

The Form of Holy Baptism

by His Grace Bishop Ephraim of Boston

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Unless a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Why not? Because, as Saint John Chrysostom answers, “he wears the garment of death, of cursing, of perdition, he has not yet received his Lord’s insignia, he is a stranger and an alien, he does not have the royal watchword.”¹

Baptism has become a particularly vital issue of late, even in ecumenical circles. Wherever one stands on other issues regarding the Christian Faith, be he Protestant, Roman Catholic, or Orthodox Christian, all agree that Baptism is necessary for membership in the Church. This is quite natural, for our Saviour Himself declares unequivocally: “Unless a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

The Church Fathers, in fact, felt so strongly about the absolute necessity of Baptism that the Sixth Ecumenical Council, in its Eighty-fourth Canon, specified that if anyone “does not know or can prove by documents that he has been baptized, he must without any hesitation be baptized”—even at the risk of being baptized a second time.

That’s how important this Mystery is.

However, after this initial agreement concerning the need for Baptism, there is a general breakdown of concord on virtually every other point in regard to Holy Baptism: Is water absolutely necessary? Is water that which effects our regeneration, or is it only a symbol of that regeneration? Should infants be baptized? Does our faith have anything to do with Baptism? If so, to what degree? Is it necessary to have the Orthodox Faith to be baptized? Is there Baptism outside the Church? If so, then where are the borders of the Church? Does the Church accept the validity of “baptism” performed by the heterodox, and if so, under what conditions? If not, why not? Is the form as well as the content of the Holy Mystery of Baptism important? In whose name are we baptized?

These questions are not new. The Church has had to deal with these very questions right from the very beginning. For those of us who are Orthodox Christians, it is a comfort to know that all of these problems have been dealt with in antiquity. All that is left for us to do is to take the time and make the effort to search out what the early Church writers had to say on these issues. Basically, there is no need for us to hammer out our own personal solutions to these vexing matters, since God-inspired men, following in the footsteps of the Apostles and their disciples, have already resolved these questions. The only thing that is required of us is to uphold their Apostolic teachings.

Of course, it is not possible, in the space here allotted, to deal with all of the questions listed above. The task that is assigned to us here is to examine more specifically the actual form of Christian Baptism and its theological implications.

Several elements are necessary if the Mystery of Holy Baptism is to be imparted in its correct form. These elements are:

- (1) Immersion in water.
- (2) The invocation of the Holy Trinity.
- (3) The correct Faith.
- (4) The Holy Spirit.

Since Fr. Michael Azkoul will speak on the role of the Holy Spirit in Baptism and Chrismation, we need not consider this particular topic here. But in considering the first three points we will see from many apostolic and patristic sources how much importance was attached to the proper and traditional form of Baptism. This concern for the correct form did not arise from petty hair-splitting. It came, rather, from the belief that the form represents a statement of faith, a conviction, a vital belief of the Church. It is a visible application and demonstration of the Church’s doctrine.

In contrast to this necessary concern for the correct form, there is, even among those who are nominally Orthodox (not to mention the heterodox), often a grievous laxity in properly performing the Mystery of Baptism. This laxity is in fact so pronounced as sometimes to leave one wondering whether a “baptism” actually took place. In some instances, for example, vessels that bear the name “baptismal font” are hardly deep enough to baptize the baby’s ankles, let alone the baby. This is really inexcusable, especially since—as I noted above and as we shall see further below—the Church has always been so concerned about this matter, in view of the fact that the form itself is the visible application of Christian teaching.

Immersion in Water

¹ St. John Chrysostom, *On the Gospel of Saint John*, Homily Twenty-five.

The importance of water in Baptism is evident in the Holy Scriptures themselves. For example, in the Gospel of Saint John we read:

After these things, Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judæa; and there He tarried with them, and baptized. And John also was baptizing in Ænon near to Salim, because there was much water there.

John 3:23

Saint Paul also gives another important insight into the correct form of Holy Baptism. He writes:

Know ye not that as many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death? Therefore, we are buried with Him by baptism into death, so that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of His death, we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection.

Romans 6:3–5

In his first Epistle, moreover, Saint Peter makes allusion to the importance of water—indeed, a great deal of water—when, immediately after he speaks of the time of Noah and the *flood*, and how those who were with Noah were saved by water, Saint Peter goes on to say:

There is also an antitype which now saveth us, namely Baptism.

