



From A Bishop's Journal (653)

Major Elements of Baptism (2)

I am pleased to share with you what Sister Marie-Thérèse Nadeau, C.N.D. holds to be the major elements of the great marvel that is our baptism. This reflection is part of my Pentecost 2006 Pastoral Letter.

A Fundamental Relationship with Christ

When I am asked about baptism, today, I cannot help but think somewhat sadly about the definition memorised years ago, from our catechism: “Baptism makes us children of God and of the Church, and heirs to heaven.” But why this sadness? Isn't it a beautiful definition of baptism? What was wrong with it? Wasn't it enough to aim at being a child of God and a member of the ecclesial community, while awaiting eternal life? As a matter of fact, what bothers me with this old definition isn't that it is wrong but that it fails to mention that filiation with the Father and fellowship with one's brothers and sisters would never be possible nor effected, if baptism did not give us first and foremost, and fundamentally so, the possibility of developing a relationship with Christ. This is serious: Christ had been left out of the picture! Yet, the New Testament clearly states that we are “baptised in the name of Jesus” (1 Co. 1:11-15, 6:11; Ac. 2:38, 8:16, 10:48, 19:5), and “baptised in Christ” (Ga. 3:27-29; Rm. 6:3). This is where it all begins, and the rest cannot be understood without this starting point.

One Being with Christ

Baptism establishes a fundamental relationship between the baptised and Christ. More precisely, to take into consideration the two expressions mentioned above, the baptised person is turned over to Christ and becomes his property, belonging to him in a very narrow sense. Saint Paul says that the baptised becomes “one in being with Christ” (Rm. 6:5). And this is not all. Not only is the baptised united to the “person” of Christ, but also to his “destiny,” that is, to his death and resurrection (Rm. 6; Col. 2). In other words, baptism gives the person the possibility of sharing in the two-fold dimension of Christ's Passover, death to sin and life for God. Mysteriously, but no less truly, the power of Christ's death and resurrection touches and transforms the baptised to the point that he or she can affirm he/she lives his/her own paschal event, his/her own passage from death to life. What was accomplished historically in Christ's body on the cross is “sacramentally” realised in the Christian. This is not literature or just a pious thought! Not at all. In baptism we “really” die and we

“really” rise with Christ (Rm. 6:11). There is evidently nothing magical about baptism. Although truly dead and raised up again, one can never rest satisfied. In fact, the fullness of this eternal life already begun is given to us on condition of our being faithful to our commitments. Can we blame God for calling on our freedom and responsibility?

Raised with Christ

If we the baptised only knew how deep death to sin is, in us! In his death, Christ not only destroyed sins but also sin itself, that is, Sin as Power, at the source of all our sins. Or, if you prefer, Christ overcame Sin at its root. So, from the moment the Christian dies with Christ at baptism, he/she is also in the process of dying to the domination of sin. Of course, because of his/her freedom, the baptised can still sin, though he/she received all that was necessary – that is, the Holy Spirit – to resist sin. Therefore, the more one lets oneself be moved daily by the Holy Spirit, the less one sins. Doesn't this make sense? You have guessed it, it is because we rise again with Christ that we are given the Spirit. The Bible tells us, as a matter of fact, that the risen Christ lives according to the Spirit (Rm. 1:4), and that he is life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 14:45). One thing is certain, several New Testament passages talk of baptism as a gift of the Spirit (Ac. 9:17-19; 1 Cor. 12:13; Tt. 3:5-6). Well, it is this Spirit that makes us sons and daughters of the Father, brothers and sisters to one another. On the one hand, the Spirit received at baptism sets the believer in the same relationship Jesus had with his Father and which allowed him to call the Father “Abba” (Rm. 8:14-17). On the other hand, the same Spirit received by all at baptism ensures ecclesial communion (1 Cor. 12:13). One should certainly not seek for the foundation of ecclesial communion solely in the good will of humans! Such an attempt would lead to failure. We therefore understand that “being-in-Christ” normally leads to “being-with-others”. This is only one action: there is never a participating in Christ that is purely individualistic. Please take note!

In the Hope of an Inheritance

Finally, to the Christian baptism is also a sign of the Kingdom and of life in the world to come. This is wonderful and encouraging; the “being-with” finally has no other *raison d'être* than “being-like.” In other words, the baptised live in the hope of an inheritance. Take note, here! Not only an inheritance announced and promised, but one which the baptised already truly enjoys, like the flower that exists potentially in the bud that is blooming. But this, on condition that one live one's baptism daily and not consider it only as a kind of passport. The baptised therefore has in this very life the assurance of a life that opens to something. His/her present participation in the condition of the risen Christ gives the baptised the certainty of a resurrection similar to Christ's (Rm. 6:5). This is such good news, in this period of Pentecost!

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