

## **AN EXPLANATION OF THE CEREMONIES OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION (Baptism, Chrismation and Eucharist)**

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### **The Apostolic Origins of Christian Initiation**

**Introduction:** There are several places in the Bible where Baptism is mentioned. Perhaps the most important is Christ's commission to the Apostles: to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19-20). The most famous passage from the Epistles on baptism is Romans 6:3-11 which is read in our baptismal ceremony and refers to baptism as joining Christ in his death and burial. Below I give three examples from the Acts of the Apostles of baptismal ceremonies. These stories show us how Christian Initiation came to be organized in the apostolic times and that the same basic patterns are still with us today.

**The Conversion of Saint Paul (Acts 9:10-19):** In the early years of the Christian Movement, after the death of Saint Stephen, Saul (Paul) of Tarsus was converted by an appearance of Jesus Christ while he was on the way to Damascus in order to persecute the Christians there. This event was memorialized in art over the ages with the most famous painting being that by Michelangelo Caravaggio in the church of Santa Maria Del Popolo in Rome. It was the artists who had him falling off a horse for the Scripture says nothing about any kind of a beast of burden; Saint Paul was probably walking to Damascus and not riding. Any way it is important to note that although Christ appeared to Saul (Paul) this was not sufficient to make him a Christian for he still had to receive baptism. Acts tells us that he fasted for three days after seeing Christ and before being baptized. A pre-baptismal fast became common practice and eventually became the origins of Great Lent. A disciple named Ananias was sent by Jesus to baptize Paul. He first laid hands on him to receive the Holy Spirit and then baptized him. After this they ate. At this time the Eucharist was still connected to a full meal as at the Last Supper so most likely "when he had eaten"

means that Paul also received Communion. So in this story we see that conversion is separate from becoming a Christian, fasting precedes baptism and the ceremony of initiation consists of three actions: receiving the Holy Spirit, baptism and the reception of the Eucharist. Also, we see the importance of an agent of the Church for Christ did not directly incorporate Paul into the Church but called him to convert and sent Ananias to baptize him.

**The Conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10:1-49):** Cornelius was a Roman centurion (leader of 100 men in the Army) who lived in Caesarea of Palestine. He was a Gentile admirer of Judaism called in the New Testament times a "God fearer." An angel appeared to him and told him to send for Saint Peter who was visiting in Joppa at that time. When Saint Peter arrived Cornelius called together his family and friends and the Apostle explained to them about Jesus Christ. While they were listening the Holy Spirit descended upon them and Saint Peter ordered them to be baptized and afterwards he stayed with them for a few days and naturally ate with them. Here we see a pre-baptismal teaching, the Gift of the Holy Spirit, baptism and Eucharist. Again we see the importance of an agent of the Church for seeing an angel was not enough to make Cornelius a Christian but Saint Peter and his helpers had to baptize him.

**The Conversion of the Jailer of Philippi (Acts 16:25-34):** Paul and Silas were in jail in Philippi praying at midnight and an earthquake freed them. The implication is that the earthquake was of divine origin for St. Peter was freed from his chains by an angel (Acts 12:7). The jailer asked what to do and was told to believe in Christ. Then in the man's house Paul and Silas preached to the members of the household after which they were baptized and ate. It was still dark when they ate and this was in no way a normal practice but the meal was served in order to have the Lord's Supper (Holy Eucharist). So, once again we see here the celebration of the Eucharist connected to the meal and after baptism. This story has in it pre-baptismal preaching followed by baptism and Eucharist

and again we see the importance of the role of the Apostles despite the fact that the earthquake was caused by the Lord.

**Summary:** When we add together the different elements of these stories we arrive at the basic pattern of Christian Initiation as practiced in the Early Church and still followed today in our Church. First, there is something that makes the person interested in Christ and then there is pre-baptismal teaching (catechesis). There should also be a pre-baptismal fast even if it is only for a few hours as a preparation to receiving the Eucharist. Then the three Mysteries of Baptism, Chrismation (Confirmation) and Eucharist are administered at one time. Only after receiving these Sacraments is a person a Christian and they must be administered by another person – the priest or bishop. No one may baptize himself or chrismate herself. In this Christian baptism is different from Jewish ceremonial washings (mikvot) wherein one purifies oneself.

