

Baptism: Clothing ourselves with Christ

Dr Philip Kariattlis
Academic Director and Senior Lecturer in Theology
St Andrew's Greek Orthodox Theological College

In the Orthodox Church today, baptism is a sacramental mystery through which we are formally received into the Church, the body of Christ and given access to all other sacraments of the Church. In being immersed in water, we are reborn through the Holy Spirit to a true life in Christ by becoming members of his body, the Church. In the early Church, the sacrament of baptism was understood in this very positive way; namely, as the means by which the faithful could be incorporated into the body of Christ. They saw baptism as being clothed with Christ - note St Paul's teaching in his letter to the Galatians "as many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Gal 3:27); participating in his resurrection and sharing in his victory over death - note, in this case, St Paul's letter to the Romans "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised 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 6:3).¹ In taking up their own personal cross and dying with Christ, early Christians believed that they could experience their own personal resurrection - namely the gift of victory into God's eternal kingdom.

In a very real sense, therefore, baptism was seen to be intimately connected with the daily struggle of the early Christians to authentically 'live' a life in Christ - namely, renouncing their own sinful self and living a Christ-like life. It was meaningful and relevant in their everyday life and was indeed known as the sacrament of the "new heaven and new earth" of the kingdom, the sacrament of the "world to come." For many today, however, baptism is seen in a very narrow way; namely as a one-off ritual in which 'original sin' is taken away - usually when they were infants - and the means by which their individual salvation has been secured. In other words, very few Orthodox faithful would appreciate the relevance and significance of their baptism for their everyday life. It is this dynamic aspect of baptism, that sees it as being absolutely significant in our every day life, which is in need of rediscovery today.

The Significance of Baptism

The importance of baptism for the Christian life is seen in that much of the Church's festal calendar and services point to baptism. In the early Church, Great Lent,



the period leading to Christmas/Epiphany, the structure of Holy Week, the Easter service itself all evolved with baptism in mind. These were all rites - namely solemn ceremonies - understood as means for initiation into baptism and instruction afterwards. For example, in the early Church, Lent was a time of preparation for those wishing to be baptised with the solemn Easter vigil being the time when they would formally be received into the Church. The period after Easter was a time of instruction into the formal doctrines of the Church. The first part of the Divine Liturgy, known as the 'Liturgy of the Catechumens', developed with those preparing to be baptised especially in mind. Those who were not baptised would have to leave after this part of the service at the instruction of the deacon who would say "the doors the doors." Namely the doors of the Church at this point would be shut and only the baptised faithful partaking of Holy Communion could remain. Hearing this injunction, those already baptised would be reminded of the need to continually grow in the awareness of the outpouring of grace received at baptism.

What all this implies for today is that, far from being reduced to a sacrament received by most as infants, baptism needs to be seen as a wonderful endowment from God whose content ought to inform - and for that matter, form - our entire life and growth in Christ's body, the Church. For example, in the same way that in baptism one is 'clothed with Christ' only after that person has renounced evil, so too, the Christian life of every believer ought to be a continual flight from evil, so as to be united with Christ and then able to confess him. It is to this aspect of baptism, namely its significance for our spiritual life, that we now turn.

1. These verses form part of the epistle reading read during the baptismal service in the Orthodox Church.

Reflecting on this a little further, namely, the significance of baptism for our everyday life, the service of baptism reminds us today that the first step in the Christian life is to acknowledge the reality of evil and then to be ready to renounce it. This, therefore, should inform our daily life if we want to live authentically as Christians. Indeed, living in a 'modern' 'civilised' world which has demythologised evil and its power, it is important to realise that not only are the demonic powers not a myth, but also appreciate their extensive existence so as to be ready to fight against them. In referring to evil, we must not think of it simply as a mere 'absence of good' or a question of negative feelings that we all experience - such as anger, grief, envy or hate. On the contrary, evil is the presence of a real and pervading power that is dark, irrational, harmful - to ourselves and others - totally contrary to life and laying claim not only on the soul of a person but the totality of life. In a word, evil is the word 'live' spelt backwards, namely any power which attempts to eradicate life and sow death.