I Peter 3:21

Again, in the Acts of the Apostles, we see a description of the Baptism of the eunuch of Candace, the queen of Ethiopia. The Acts describe how Philip and the eunuch were travelling down the road in a chariot while Saint Philip spoke to him of the Messiah. Then it says:

As they went down the road, they came to a certain body of water. And the eunuch said, “Behold, water! What hinders me from being baptized?” And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” And he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down *into* the water, and he baptized him. And when they had come up *out of the water*, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing.

Acts 8:36–39

As we see in these passages, the element of water—lots of water—is very important.

In the generation that followed the holy Apostles we likewise have an abundance of testimonies regarding the Church’s Baptism. In fact, the texts are far too numerous to quote more than a few especially significant ones here. Among these is a passage in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, written around the year 100, that is, only some ten years after the repose of Saint John the Evangelist.

This work consists of three large sections: the first is divided into five chapters called *Visions*; the second into twelve chapters called *Mandates*; and the third into ten chapters called *Parables*. In the Ninth *Parable*, we read the following:

They had need [said the Shepherd] to come up through the water, so that they might be made alive; for they could not otherwise enter into the Kingdom of God, except by putting away the mortality of their former life. These also, then, who have fallen asleep, received the seal of the Son of God, and entered into the Kingdom of God. For, he said, before a man bears the Name of the Son of God, he is dead. But when he receives the seal, he puts mortality aside and again receives life. The seal, therefore, is the water. They go down into the water dead, and come out of it alive.²

This passage, like the one which we just saw in Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, gives another insight into the theological aspect of the water of baptism as an image of death. We shall return to this theme shortly.

Another second century document that speaks of the form of Baptism is the *Didache*, or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. (This document makes reference to the work which was just quoted, that is, *The Shepherd of Hermas*.)

Most scholars agree that it was written no later than 160 A.D., and, most likely, much earlier. As its name suggests, the *Didache* contains many teachings of the Apostles which were passed down and finally codified in this text.

Concerning Baptism, the *Didache* has this to say:

In regard to Baptism—baptize thus: After the foregoing instructions, baptize in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living water. If you have no living water, then baptize in other water; and if you are not able in cold, then in warm. If you have neither, pour three times on the head, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Before the Baptism, let the one baptizing and the one to be baptized fast, as also

² *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Parable Nine, 16, 2.

any others who are able. Command the one who is to be baptized to fast beforehand for one or two days.³ Here we see how an alternate form of Baptism is provided for, with, however, the specific qualification that such an alternate may be used only when the prescribed and traditional form cannot be used for some good reason. The Church maintains this use of an alternate form of Baptism, in, for example, the case of clinical Baptisms, or in other cases where no water at all is available and one is in danger of dying without Baptism. Nonetheless, in such cases, the Church also specifies that, if the person lives, such “special” or emergency Baptisms must be perfected and “regularized” at the first opportunity—that is, set aright according to the prescribed and canonical order. But here we have been talking for so long about Baptism, and we have not yet examined the exact meaning of this word. This is especially important at this point where we are discussing the correct form of Baptism, and the use of alternate, emergency forms, and how the Church views these various forms.

Baptism is a Greek word, and so we have to turn to the Greeks to find out what they meant by this word. As the saying goes, “The Greeks have a word for it.” (Here, alas, the bitter truth must be confessed: sometimes, they don’t have a word for it. For example, there is no Greek word for “toe.” What we call “toes” are known in Greek as “the fingers of the foot,” or maybe “little fingers.” So if you look carefully [in a Greek lexicon], you will see that Greeks don’t have toes.)

They did have a word for “baptism,” however, and that word is *baptisma*; they had a verb too: *baptizein*—“to baptize.” What did the ancient Greeks mean when they called something “baptized”? Hippocrates used the word, in its passive sense, to refer to something that was *drenched*. Eubulus the comedian used the word in reference to drunkards who were “soaked in wine.” Plato used the term to describe debtors who were “over their head and ears in debt.” And in regard to someone who was being interrogated, he used the same word to say “he was *drowned* with questions; he was getting into deep water.” And finally, the historian Polybius refers to ships that were “baptized” during a sea battle, that is, they had sunk right down to the bottom of the sea.

At the risk of repeating a good story to an audience that may already have heard it, a few years ago a Roman Catholic priest came by our monastery, and I happened to be on telephone duty. During our conversation he asked, “Is it true that you Orthodox baptize by immersion?” I told him, “Well, you must know that ‘baptism’ is a Greek word that means ‘immersion.’ So what you’re really asking me is if we immerse by immersion, and the answer to that is: “Yes!”

