection between baptism and preaching the Gospel: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (28:19).

In conformity with these words of Christ, Peter addresses the people on the day of Pentecost to exhort them to conversion, inviting his listeners to receive baptism: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (*Acts* 2:38). Conversion, then, involves not only an interior attitude but also entry into the Christian community through baptism, which takes away sins and makes one a member of Christ's Mystical Body.

2. To grasp the deep meaning of baptism, we must meditate again on the mystery of Jesus' baptism at the beginning of his public life. At first sight this is a surprising episode, because John's baptism, which Jesus receives, was a baptism of "repentance" which prepared man to receive the forgiveness of sins. Jesus knew well that he had no need of that baptism, since he was completely innocent. One day he would challenge his enemies, saying: "Can any one of you convict me of sin?" (*Jn* 8:46).

Actually, in submitting to John's baptism, Jesus did not receive it for his own purification but as a sign of redemptive solidarity with sinners. His baptismal act contains a *redemptive intention*, since

he is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (*Jn* 1:29). Later he would call his passion a "baptism", describing it as a kind of immersion in suffering redemptively accepted for the salvation of all: "I have a baptism to receive. What anguish I feel until it is over!" (*Lk* 12:50).

3. At his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus not only foretold the task of redemptive suffering, but also received a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who descended in the form of a dove, that is, as the Spirit of reconciliation and divine goodwill. This descent prefigured the gift of the Holy Spirit, which would be imparted to Christians in baptism.

A heavenly voice also proclaimed: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (*Mk* 1:11). It is the Father who acknowledged his own Son and expressed the bond of love between them. Christ is actually united with the Father in a unique relationship, because he is the eternal Word "of one being with the Father". However, through the divine sonship conferred by baptism, it can be said that the Father's words, "You are my beloved son", apply to every person baptized and grafted on to Christ.

Thus, the source of Christian baptism and its spiritual riches are found in Christ's baptism.

4. St Paul explained baptism primarily as a sharing in the fruits of Christ's redemptive work, stressing the need to renounce sin and to begin a new life. He wrote to the Romans: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (6:3-4).

Because it is an immersion into Christ's paschal mystery, Christian baptism has a much greater value than Jewish and pagan baptismal rites, which were ablutions symbolizing purification, but incapable of taking away sins. Christian baptism, however, is an effective sign which really purifies consciences and forgives sins. It also bestows a much greater gift: the new life of the risen Christ, which radically transforms the sinner.

5. Paul revealed the essential effect of baptism when he wrote to the Galatians: "All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with him" (3:27). The Christian bears a fundamental likeness to Christ, which involves the gift of divine adoptive sonship. Precisely because they have been "baptized into Christ", Christians are "children of God" in a special way. Baptism causes a true "rebirth".

Paul's reflection is linked to the doctrine transmitted by John's Gospel, especially to Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus: "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (3:5-6).

"Born of water" is a clear reference to baptism, which is thus seen as a true rebirth by the Spirit. In it man receives the Spirit of life, who "consecrated" Christ's humanity from the moment of the Incarnation and whom Christ himself poured out through his redeeming work.

The Holy Spirit brings about the birth and growth of a divine, "spiritual" life in Christians. This life animates and elevates their being. Through the Spirit, the very life of Christ bears its fruit in Christian existence.

What a great gift and mystery is baptism! It is to be hoped that all the Church's children will become more deeply aware of it, especially during this time of preparation for the Jubilee.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Denmark, Japan and the United States of America. Upon you and your families I cordially invoke the blessings of almighty God.