### **The Catechumen Rites**

**Introduction:** The Catechumen Rites are held in the entryway (narthex) of the church. They may be held prior to the actual baptism ceremony or immediately before it. In the ancient Church when most candidates for baptism were adults they were usually held on Good Friday at 3 PM when Jesus died on the cross and thus overcame the power of Satan. The people were then baptized on Easter at the Saturday evening vigil service. Whenever an adult is baptized these rites are very moving for the person speaking for himself renounces Satan and accepts Jesus Christ as their God and Savior. When a child is baptized the god-parents do it in the name of the child.

**Exorcisms:** Our present day ceremony begins with several exorcisms or prayers to expel the evil powers. These prayers originally entered the ceremony because the Saints considered pagan worship to be the worship of demons placing the devotee of the pagan gods under the power of the devils. The demons would need to be expelled for the person to belong to Christ. When these prayers are done over children they protect the

child from evil and expel any evil presence near the child. We should never doubt the reality of evil and the evil powers for to deny their existence gives them the opportunity to deceive us and trick us into sinning.

**Breaking your Contract with Satan:** While the candidates and sponsors face west (away from the altar in the east) they renounce Satan. This is an act of the will to cut relations with Satan and anything evil. It is also a commitment not to participate in pagan worship or witchcraft.

**Making your Contract with Christ:** The candidates and sponsors then turn and face the altar in the east in order to accept Christ. The altar represents Christ and is on the east side of the church to remind us that He is risen (like the sun), He is the Sun of Righteousness foretold by the Prophet Malachi (Malachi 3:20) and that He will come again. By accepting and believing in Christ the candidate is attaching himself to Christ by an act of the will. Belief is indeed an act of the will and a decision. The person is giving herself to Christ as fiancés commit themselves to each other.

**The Creed:** The Nicene Creed that we use in baptism, the Divine Liturgy and some other services as well was composed at the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea in 325 AD. It was completed at the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 381 AD with the further expansion of the clause on the Holy Spirit. In this Creed we express the basic beliefs of our Faith that God is the Trinity; He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Each divine person is briefly described; the Father and Creator, the Son and Savior and the Holy Spirit the Sanctifier. Although brief, the Creed is the source of all of our beliefs and theology. Every other article of faith or theology is somehow rooted in it. This Creed is used by the Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and Lutherans and is thus a point of Christian unity.

### **The Main Ceremony**

**The Blessing of the Water:** The Blessing of the Baptismal Water begins with the Litany of the deacon. In any litany the lines

of the priest or deacon are the intentions, not the prayer. The prayer is when the people respond: Lord, have mercy. Therefore, it is very important that all of those present at the ceremony chant the response. The priest's prayer for the blessing recalls what Christ did for us especially his incarnation and baptism. We petition our Heavenly Father to send the Holy Spirit into the water; this is called the Epiclesis or invocation. We believe that this petition is always answered because of a conversation between Christ and the Apostles in the Gospel of St. Luke (Luke 11:9–13). In this teaching Christ tells the Apostles, who know how to give good things to their children, that our Heavenly Father (who is perfect) will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.

**The Blessing of the Olive Oil and Anointing:** The Word Messiah means the "Anointed One" chosen by God to perform some special function for the benefit of his people. The person would be anointed with olive oil and receive gifts from the Holy Spirit to perform their ministry. Each follower of Christ is anointed in baptism with blessed olive oil to share in the ministry of Christ and perform a ministry that will benefit the Christian people as a whole.

**Priest, Prophet and King:** When Aaron and his sons were chosen to be the priests of the Jewish people they were bathed by Moses, then anointed with olive oil mixed with spices (called chrism) and then dressed in their vestments after which they offered sacrifices (Exodus 29). Christ is our Great High Priest who offered his own life to the Father for us (Hebrews 9). We all share in his General Priesthood by praying for others and offering our time, talents and treasure to God. Those who are clergy share in Christ's ministerial priesthood for the good of the believing community.

Shortly before he was taken to heaven the Prophet Elias was told by God to anoint Elisha to take his place (1 Kings 19). The main function of the prophet is to use the gifts of the Holy Spirit to preach the Word of God. We see this in our Lord's life especially in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). We too

are called to know and preach the Word of God to a world that is dying without it. The best way to do this is by the good example of a Christian life and sharing our stories with others of how God touched our life.