But why is *immersion* so important? Because it is a figure and symbol of Christ’s death and burial. As we saw above from Saint Paul:

Know ye not that as many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death? Therefore, we are buried with Him by baptism into death . . . For if we have been planted together in the likeness of His death, we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection.

Romans 6:3–5

In one of his homilies, Mar Jacob, Bishop of Serugh, who lived in the fifth and sixth centuries, brings out this link between our Saviour’s death and the Mystery of Holy Baptism:

Adam in turn slept, and his side was pierced;
from it came forth Eve to be mother for the whole world,
serving as an image of that sleep of death on the Cross
and that side which gave birth to Baptism.
Adam slept and gave the whole world a mother;
the Saviour died, and there flows from Him baptismal water.⁴

Mar Jacob (among other Church writers) speaks of the water and blood that came forth from our Saviour’s side on the Cross. The water is an image of the Mystery of Holy Baptism, the blood is an image of the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist. The one is the image of our death, the other of the source of our life.

In his beautiful homily on Moses’ veil, Mar Jacob intertwines the themes of Baptism and death, of the Crucifixion and of Holy Communion, of the union of Christ the Bridegroom with His Bride the Church. In one remarkable passage he says:

From the [baptismal] water comes the chaste and holy union
of Bride and Bridegroom, united in spirit in Baptism.

³ *Didache*, 7, 1.

⁴ Mar Jacob of Serugh, “On the Mysteries, Types, and Figures of Christ,” trans. Sebastian Brock in “The Mysteries Hidden in the Side of Christ,” *Sobornost* 7, no. 6 (1978), p. 464.

Women are not joined to their husbands in the same way
 as the Church is joined with the Son of God.
 What bridegroom died for his bride, apart from our Lord?
 What bride sought out a slain man to be her husband?
 Who, from the world's beginning, ever gave his blood as the bride-price?
 Apart from the Crucified one, who sealed the marriage with His wounds?
 Who has ever seen a corpse placed in the midst of the wedding feast,
 with the bride embracing it, waiting to be comforted by it?
 At what wedding, apart from this, did they break
 the body of the bridegroom for the guests in place of other food?
 Wives are separated from their husbands by death
 but this Bride is joined to her Beloved by death!
 He died on the Cross and gave His Body to the Bride made glorious,
 and she plucks and eats it every day at His table;
 He opened up His side and mixed His cup with holy Blood,
 He gave it her to drink that she might forget her many idols.
 She was anointed with Him in the oil,⁵ she put Him on in the water, she consumed Him in the Bread,
 She drank Him in the Wine, so that the world might know that the two of them are one.
 He died on the Cross, but she does not exchange Him for another;
 she is full of love for His death, knowing that from it she has life.
 Man and wife were the basis of this mystery,
 they served as a picture and type and image for reality.
 By means of them Moses uttered this great mystery,
 covering up and preserving it under a veil so that it should not be laid bare.
 The great Apostle uncovered its beauty and showed it to the world,

and so Moses' words 'the two shall be one', stood illumined.⁶

And in his homilies on the Gospel of Saint John, our holy Father John Chrysostom elaborates the theme of Baptism and death:

In Baptism are completed the articles of our covenant with God; burial and death, resurrection and life; and these take place all at once. For when we plunge our heads down in the water, the old man is buried in a tomb below, and wholly sunk for ever; then, as we raise them again, the new man rises in his place. As it is easy for us to dip and to lift our heads again, so it is easy for God to bury the old man, and to show forth the new. And this is done thrice, that you may learn that the power of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit fulfils all this. To show that what we say is no conjecture, hear Paul saying, "We were buried with Him by Baptism into death"; and again, "Our old man was crucified with Him"; and again, "We have been planted together in the likeness of His death." And not only is Baptism called a "cross," but the Cross is called Baptism. "With the Baptism," says Christ, "that I am baptized with, shall ye be baptized"; and "I have a Baptism to be baptized with, which ye know not." For as we easily dip and lift our heads again, so He also easily died and rose again when He willed; or rather, much more easily, though He tarried the three days for the dispensation of a certain mystery.⁷

In still another homily, Saint John Chrysostom notes that other people fish by pulling the fish out of the water, whereas we Christians fish by throwing the fish into the water!⁸

The complete immersion or submersion of an individual in Baptism is the figure of the death of the old man, and his emergence from the water as one reborn is a figure of renewal and the consecration of a new life in the figure of the Resurrection. We do not bury people by sprinkling a handful of earth over their heads or by shaking a little shovel full of dirt over them. No, we bury them completely, deep in the earth. Immersion, that is, Baptism, is one

⁵ Literally, "She anointed Him with oil," and translated thus by Sebastian Brock.

