

Brothers and sisters,

Most of us can't remember the day of our baptism, but it was a day of supreme importance for each of us and for all of us - individually and collectively. Think back to about two months ago - or simply go back to Acts chapter 2 - and recall the crowd's response to Peter's preaching of the Kerygma: "*Brethren, what do we do?*" And Peter's immediate response, "*Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you too will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit...*" Later in the New Testament St. Peter says, "*Baptism now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience*" (1 Peter 3:21). **Baptism is the beginning of our salvation.** Powerful. Did you know that? Many (not all) of our Protestant brothers and sisters understand baptism to be merely a symbolic action, but the Bible tells us that it does something, namely it is the tool Jesus gives us so that we may be set free from sin and be given the gift of the Holy Spirit. That's pretty amazing! God comes to live in you. Wow.

St. Peter gives us a pretty strong clue into the first part of our definition for what a sacrament is: an outward sign. What happens at baptism? A person is either dunked in water entirely or has water poured over his/her forehead. What does water ordinarily do in that situation? It removes dirt, it cleanses someone. That's the sign value of this sacrament - it signifies that someone is being cleansed. However, what is cleansed is beneath the surface of what we see on the outside. Peter says baptism does not save us from dirt on our bodies, but it saves us from a dirty conscience. The sign points to the deeper meaning. The ordinary application shows us the extraordinary reality: a person's soul is cleansed from the filth of sin and made pure before the Lord.

When was baptism instituted by Christ? This is an easy one, very straightforward in the Gospels. At the end of Matthew 28, after Jesus has risen from the dead but before he ascended into Heaven, he gives this charge to his apostles: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...* (Matthew 28:18-20). This is a very clear command of the Lord.

What is the grace of this sacrament? As you can tell from the passages I cited above, this sacrament is the beginning of our salvation. It launches us into the Christian life. Before this sacrament, a person is disconnected with God and the Christian life is not really open to him/her. In receiving this sacrament, a person becomes connected to God, adopted into His family and made a member of the Body of Christ, and a world of grace is opened wide to be received. Divine Power is unleashed in a person's life. The Holy Spirit is given and comes to live within the one who is baptized. Where one member of the Holy Trinity is dwelling, there also are the other two members. The Holy Trinity lives within those who are baptized in faith. Do you think about this often, God living within you? I know I don't, but maybe we can improve.

May the Lord give you his peace!
Fr. Bryan