

HOLY BAPTISM

The Eucharist is the constant sacrament of the Christian life: food for the journey week by week, even day by day. In contrast, we receive baptism only once. That is because God's commitment to us is unending. No matter how far we might wander from God, when we hear the call to return, we are welcomed back with open arms. God's love is unswerving. It is true that we *cannot* be rebaptized. Of that the Church has always been sure. But there is something more wonderful to be said: we *need not* be rebaptized.

If some act of return is helpful, it may be useful to reaffirm your baptismal vows, as Christians often do together at Easter; or, if you want a concrete assurance of God's forgiveness, you could make a confession to a priest and receive absolution. Those are good ways to reconnect with the once-for-all gift of baptism.

The renewal of Christian life is always a renewal of baptismal life: a renewal of baptismal grace and of baptismal calling. In baptism, we receive the Christian *character*, as theologians sometimes put it. It is a calling characterized by love and mercy, by prayer and worship, by service and support for the Church, and by witness and Christian action in the world. We should see any more specific calling that we might discern as a more detailed exploration, particular to the person concerned, of what it means to fulfill what we become in baptism — a Christian in the body of Christ — whether to a particular role in the community, such as an occupation, or to marriage, or ordination, or consecrated life, like that of a monk, nun, or friar.

An important step in living that way, as a baptized person, comes with the sacrament of confirmation. In confirmation, a bishop, as a successor of the apostles in our time, prays for the special strengthening of the Holy Spirit, and confers that grace by the laying on of hands. Traditionally (in the Western tradition of Christianity, to which Anglican churches belong), confirmation comes when someone is preparing for, or entering into, Christian life as an adult.

Baptism is the decisive moment at the beginning of the Christian life. In an often divided church, baptism is also the beginning of our growth toward unity. Whatever our disagreements, Christians recognize one another through our common baptism, with water and in the name of God who is Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Baptism reminds us what we all share: that we are all recipients, all beneficiaries, all once poor but now made rich. "For in Christ Jesus," Paul wrote, "you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Gal. 3:26-27).



THE LIVING CHURCH

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**The Sacrament
of Initiation**

Baptism is all about grace from beginning to end.

Think of a baptism and you will likely picture one of two things: the joyful celebration of a newly born life, or the equally joyful welcome of a new adult believer into the family of the Church. In that way, baptism — or christening, as it is sometimes called — is the most homey and welcoming of all our rites and rituals. Yet it is also the most apocalyptic sacrament: a matter of life and death. In it we renounce sin, the devil, and the vanity of the world, while we promise obedience to God's will. Baptism unites us to Christ so profoundly that in it we die with him to sin, and to those old and selfish ways of life into which human beings so easily slip. In baptism we also rise with him to eternal life, which even death cannot take from us.

In baptism we are born again (see John 3:3), whether as a baby or as an adult. The 1662 Book of Common Prayer seizes upon the idea. Soon after the baptism, the priest prays:

Seeing now, dearly beloved brethren, that this child is regenerate [or *these persons are regenerate*] and grafted into the body of Christ's Church, let us give thanks unto Almighty God for these benefits, and with one Accord make our prayers unto him, that this child may lead the rest of his life according to this beginning.

This new life is God's gift of grace. Indeed, baptism is *all about grace*, from beginning to end — about God's welcome and love for us — whoever we are, and

whatever we have done. This is why Anglicans baptize infants (as do most of the world's Christians, and as did the ancient Church): God's offer of salvation does not rest on our merits, or our understanding. God's initiative precedes our response, and calls it forth. Even when we are stirred to respond, and when our faith continues to grow, God has always gone there before us. Infant baptism is one of the most important ways in which the Church demonstrates that.

Baptism confers God's grace. That grace, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, is free but not cheap. It is freely given but demands our all. In the early Church, being identified as a Christian through baptism might have brought persecution, even death. That remains true today for Christians in some parts of the world. It may not be like that where we live, but the call for a new way of life — death to sin and rising to newness of life — applies the world over. As baptized people, we stand with Christ, come what may. With him we oppose evil, corruption, injustice, untruth, and degradation. That calling encompasses everything about us.

Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom. 6:1-4)

Baptism is a sacrament. As Anglican catechisms often explain, using the language of St. Augustine, that means it is “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” The sacraments are physical and tangible actions — since we are physical, tangible beings — that bring God's grace to us, and assure us, by their quality of being physical, tangible, and obvious, that God has met us. They are *signs* of grace, but also *means* and *pledges*, as the 1662 BCP catechism says. Sacraments *are* what they signify: baptism both *represents* and *is* the washing away of sin and death.

Baptism and the Eucharist belong together because they are the great sacraments of the *body* of Christ. In baptism, we *join* the body of Christ; in the Eucharist, we are *fed* with the body of Christ, and strengthened to *live* as his body in the world. As Augustine said in the early fifth century, “Become what you behold; and receive what you are.” In Communion we receive what baptism has made us to be: the body of Christ.

All this means that baptism is the gateway to Communion, and indeed to all the sacraments of the Church. For Anglicans, as for the ancient Church, we come to Communion through baptism. That is not because God's table is closed, but because baptism is the open door.

When someone is ready to receive Christ's body and blood, that person is ready first to be incorporated into his body, the Church, by baptism.