⁶ Mar Jacob of Serugh, "Concerning the Veil on Moses' Face," trans. Sebastian Brock, *Sobornost* 3, no. 1 (1981), pp. 75–76.

⁷ Saint John Chrysostom *On the Gospel of Saint John*, Homily Twenty-five.

⁸ Saint John Chrysostom *On the Holy Pascha* (Migne, PG 50, 437).

thing and sprinkling is another. They are not the same, and that is why the Holy Scriptures make a point of telling us that Saint John the Forerunner was baptizing at Ænon near Salim, “because there was much water there.” Indeed, why should Saint John the Baptist, or our Saviour, take the trouble to go all the way down to the Jordan River if any little washbasin elsewhere would have served the same purpose?

Assuredly, just as sprinkling a little earth over the head of a dead man does not count as burial, even so does sprinkling a little water over one’s head not amount to Baptism, neither does it serve as a symbol of the death of our old self, nor even as a “likeness” of the death and burial of our Saviour.

Even elephants have more sense in this particular regard.

Have any of you ever been to an elephant funeral? Now, there’s a funeral for you! Their time-honored observances in this matter are certainly most impressive. First of all, the prescribed form calls for a lot of mournful trumpeting and solemn stomping of the feet as the mourners circle the deceased. Then the bereaved elephants go off in different directions and break leafy branches off from the trees. They carry these back in their trunks and use them to bury the carcass of the newly-departed. Note that they don’t just sprinkle a few leaves or throw a couple of roses over the body. No indeed. They completely bury it under the branches. So, in this particular case at least, even elephants have more sense than some people do. Instinctively, the wise elephant knows that when one is dead, one is dead and buried, not dead and sprinkled.

Returning to our own, too often less circumspect species, we observe that all the ancient authorities, including the Holy Scriptures, bear witness to the Orthodox tradition of immersion. The Jews themselves had their *miq’uah*, which was a ritualistic form of washing. Their “baptisteries,” so to speak, where these rites were carried out, have been found throughout Judæa, and they are all deep enough to allow a person to be completely submerged. So deep are these fonts, that steps had to be provided, both leading in and leading out of these man-made pools. The very same is true of the ancient Christian baptisteries which exist to this day, for example, in Ravenna, Italy.

There can be no doubt, then, that for the Church in antiquity, and for the Church today, Baptism meant, and still means, complete immersion.

The Invocation of the Holy Trinity

Now we must ask what words are to be used when conducting Holy Baptism in its correct form. Again the Holy Scriptures and the ancient practice of the Church furnish the answer. Our Saviour commanded the Apostles: 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 things whatsoever I have commanded you.

Matt. 28:19–20

Saint Justin the Martyr, in his *First Apology*, makes reference not only to the invocation of the Holy Trinity, but also to the three-fold immersion, exactly as we correctly practice it in the Church today. And keep in mind that Saint Justin belonged to the first generation after the Apostolic era. If anyone did, he knew how the Apostles conducted Baptism. Here is what he says:

Then they [the candidates for Baptism] are brought by us where there is water, and they are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves reborn. For, in the Name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they receive the washing with water.⁹

And a little later in the same chapter, he writes:

So that we should not remain children of necessity and ignorance, but of free choice and knowledge, and obtain remission of the sins we have already committed, there is named at the water, over him who has chosen to be born again and has repented of his sinful acts, the Name of God the Father and Master of all. . . . [Then] the one who is being illumined is also washed in the Name of Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and also in the Name of the Holy Spirit, Who through the Prophets foretold everything about Jesus.¹⁰

The *Didache* likewise confirms this practice of immersion in the Name of the Holy Trinity. Another prominent text which affirms this usage is the early third-century work known as *The Apostolic Tradition*, ascribed by many to Saint Hippolytus of Rome, who is thought to have written it around the year 215. Here is the description of the baptismal rite found in this ancient document:

After all these things have been done, let him [the candidate for baptism] be given over to the bishop or presbyter who will baptize. Let them stand naked in the water, a deacon going down with them likewise. When the one being baptized goes down into the water, the one baptizing him shall put his hand on him and speak thus: “Do you

