

Joined to Christ

Understanding an Orthodox Baptism

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In many contemporary non-Orthodox groups, baptism is restricted to adults. However, the baptism of infants is a tradition the Church received from the Apostles themselves. It represents a different understanding of the very nature of the Christian life. In modern society, great emphasis is placed on choices and decisions. We imagine that our choices are the primary forces that shape our existence. We all too easily become consumers of religion.



Orthodox Christianity understands that all that we have and all that we are is a gift from God. We did not bring ourselves into existence. Therefore, the primary characterization of our life in Christ is one of grateful acceptance of the gifts of God. It is certainly the case that such an acceptance needs to be made consciously by adults. But the gift itself is from God and is appropriately extended to infants. We nurture them in the faith and teach them how to live as grateful followers of Christ. Psychologists note that the most formative habits and character-

istics of our adulthood will have been formed by age five or six. Faithful following of Christ should be paramount in the life of a child. In baptism, a person becomes a member of the local and universal Body of Christ. Why would we want to exclude our children from that?

The service begins with a direct confrontation with the powers of evil. The candidate (or parents and sponsors of an infant) is asked to renounce Satan and all the forces of evil. Those renunciations are made three times and culminate in actually spitting at the devil. That dramatic action is immediately followed by an act of union: "Do you unite yourself with Christ?"

The candidate has chosen sides in the conflict that defines the very existence of the universe. In Christ, God has acted decisively to defeat sin and death and everything that stands between us and our communion with Him. This is truly a life-and-death decision.

Sacraments in the Orthodox Church are understood to do exactly what they say—they are not symbols of something else or meditations on abstracted ideas. In Holy Baptism, the candidate is truly united with the very death and resurrection of Christ. St. Paul says, "Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?" (Rom. 6:3).

The actions of the service offer a graphic depiction of our victory in Christ. The blessing over the waters recalls the waters of creation in Genesis, connecting them as well with the water of the Jordan River, in which Christ Himself was baptized. In Orthodox understanding, those waters also represent the gates of Hades—Christ descended into the waters just as He would descend into Hades after His death on the Cross. In Hades He "led captivity captive" (Eph. 4:8), and "having disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 2:15 NIV).

The candidate is given a candle that reminds us of Christ as the Light of the world. When everything is made ready, the candidate is immersed three times in the water, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. The ancient tradition of the Church is to immerse rather than to sprinkle or



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pour. St. Paul's description of baptism as a sharing in Christ's burial, as well as earlier Jewish practices of ritual washing, established the pattern in the primitive Church. It remains normative in Orthodox practice.



Oil plays an important role in the sacrament. Just before being immersed, the candidate is anointed with olive oil. That oil is a blessing for strength in the coming sacrament of baptism itself. In the early Church, this anointing

was often repeated during the preparation period for Holy Baptism. The anointing that takes place after baptism is itself considered a sacrament, that of Chrismation. It is understood to be the sealing of the newly baptized with the Holy Spirit, a confirmation and protection for the new life they are entering.

In the early Church, candidates for baptism entered the waters completely naked. This represented their total abandonment of all earthly things as they were united with Christ. To this day, infants are baptized in such a manner. Adults are usually dressed in a casual or simple manner. After coming out of the waters, the candidate is often clothed in a white garment of some sort with the reminder that those who have been baptized into Christ are spiritually clothed with Christ Himself.

The priest leads the newly baptized and their sponsors in a triple procession around the font, accompanied by the words of Scripture, "As many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Alleluia!"

A final part of the service will seem unusual to the non-Orthodox. The priest snips four small bits of hair from the head of the newly baptized. This is known as the tonsure. It has its roots in the ancient practice of the Jews in which, after the completion of a serious vow, one's hair was cut and offered in the temple (see Acts 18:18). For the Orthodox, this cutting of the hair represents a first offering to God from the newly baptized. We come into this world with nothing; all we can offer is the hair of our head.

At the completion of the service, the newly baptized is given a cross as a token of Christ's words, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me" (Matt. 16:24).

In baptism, Christ gives Himself to us completely. We accept His gift and offer ourselves in return. It is a pattern that lasts for a lifetime.



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