

# The Sacraments of Entry: Baptism, Chrismation, and the Eucharist

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Each Baptism provides an opportunity not just to witness an event taking place in the life of some other person or family, but to rediscover some very important things about one's own Baptism and about the Christian life. First, one learns what Baptism is not. It is not about magic. It is not a kind of insurance policy. ("I don't really understand or believe in it, but I better have my child baptized because something might happen.") It is not an entrance ritual required for membership in a club or organization.

If it is not these things, then what is it? Here a short story might help. There was an English sailor who yearned to discover the island of his dreams. Finally, after leaving England, having all sorts of adventures and travelling for years, he eventually did find that island which fulfilled all his desires - only to learn that, in fact, he had only re-discovered England. Baptism is something like that. It is the gift, given to us in the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit, of uniting our life with that of Jesus Christ. The Tradition of the Orthodox Church confirms that the older we get and the more we experience and grow in our spiritual understanding, the more we will discover (or "re-discover") the gift given to us when we first started, when we were baptized. Two saints, Kallistos and Ignatios, put it this way: "The aim of the Christian life is to return to that perfect grace of the Holy and Life-giving Spirit, which was given to us from the beginning in divine baptism." The poet T.S. Eliot, perhaps in a different context, nevertheless said the same thing: "We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And to know the place for the first time." Every baptism one attends marks both the beginning of this journey in the one being baptized and the possibility of re-discovery for those already baptized.

Although it might not seem apparent, movement is a key element in the sacrament. The first movement would be the change required in a person's life style. Our present form merges into about 45 minutes what would have taken considerable more time in the early church. Then, most people being baptized were adults who would spend up to 3 years preparing as catechumens to be baptized. They would be required, in many cases, to make dramatic changes in the paths that their lives were taking. The service still begins in the back of the church with the theme that the one to be baptized is being received or enrolled with the official liturgical name of "*catechumen*," as one preparing to be baptized.

Next, four *prayers of Exorcism* are read. These prayers assume a particular view of the world. They affirm that despite the coming, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ - the world is still a place of sinfulness, distortion, and evil, effecting even the most beautiful and innocent newborn. The Prince of this world is still the devil. As part of this

movement, one is required to turn, face the direction opposite the altar and (or the sponsor, speaking for the child, does this) "renounce Satan, and all his works, and all his angels, and all his service and all his pride." After this is done several times, the person turns toward the altar and pledges the desire to be "united to Christ." *The Creed* is read and the person to be baptized with the sponsors moves to the center of the church.

At this time a censuring of the Baptismal water is done and the person or sponsor is given a lighted candle. *The Great Litany*, petitions which ask for God blessings upon the world, the one to be baptized, and particularly the baptismal water, and the *Prayers for the Blessing of the Baptismal Water* are then offered. Following this, the child/person is anointed with oil, reminding us of God's reconciliation with Noah as represented by the olive branch brought back by the dove and of His strength. The child is immersed in the baptismal water 3 times. While the child is being dried and dressed, Psalm 32 is sung, upon which the child is then dressed in the baptismal ("christening") gown. At this time the sacrament of *Holy Chrismation* (known as "Confirmation" in other Christian churches) is administered. The child is anointed with *Holy Chrism* (a form of specially consecrated oil) on the forehead, eyes, ears, hands, and feet.

The next movement is represented by a small procession around the center table by the priest, the child, and sponsors while the choir sings, "As many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Galatians 3:27). This movement is reminiscent of the Procession made by early Christians from the special place where they would have been baptized into the church building, entering now as part of the community, something that would have been done particularly on Pascha and other great feasts.

*The Scriptures* are now read (Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans 6:3-11 and Gospel of St. Matthew 28:16-20). The priest then *washes off the Holy Chrism* with a small sponge and the tonsure takes place. This act, the cutting of a small amount of hair, represents a first offering to God. The final action is called the *Churching*. The priest will take the person the back of the church and then, reciting several verses which emphasize entrance into the Church, will bring the child forward toward the altar (and around it if a male), returning him/her to his mother's arms. This will conclude the service, although the entrance will truly be complete when the child partakes of Holy Communion at the next Divine Liturgy (receiving a small amount of the wine, if just a baby).

The Service of Baptism inaugurates the child's reception of three Sacraments – *Baptism, Chrismation, and the Eucharist* – allowing that person to have the same potential as any of the greatest saints. Nothing more can be added. *Baptism* is one's personal acceptance of the feast of Pascha. It celebrates one's unification and identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. *Holy Chrismation* marks one's acceptance of the Feast of Pentecost, in which the Holy Spirit descended upon the gathered disciples. It celebrates the consecration and dedication of a person's uniqueness and talents - all in the context that "God's Holy Name might be glorified" in the life of that person or child. The gifts of *Baptism and Chrismation* prepare one for the true possibilities of communion, life, and nourishment that God provides in Holy Communion, the *Eucharist*.

These *Sacraments of Entry* mark the opening moments of Christian life: the beginning of a life in Christ which leads from "glory to glory" and to continual re-discovery and joy.