⁹ Saint Justin Martyr *First Apology*, chapter 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

believe in God, the Father Almighty?" And he that is being baptized shall say: "I believe." Then, having his hand imposed upon the head of the one to be baptized, he shall baptize him once. And then he shall say: "Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, Who was born of the Holy Spirit, of the Virgin Mary, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate and died and rose up again on the third day, alive from the dead, and ascended into Heaven and sat at the right hand of the Father, about to come to judge the living and dead?" [Notice how much this resembles the Nicene Creed, which was composed 110 years later at the First Ecumenical Council.] And when he says: "I believe," he is baptized again. And again he shall say: "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit and the holy Church and the resurrection of the flesh?" The one being baptized then says: "I believe." And so he is baptized a third time. And afterwards, when he has come out, he is anointed with the consecrated oil.¹¹

In his *Mystagogical Catecheses*, which were written around the year 350, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem describes the same ceremony with these words:

After these things, you were led by the hand to the holy pool of divine Baptism, as Christ was carried from the Cross to this sepulchre here before us. And each of you was asked if he believed in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. And you confessed that saving confession, and descended three times into the water, and again ascended; and in this there was intimated by a symbol the three days of Christ's burial.¹²

In summing up this second part of our subject, I quote the learned Church scholar Fr. George Florovsky, who observes:

Holy Baptism, which according to the traditions of faith is performed in the Name of the One and Indivisible Trinity, brings salvation. The Mystery takes place in the Name of the Trinity, and [as Saint Athanasius the Great says in his Letter to Serapion,] "whoever takes anything away from the Trinity and is baptized in the Name of the Father alone, or in the Name of the Son without the Spirit, receives nothing. Those who are baptized in this way and those who think they are giving Baptism remain empty and unsatisfied."¹³

Then, paraphrasing Saint Athanasius, Fr. George continues:

In spite of the fact that the necessary words are spoken, Arian Baptism "in the Name of the Creator and His creation" "is only apparent and not real" because the words must be accompanied by true Faith. Baptism takes place in the Name of the Trinity because grace is received from the Trinity.¹⁴

These authoritative witnesses from antiquity establish beyond question what the Church's practice was and continues to be, both in the specific form that Baptism took (that is, immersion), and with what formula the Baptism was accomplished (that is, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit).

The Correct Faith

Now we come to the third part of our discourse. We must consider, though briefly by necessity, the doctrinal foundations of the Church's Baptism. Here we must ask whether the traditional, Orthodox Faith of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church is the only appropriate basis for a valid Baptism; or whether it is possible to have a valid Baptism established upon another, nominally Christian, credo? In other words, can Orthodoxy and heterodoxy equally, or even unequally, support the Mystery of spiritual rebirth, as our Saviour imparted it unto us?

Perhaps a little anecdote will help us keep on course.

Since our monastery—Holy Transfiguration—adheres to the traditional, ecclesiastical calendar and we have also been very vocal in our objections to Ecumenism, we are quite often visited by students, professors, clergymen, and once in a while, even bishops affiliated with Holy Cross, the nearby theological academy of the new calendar Greek Archdiocese in this country. These visits are often made with the purpose of trying to persuade us that the ecumenical path which their jurisdiction follows in no way compromises the Orthodox Faith. Virtually without exception, these good people open their defense with the words, "I believe," "I think," "I feel," or "In my opinion." But right at this point, we feel compelled to say, "Wait, wait! What you or I believe, or think, or feel, has no bearing on this matter. The only thing that is of any importance and has any authority in these matters is what the Church believes, thinks, and feels. If we start going on the basis of what each one of us thinks, believes, or feels,

¹¹ Saint Hippolytus of Rome *The Apostolic Tradition*, 21, 12–20.

¹² Saint Cyril of Jerusalem *Mystagogical Catecheses*, 2, 4.

¹³ Father Georges Florovsky, *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century* (Vaduz: B uchervertriebsanstalt, 1987), pp. 57–58.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

then we'll become like the Protestants, and in fact, soon we won't have just four or five hundred denominations as they do—we'll have millions. Each individual will become a church in himself, each one feeling, believing, and thinking as he sees fit. In this, as in every matter, it is the Church and its sacred tradition that must teach us, and we must listen humbly and be instructed."

What, then, does the Church say about the relationship between true and valid Baptism and the true Faith?

It is Saint Paul who provides the Church with Her battle-cry: "One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism" (Eph. 4:5). Not many lords, many faiths, many baptisms. Thus, from the very beginning, we are taught in unequivocal and unambiguous language that God, the Faith, and Baptism are inextricably bound together and are indeed one. There is no ecumenistic plurality here, no room for relativism.

