

The Sacrament of Baptism



in the
Orthodox Church

Baptism is the first Sacrament we participate in as Christians, it makes us a member of Christ's Church and is the beginning of a new Christian life. The Church takes new members of the Church (usually infants, but also adults who have not been Baptized) and Baptizes them by the priest with water and the Spirit.

The Baptism of Jesus

Just as we began our lives as new Christians when we were Baptized, Jesus began his mission to the World by His Baptism. Almost all Jesus' great acts happened after His Baptism. Jesus called His Disciples and performed His miracles all after His Baptism.

The day of the Baptism of Jesus is also called the *Theophany*, or the day God was shown to everyone is celebrated every year on January 6th. It's not that Jesus' needed to be Baptized to be cleaned from sins. It was a revelation of His Divinity. In the same way, one reason we're Baptized is to announce that we now belong to God and are ready to begin our Christian lives.

The New Creation

Baptism can be seen as *death* and *birth* at the same time. It's at the same time a *death* to sin and the ways of a non-Christian, and also a *birth* into a new life in the Church. Because of this second birth or *rebirth* we can say that the newly Baptized person is *newly created* or created again. The person is no longer someone bound by sin, but a person dedicated to Christ. This is why in the Orthodox Church insists upon total *immersion* or dunking the person as a symbol of the drowning, and death of sin. Coming out of the water symbolizes the Resurrection of Christ- a new life, like being born again.

Who can be Baptized?

As we say in the Nicene Creed every Sunday, "I believe in one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins." So, each Christian is Baptized only once. Even if they're Baptized in another Christian Church and then convert to Orthodoxy, they are not rebaptized. But, in order to be recognized by the Church, their Baptism must have been in the name of the *Holy Trinity*- The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as prescribed in the Gospel of Matthew. Christ sent out His Apostles instructing them-

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age "

Matthew 28:18-20

Those who have been Baptized in another faith by this formula are given the Sacrament of Chrismation to bring them into the Church. Adults to be Baptized or Chrismated must go through a period of learning the faith or *Catechism*. This was true in the early Church and Today.

The Baptism of Infants

In the Orthodox Church we Baptize new members at any age. The same was true in the early Church. All infants born into the faith are baptized as early as possible. And as a Baptized Orthodox Christian the new member is entitled to full membership in and access to the Sacraments of the Church. Some faiths choose to wait for the so-called "age of reason". However, just because a baby can't dress or feed itself doesn't mean this won't be decided for them. In the Orthodox Church, a baby is a full member of the Church from the beginning. In this way going to church and being a Christian will become as familiar to them as getting dressed in the morning.

That's not to say that no one is responsible for the decision to Baptize an infant. It's the job of the parents, but especially the Godparents to make the decision for the baby. It is then the Godparents responsibility to make sure the child is brought up as a good Christian. So really, it's the Godparents who make all the promises involved to God for the child. There is a spiritual bond between Godparent and Godchild lived in the spiritual upbringing of the child.

What Happens in the Baptism Service

The Baptism Service is made up of two parts. The first part gets the person ready, and is called the *catechesis* or the teaching. The part includes the making of a learner of the faith, the prayers of exorcism, reciting the Creed, the rejection of the devil, and the acceptance of Christ. This used to be done over several weeks, but now is all part of the same service.

The second part is the basic service of Baptism. This is the part that takes place around the *Baptismal Font*. First the Priest asks for the *descent* of the Holy Spirit to Bless the water, then the person is *anointed* with the "oil of gladness". Oil is a sign of healing from sin and God's mercy. The person is then Baptized with three immersions, while the priest says "the servant of God (name) is Baptized in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen." The newly Baptized Orthodox Christian is then Chrismated in the Orthodox Church (receiving the Seal of the Gift of the Holy Spirit), Tonsured (giving of the firstling of their hair to God) and dressed in new white clothes as a symbol of newness, and a clean soul free from sin. They are then given a cross and in the procession around the Baptismal font they take their first steps as a Christian. Then the New Orthodox Christian is partakes of Communion (the Body and Blood of Christ) for the first time. As all Baptized Christians have all the same spiritual rights as full members in the Church.