When Saul was chosen by God to be the first king of Israel the Prophet Samuel went to him and did not crown him but rather anointed him with olive oil thus he became king (1 Samuel 10). Jesus is the Messiah or Anointed One because He is King by two rights: as God and as the Descendant of King David who rules forever and ever (Luke 1, 2 Samuel 7). We share in the royal authority of Christ exercising authority over our homes and serving our community with the talents that He has given us for the good of others. Christ also sacrificed his life on the cross for his people. Whenever we sacrifice our life or desires for the good of others we are sharing in Christ's royal office.

**The Sign of the Cross:** In the Book of Revelation those who belong to God are marked with a sign on their foreheads (Revelation 7). From the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 9) we learn that this mark is a cross "+". The priest makes a cross with olive oil on the forehead of the person to be baptized thus marking them as belonging to God forever. We may run away from God with our sins but He never runs away from us. He accepts us and we belong to Him forever and the sign of the cross remains on our souls forever.

**The Final Preparation to Receive Christ as did the Virgin Mary at the Annunciation:** When the Virgin Mary accepted to become the Mother of our Lord the Holy Spirit descended upon her and prepared her to receive Jesus in her womb and after the preparation was completed the Spirit placed Christ in her womb (Luke 1: 26–38). As the candidate is anointed with olive oil by the priest the Holy Spirit is preparing him/her for Christ so that when they enter the water Jesus may enter and dwell in their heart.

**Immersion in Water:** The person is immersed three times in the water signifying the three days of Christ in the tomb. By this

action all sin is removed from the person, he/she is born again as the adopted child of God and God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit comes to live in them. They begin a new life as a royal child of the Heavenly Father and temple of God. God is not far away from the person but dwelling in them. We use a generous amount of water in the ceremony to show these mystical realities of spiritual birth, death and cleansing.

**The Baptismal Formula:** The person is baptized by the priest saying: The servant of God N. is baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This formula comes from the lips of Christ Himself (Matthew 28:19). By it we know that God is 3 in 1 or Trinity. The Holy Spirit leads us to Christ and Christ leads to the Father and thus God lives in us and we in Him.

**New Clothes:** After the immersion in the font the newly baptized person is clothed in pure white. Other colors are not used at all not even as decoration or trim. The pure white baptismal robe is an ancient custom going back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century if not earlier and has several scriptural origins. One is the robe of Christ at the Transfiguration which was a brilliant white (Matthew 17:2) and when He appeared to St. John in the Book of Revelation He was also clothed in white (Revelation 1:13–15). So we see white as a color indicating the glory of Christ and his divine light. Psalm 103:2 tells us that God wears light like a cloak referring to the fact that God is the Source of Light and that God is light and there is no darkness in Him (1 John 1:5). Light also is symbolic of the glory of the Lord because of the story of the Transfiguration and in icons of the resurrection Jesus is always in white.

The Book of Revelation says the Saints in heaven wear white robes (Revelation 7:9). This shows that they share in the light and life of God and their sins were removed by the blood of Christ. White robes were also associated with the temple priests (Exodus 39:27) and thus show the newly baptized now worship God.

**Chrismation:** After the blessing of the white clothes the newly baptized are signed with chrism on the forehead, sense organs, chest, back, hands and feet. While doing this the priest says: The seal of the Gift of the Holy Spirit, to which all reply: Amen.

**Chrism from the Patriarch:** Chrism is a combination of olive oil and spices that are cooked together so that they will not separate out and thus making a type of oily perfume. In the Old Testament Moses was commanded by God to make it and then use it for the dedication of the Tabernacle and the consecration of the priests (Exodus 30:22–33). In the Melkite Church it is made every several years by the Patriarch who then distributes it to the bishops who in turn give it to the priests. Thus the chrism used in the churches shows the unity of the parish with the bishop and the bishop with the Patriarch and Synod. Chrism is also used to dedicate churches and icons that are used in churches.

**The Gifts of the Holy Spirit:** The purpose of the Chrismation of the newly baptized is that they may receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit which are: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord. These are given that the person may share in the life of God and show this in their actions. These gifts are also given so that the Church may be built up with each person contributing their part by fulfilling the special mission that God has given them in life.

### **The Eucharistic Synaxis**

The Sacraments of Initiation are completed with the reception of the Holy Eucharist which is the Body and Blood of Christ. By receiving the Eucharist Christ enters us physically as well as spiritually. At the same time because there is only one Jesus, whom all receive, we are united together by Christ. Christ is the principle of unity of the Church dwelling in the hearts of all of the baptized.