Curiously, certain academic theologians of an ecumenistic turn of mind are not entirely happy with this "rigorous" interpretation of Saint Paul's dictum. They would say that this is the Cyprianic point of view. By "Cyprianic," they mean Saint Cyprian of Carthage, and by labelling this view "Cyprianic" they seek to create the impression that it was Saint Cyprian who was the "odd ball" who invented, or in any case vigorously promoted, this "hard line" view. But is this true? Let us begin by taking a look at the Apostolic Canons. The Forty-sixth Apostolic Canon, in complete agreement with the Apostle Paul, says quite clearly, "We ordain that a bishop or a presbyter who has admitted the Baptism or Sacrifice of heretics be deposed. For what concord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?"

Now, what shall we label this "viewpoint"? "Pre-Cyprianic Hard Line"? But there is more. The Forty-seventh Apostolic Canon says:

Let a bishop or presbyter who shall baptize again one who has rightly received Baptism, or who shall *not* baptize one who has been polluted by the ungodly, be deposed, as despising the Cross and death of the Lord, and not making a distinction between the true priests and the false.¹⁵

And before any one makes any hasty statements about the Apostolic Canons, allow me to point out that they were ratified and accepted by the Ecumenical Councils.

Now, in the Sixty-first Chapter of his *First Apology*, Saint Justin the Martyr points out that those who do not assent to the doctrines of the Church, that is, those who are found in heterodoxy, have no part or portion in Baptism or the Eucharist.

And Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, who comes in the second generation after the Apostolic era, has this to say of the Holy Mysteries in his writing *Against Heresies*:

So, where the gifts of the Lord are, there one ought to learn the truth from those who have succession in the Church from the Apostles.¹⁶

Elsewhere in the same work, Saint Irenaeus speaks in even stronger terms about the succession of the Apostolic Faith through true bishops—who, in turn, are the ministers of the Holy Mysteries of the Church. He writes:

We can enumerate the bishops who were appointed in Churches by the Apostles and their successors down to our time, none of whom taught and thought of anything like the mad ideas of the heretics.¹⁷

In short, as Saint Irenaeus points out, "the authentic Church has one and the same Faith everywhere in the world." "One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism." In *Against Heresies*, he states repeatedly that any false teaching regarding our Saviour or any corruption of the Apostolic tradition completely undermines God's redemptive work. Instead of building upon the rock of the Faith, which is single and steadfast, those who are in heresy build upon the sand, which—like their personal opinions and private interpretations—is multiple and constantly shifting.

The Church writer Tertullian was born around 155 A.D. and died around 240. Because of their genuine excellence, his writings, especially his early ones, are quoted considerably by later authors. He was also the first church writer to write in Latin, since Greek was beginning to pass away as a common language in the West. Later in his life, Tertullian fell into the Montanist heresy. But around the year 200, while he was still Orthodox, he wrote a book called *On Baptism*, where he describes in considerable detail the faith and practice of the Church. Here is the testimony of *On Baptism* regarding the Baptism of the Church and that of the heterodox:

We have one and only one Baptism in accord with the Gospel of the Lord as well as with the letters of the Apostle, inasmuch as he says: "One God, and one Baptism, and one Church in the Heavens." The question, however, of

¹⁵ *The Apostolic Canons*, Canon Forty-seven.

¹⁶ Saint Irenaeus of Lyons *Against Heresies*, Book Four, 26:5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Book Three, 3:1.

what is to be observed in regard to the heretics may be worthwhile treating. The assertion is made in our regard. Heretics, however, have no fellowship in our discipline. That they are outsiders is testified to by the very fact of their excommunication. I ought not recognize in their regard a precept binding upon me; for we and they have not one God nor one—that is the same—Christ. Therefore, neither is their Baptism one with ours, because it is not the same. Since they have it not rightly, doubtless they have it not at all; and what they do not have is not to be counted. Thus, they cannot receive the grace of Baptism, because they do not have it to give.¹⁸ Not only before Saint Cyprian, but also after him, the Church adhered tenaciously to this Apostolic teaching. In his work on the Holy Spirit, Saint Basil the Great speaks of the indissoluble bond linking the true Faith and valid Baptism. He writes:

From whence is it that we are Christians? Through our Faith, would be the universal answer. And in what way are we saved? Plainly because we were reborn through the grace given in our Baptism. How else could we be? And after recognizing that this salvation is established through the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, shall we fling away “that form of doctrine” (Rom. 6:17) which we received? Would it not rather be ground for great groaning if we are found now further off from our salvation “than when we first believed,” (Rom. 13:11) and deny now what we then received? Whether a man departs from this life without Baptism, or receives a baptism that is lacking in some of the requirements of the tradition, his loss is equal.¹⁹

In his work *On the Holy Spirit*, Saint Gregory of Nyssa writes:

If, then, life comes in Baptism, and Baptism receives its completion in the Name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, what do the followers of the heretical Macedonius mean who account the Minister of life, the Holy Spirit, as nothing? . . . What condemnation is thereby implied in those who thus defy the Holy Spirit? Perhaps this is the blasphemy against our Law-giver [the Holy Spirit] for which the judgement without remission has been decreed; since in Him the entire Being, Blessed and Divine, is insulted also.²⁰

Saint Gregory explains that because of their erroneous belief concerning the Holy Spirit, the heretical Macedonians not only do not receive the grace of the Holy Spirit—in Baptism or in anything else—but they actually blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, and thus bring upon themselves a sin which is unforgivable.