It is quite unfortunate to see that even within the Church, there are many believers who pretend that evil does not exist. On this the late Fr Alexander Schmemmann poignantly wrote that we must "not keep smiling at the world, putting the 'all welcome' signs on the Churches, and adjusting... [our] language to that of the last best seller."² Now, the baptismal service reminds us not only of the reality of evil but also of the need to face it. It is for this reason that the catechumen faces the west, namely away from the light and is asked: "Do you renounce Satan and all his works, and all his worship, and all his angels, and all his pomp?", to which a response is given, "I do renounce him." In one of the prayers at this point the priest blows on the catechumen three times making the sign of the cross on the forehead, mouth and breast, whilst saying:

Drive out from him (her) every evil and unclean spirit, hiding and lurking in his (her) heart; the spirit of error, the spirit of evil, the spirit of idolatry and every form of greed, the spirit of deceit and all uncleanness working in him (her) under the direction of the Devil. Make him (her)... a precious member of your Church... an inheritor of your kingdom; so that having conducted his (her) life according to your commandments... he (she) may attain the blessedness of the Saints in your kingdom.³

The conviction here is that no one can claim to belong to Christ until they have encountered and confronted evil and proclaimed the power of God to destroy it - something which needs to take place on a daily basis until our very last breath.

All too often, unfortunately, Christians tend to speak

2. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1988), 72. On this issue, he also states: "[o]ne does not see very well where and how "fight" would fit into the weekly bulletin of a suburban parish, among all kinds of counselling sessions, bake sales, and "young adult" get-togethers." *For the Life of the World*, 71.

3. Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia, *Holy Baptism* (Sydney: St Andrew's Orthodox Press, 2008), 19.

only of the victory of life in Christ's death on the Cross, without realising that this victory over death was only accomplished through death. Namely, many faithful believe in a Christianity which gives comfort, peace, release from frustrations and anxieties without also being ready to admit that this can only be achieved through facing evil. In what could be said to be a most succinct vision of the Christian life, St Paul, for example, in his letter to the Romans writes: "know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." (Rom 5:3-5). In the same way that St Paul knew that suffering preceded God's gift of the Holy Spirit upon the faithful, so too does the service of baptism make the claim that our life in Christ is necessarily preceded by our desire to denounce evil. Put another way, it is only after evil has been confronted that we can be united with Christ.

In further examining the significance of baptism for the Christian life, the service of baptism teaches that confrontation against evil needs to be followed by a commitment to remain united to Christ. Thus after evil has been denounced, the priest turns the catechumen towards the east, from where the light comes into the world - note that Christ is referred to as the "true light which enlightens and sanctifies everyone" - and he asks three times: "Do you join the side of Christ?" The catechumen responds, "I join his side."⁴ Having made this declaration to follow Christ, the catechumen then makes the confession of faith reciting the Nicene Creed, which is essentially a definitive summary of the main tenets of the Christian faith.

This confession is not something done once at our baptism but must be repeated on a daily basis as a sign of our acceptance of the faith and our commitment to it. Namely, what we confess must be reflected in our actions. The baptismal service further explicates the content of this commitment when it asks the catechumen to say: "I bow down and worship Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Trinity of one essence and inseparable."⁵ In response to God's unimaginable love, evidenced in his creation of the world, the human person responds by giving thanks and worship to God - something which St Paul, in his letter to the Romans, also calls his listeners to do, namely, to "honour him as God" and "give thanks to him" (Rom 1:21). Consequently, the ongoing significance of baptism can be seen in the fact that the steps prescribed in the baptismal service for those wishing to be incorporated into the body of the Church - namely, confrontation, conversion, confession and commitment - constitute a God-pleasing framework for our daily living out of the Christian life.

In the next issue of The Voice of Orthodoxy, we will look at the Pre-Christian and New Testament origins of Baptism followed by a discussion of its salvific effects.

4. Ibid, 23.

5. Ibid, 27.