**The Procession:** The procession brings the newly baptized to the altar to receive the Eucharist. It is solemnized by several elements which deserve explanation. During

the procession we sing: All of you who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ, Alleluia (Galatians 3:27). This chant refers to the fact that by being baptized Christ lives in us and this is symbolized by the beautiful white garments that are worn. During the procession the sponsors, newly baptized and sometimes the entire congregation carry lit candles. These candles remind us that Christ is the Light of the World (John 8:12) and He now gives us light. They also remind us that we must be vigilant for the return of the Lord as were the five wise virgins (Matthew 25:1-13).

**The Epistle - Romans 6:3-11:** Once we arrive in front of the iconostasis the Liturgy continues with the proclamation of the Word of God. We hear the Prokimenon and then the Epistle to the Romans. This reading reminds us that by baptism we join Christ in his death and burial that we may live for God. The cross destroyed the power of sin and by being baptized this victory is extended to us. We must now live for God and forget the old ways of sin and corruption.

**The Gospel - Matthew 28:16-20:** After the Epistle we prepare for the Gospel with the usual ceremonies: Incense to purify us; lit candles to show Christ is the Light of the World and the singing of Alleluia (Praise the Lord) to welcome Christ who speaks to us in the Gospel reading. The lection used is the end of St. Matthew's Gospel where Jesus commands the Apostles to go into the whole world and preach and baptize. It must be noted here that the original Greek of this passage is frequently mistranslated. A better translation would be: Go, therefore and disciple all the nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit and by teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. One makes Disciples of Christ by baptizing and teaching, both are needed. Making disciples is not separate from these two actions as some people propose.

**Holy Communion:** After the proclamation of the Word of God we receive Holy Communion either at the Divine Liturgy or from the Sacrament reserved from an earlier

celebration of the Liturgy. The Bread and Wine are the Body and Blood of the Risen Christ. Christ is one Person now glorious in heaven thus when He comes to us we receive his Body and Blood and soul and divinity. He is one Person and not chopped up into bits. The change of the Bread and Wine into the Body and Blood takes place by the power of the Holy Spirit during the Anaphora. Christ is present all over the world and to each believer also by the power of the Holy Spirit. For this reason the Divine Liturgy is offered all over the world wherever Christians gather and not just in one place like the Jewish Temple. Christianity has sacred places where Christ lived or Saints are buried but the presence of Jesus is in no way limited to these places. A Liturgy in Boston is just as sacred as one in Rome or Jerusalem.

**The Divine Liturgy would be best at Christian Initiation:** At the Divine Liturgy we hear the Word of God and then offer our gifts to God which includes our life. This self-offering is symbolized by the bringing of the bread and wine to the altar during the Great Entrance. During the Anaphora (Eucharistic Prayer) the Holy Spirit turns these humble gifts of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. When we receive from the pre-consecrated Gifts there is no offering on our part. At the full Liturgy we offer and then receive. For this reason it would be best if baptism preceded the Liturgy or was combined with it. This was the tradition of the Early Church for more than 1,000 years. Now it is gradually being restored. It is to be hoped that more and more people will realize the value of this apostolic tradition and willing agree to have their Christian Initiation ceremony be part of the Divine Liturgy.

### **The 8<sup>th</sup> Day Rites**

The baptismal ceremony ends with several rites that were originally done on the 8<sup>th</sup> day after baptism which would be the following Sunday. They closed a whole week of celebration during which the newly baptized attended the Liturgy and received Holy Communion each day. This is vastly different from those people in today's world who leave the church after the baptism ceremony and do

not come back again until the next baptism in the family.

**The Washing:** The priest washes the face of the newly baptized with a clean cloth, water and soap. This is to remove the chrism and olive oil. It has become the tradition that the god-mother would continue this process at home and wash the entire baby and dispose of the water on the grass and not in the sewer since it would contain the remnants of the sacred oils.

**The Tonsure:** In some places the priest tonsures the baby. Tonsure is a ceremony by which the hair is cut on the four sides of the head to form a cross. This is a symbol of obedience and is performed on new monks and those receiving minor orders (lector and sub-deacon). When it comes to a newly baptized infant the hair is understood as an offering by the child to God in thanksgiving for the gifts of spiritual life and physical life.

### **Conclusion**

All the ceremonies of our Church have a profound meaning and scriptural origins. By taking some time to learn about them we can participate better in them and come to a greater understanding of God's gifts and mercy to us.