The Sixty-eighth Apostolic Canon tells us the following:

If any bishop, presbyter, or deacon shall receive from anyone a second ordination, let both the ordained and the ordainer be deposed, unless indeed it be proved that he had his ordination from heretics; for those who have been baptized or ordained by such persons cannot be either of the faithful or of the clergy.²¹

The First Canon of the Local Council of Carthage says that “those who are baptized by heretics shall be baptized again in order to be admitted to the Church.” The Thirty-second Canon of the Local Council of Laodicea points out that the blessings—which, of course, includes the sacraments—of those who teach false doctrines are, in actuality, maledictions that are inflicted on those who receive them.

Thus, it is clear from these holy canons that, since the “baptism” of the heterodox is not acceptable, the Church does not practice “re-baptism” when it baptizes those who come to her from other denominations.

All of the canons that I mentioned above were adopted and ratified by the Ecumenical Councils. These teachings, therefore, are not “Cyprianic.” Rather, this is the Ecumenical and Universal Church speaking.

The Holy Councils—both Ecumenical and Local—also provided that in certain cases, by the application of *economia*, the external *form* of immersion, even if performed by a heretical clergyman, could be accepted, and the Church had the power to bestow grace upon this ritual, which, up to that point, had been no more than an empty social rite. But this acceptance had one very important condition: the individual so “immersed” had to ask to be admitted into the True Church. If he remained in his heresy, his heretical “baptism” remained null and void. Again, this viewpoint is not “Cyprianic.” It is the ancient practice and belief of the entire Ecumenical Church.

In the year 314, the Council of Arles (in present-day France) expounded this teaching in slightly different terms; that is, it stated that the heretics do have a “baptism.” The bishops who gathered in this council, however, affirmed that this “baptism” is of no avail to the heterodox so long as they remain in their heresy, and the false rite in fact

¹⁸ Tertullian *On Baptism*, chapter 15.

¹⁹ Saint Basil the Great *On the Spirit*, 10:26.

²⁰ Saint Gregory of Nyssa *On the Holy Spirit* (Migne PG 45, 1325, A, D).

²¹ *The Apostolic Canons*, Canon Sixty-eight.

works to their detriment. They must, therefore, join themselves to the Church in order to receive saving, baptismal grace. In other words, the hierarchs were saying that the heretical “baptism” was really an immersion that could be infused with the grace of Baptism, provided the heterodox involved joined themselves to the Church. Essentially, then, the position of these Western Fathers was identical with that of the Church in the East.

Whether the *rite* of immersion as practiced by the heterodox was accepted or rejected depended a great deal on whether their rites were identical to the Church’s rite. Sozomenus, for example, records that Theophronius of Cappadocia and one Eutychius—both of them disciples of Eunomius the Arian—stopped “baptizing” their followers in the Name of the Holy Trinity, and began instead to “baptize” them in the name “of the death of Christ.”²² Hence, there was no way the Orthodox would accept even the external form of this so-called baptism. In fact, this innovation caused a stir even among the other Arian parties.

On the other hand, Saint Gregory of Tours in the sixth century records that Lanthechild, the sister-in-law of Saint Clotilde, Queen of France, was converted at the same time as her brother, Clovis. She had accepted the Arian heresy, but she later confessed the triune majesty of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and received the holy Chrism.²³

In both cases, those who were received into the Orthodox Catholic Faith were Arians, yet one was received by Baptism and the other by Chrismation. In the first case, the Arians had changed the traditional rite; in the second, they preserved the traditional form. Today, except for the Monophysite Armenians, Ethiopians, and Copts, not one of the heterodox bodies preserves the Church’s ancient form of Baptism. This in itself is reason enough for the Orthodox to adhere to the Church’s norm of receiving the heterodox by Baptism.

Ecumenism’s position on this matter is radically different. According to this ideology, virtually everyone possesses valid baptism, provided “the baptisms are celebrated in the Name of the Holy Trinity and involve the use of water”—to quote the official periodical of the Greek Archdiocese in the Western Hemisphere.²⁴ However, as we have seen from the Church Fathers and Canons quoted above, this is not true; and yet this heresy is one of Ecumenism’s basic tenets.

Some ecumenists apparently are confused and draw their erroneous conclusions in this matter from the fact that the Church does not *always* baptize those who leave a heresy and come into the Church. On occasion, as we have seen, the Church has received non-Orthodox by Chrismation, or even by the laying on of hands, or by confession. This, however, does not mean that the Church recognizes heterodox baptisms. It simply means that, *on the condition of a non-Orthodox person asking to be received into the Church*, the Church has the power and authority to grant grace and content to that which hitherto had had no salvific content. This was emphasized by the Sixty-first Canon of the Council of Carthage in 419 A.D., which noted that “the sacraments of those *persevering in heresy* shall obtain for them the heavy penalty of eternal damnation.” So, in a twisted sense, the ecumenists are correct: as the Sixty-first Canon affirms, heretical baptisms are “valid” and effectual, not in *saving* those who receive them, but “in obtaining for them the heavy penalty of eternal damnation.”

Who needs this kind of validity?

We see, then, that if the teaching which we have confirmed above by many patristic texts is “Cyprianic,” then it is also Apostolic, Pauline, Justinic, Irenaeian, Orthodox Tertullianic, Basilian, Gregorian, Local and Ecumenical Synodal, and so on. Very simply, it was and is the teaching of the Church from day one on down to our own times, despite contemporary private opinions to the contrary.

When I say “our own times” I am not exaggerating or just being rhetorical. Although our century has witnessed many academic, licensed “theologians” who have their own ideas about Orthodoxy, we also have a super-abundance of Saints who censure the former by the holiness of their lives, by their steadfastness in the truth, and by the supreme sacrifice which they made for our Saviour and His holy Church.

For example, we have the holy New-hieromartyr Victor, Bishop of Glazov, who died in exile in Siberia, probably in 1933.

Listen to this remarkable reply which the Saint made to the Soviet Patriarchate:

I myself grew up among simple people, the son of a church reader, and I have spent my whole life among simple people, in monasteries. As the people believe, so do I believe, namely: We believe that we are saved in Christ Jesus

²² Sozomenus *Ecclesiastical History*, Book Four, chapter 26.

²³ Saint Gregory of Tours *History of the Franks*, Book Two, chapter 31.

²⁴ *Orthodox Observer* (30 June, 1982).

by the Grace of God; this Grace of God is present only in the Orthodox Church and is given to us through the Holy Sacraments, and that the Church herself is the house of grace-given salvation from this life of perdition.²⁵

In concluding this third and final portion of my talk, allow me—like Saint Victor of Glazov—to give you another Orthodox “grass-roots” view of heretical baptism. All this time, I have been quoting to you from Church Fathers, early Apologists, ancient documents from the second and third centuries, Local Councils, Ecumenical Councils, ecclesiastical writers, and academic theologians. But what about the “simple people” that Saint Victor speaks of? What about the ordinary lay people, the “Orthodox silent majority,” the non-professionals, so to speak—what did they believe in this matter?

On December seventh, we celebrate the memory of a certain Orthodox woman of Rome. Her name is unknown to us, but we must surely call her blessed. In the year 474, the Arians raised up a terrible persecution against the Orthodox Catholic Christians. Sunilda, the wife of the Arian ruler of Rome, took it upon herself to attempt to force one Orthodox woman to accept the baptism of the Arians. The woman would not consent, so the Arians seized her, took her by force to one of their churches, and immersed her into the water in the presence of the Arian bishop.

As she came out of the water, she turned to her handmaid who was holding a purse. She took two coins out of the purse, handed them to the Arian bishop, and said to him, “Thank you for the bath.”

This so enraged the Arians, they dragged her out of their temple, tied her to a post, and burned her alive.

In her, truly, are fulfilled the words of King David the Prophet: “We went through fire and water, and Thou didst bring us out into refreshment” (Psalm 65:12).

By her intercessions, and of those of all the Saints, may we be counted worthy of the Heavenly Kingdom. Amen.

²⁵ *The Orthodox Word*, 1971, p. 118.

Note

Patristic texts cited above have been referenced by author and title and standard text divisions, since these works are available in several collections of translations, among them:

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Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973.

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Father Ephraim (now Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston) delivered this talk—here slightly edited—at the Tenth Orthodox Conference, held in Ipswich, Massachusetts, in June, 1988.