

THE SACRAMENTS: I—BAPTISM

LAURENCE BRIGHT, O.P.

THE sacraments, and baptism first of all, are the means by which Christ unites us to the Church which is his body. Yet we may well wonder how the pouring of a little water, the brief statement of the priest, 'I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost', can effect so great a change. Of course it is possible simply to reply 'because God wills it to be so', and perhaps ultimately there is nothing more to be said, but it is still open to us to explore the meaning of such mysteries as far as we can. The truths revealed by God and handed on to us by the Church are indeed mysteries, acceptable only to those who have received the grace of faith, but faith is given to our minds and needs to be thought about. We cannot give a real assent to revealed truth unless we have thought about it within the living context of the Church and in this way made it our own. This has always been the work of theologians within the Church, but there is a real sense in which every Christian is called on to be a theologian in the measure allowed by his ability and leisure: otherwise he runs the risk of remaining only half a Christian, unable to give reason for the faith that is in him.

Now the faith comes to each of us in a living tradition, which we hand on to others as we live it. Every Christian shares in this activity, because of the unity of the mystical body, throughout time and space. The mysteries of the faith are not stored in ancient documents, recoverable only by those who are archaeologically minded; the word of God lives continuously in the Church, so that each member of it shares in the work of deepening our understanding. The mystery is with us here and now simply because Christ is with us here and now. Each of us has to take his part in the work of understanding and sharing with Christ's other members. Since we shall be thinking of things that seem remote, of the waters of Jordan and the passage of the Red Sea, it is as well to bear in mind the essential contemporaneity of these Christian mysteries which belong as much to the twentieth century as to any other. Christ is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, so that St Paul writes as truly to us as to the church of Corinth: 'You are the epistle of Christ . . . written not with ink

but with the Spirit.' (2 Cor. 3, 3.) Our job is always to make 'the word of truth of the gospel . . . bring forth fruit and grow in us' (Col. 1, 5-6).

In these articles, I shall try to explain briefly something of what the Church teaches about the Sacraments. They are meant to be a starting-point for discussion rather than an exhaustive dogmatic treatment. It may be as well to begin by considering the sacraments in general. People sometimes ask why it is that men must still work out their salvation by sacramental means if Christ's death saves all mankind. But each individual Christian has to make that sacrifice his own, has to be joined to Christ through the Church. This is first the result of faith, by which in a real sense we put on the mind of Christ. Faith is sufficient to save those who through no fault of their own are unable to share in the sacramental life of the visible Church. But normally faith is only the beginning of our Christian life; the sacraments complete it. They allow us not merely to apprehend Christ, but to possess him. They are the means by which Christ joins us to himself in love, enabling us to live his life on earth and so, after our death, in heaven.

But what are sacraments? First of all signs of what is hidden; the Greek word for sacrament is that which has given us our English word 'mystery'. Hidden mysteries are revealed and made visible to us by these signs. This is the sense in which we can say that the greatest sacrament is the Incarnation itself, by which the invisible God showed himself in history. In a well-known passage St Paul speaks of 'the mystery which hath been hidden from ages and generations, but now is manifested to his saints, to whom God would make known the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ, in you the hope of glory' (Col. 1, 26-27). God was manifested in Christ and Christ is manifested now in the Church through the sacraments which continue his life in us. The sacraments are signs of faith, and the grace it brings; they are signs of the Church, by which she shows that she is the living Christ.

But though the sacraments are signs making intelligible hidden mysteries to the mind of faith, they are more than this: for they cause the things which they signify. All water has a significance, which will be discussed shortly; but the water of baptism actually brings about what ordinary water only symbolizes. Both aspects, the significant and the causal, must be borne in mind if we are to

understand the sacraments. As a sign, each sacrament represents hidden things; it brings past, present and future together here and now. In the past there was the activity of Christ, his baptism, his passion, his resurrection; in the present, there is the special grace of the sacrament, relating to our place in Christ's mystical body; in the future, there will be our eternal life. All these a sacrament shows us now, and all these it really gives us. Its effect on the Christian who receives it is to bring him into a relationship with Christ who was in history. The sacraments are the means by which Christ has been, as he always will be, present in his Church, throughout the long centuries of Christian history.

We can now consider the sacrament of baptism, and apply these general remarks. The material is flowing water. But what is its significance? What do the spoken words make it effect? We must not think of the water familiar to us in our urban civilisation, tamed and under control, merely on tap. If we are to realise the significance our Lord meant it to have for us, we must turn to the Old Testament, in particular to the story of the Exodus. There is nothing fanciful in this. We have only to remember our Lord's insistence, especially in his appearances after the resurrection, that we should search the scriptures for the explanation of all he had done and suffered. St John actually presents the events of Christ's life on earth as a parallel to those of the Exodus, seeing our Lord as a new Moses leading a chosen people to a new and better kingdom. It is a theme to which St Paul constantly returns, and has a central place in the ancient Easter vigil before the baptismal ceremonies of the early Church. Israel under Moses fled from the sinful land of Egypt, pursued by Pharaoh and his chariots. The waters divided and they passed through to safety. But those same waters which brought life to Israel brought death to the Egyptians. 'And the waters returned, and covered the chariots and the horsemen of all the army of Pharaoh, who had come into the sea after them: neither did there so much as one of them remain. But the children of Israel marched through the midst of the sea upon dry land, and the waters were to them as a wall on the right hand and on the left.' (Exodus 14; 28-29.) The significance of water lies in this double aspect: it brings death and it brings life. Through the command of Christ we die to sin in the waters of baptism and pass through to newness of life. As St Paul says, 'Know you not that all we, who are baptized in Christ Jesus,

are baptised in his death? For we are buried together with him by baptism into death; but as Christ is risen from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also may walk in newness of life' (Rom. 6, 3-4). Baptism enables us to share the death of Christ, his conquest of sin, and so also to share in the resurrection which brought eternal life. It is important to see how St Paul lays emphasis on the fact that the effects of baptism come about through its uniting us to Christ. In the early Church the baptismal rite showed this very clearly, for the candidate went down into the waters and emerging again on the other side was received by the Bishop, representative of the Church. Though he went alone into the water, he came out a member of Christ's mystical body. Even so had the passage through the Red Sea turned the fleeing rabble of Israelites into a nation united under their leader Moses ready to conquer for themselves a kingdom. To Hebrew thought a nation was almost a single person, closely identified with its leader or king. Their conception is so foreign to our own way of thinking that we find it difficult to take St Paul literally when he tells us that as baptized Christians we are one with Christ, 'for in one spirit were we all baptized into one body' (1 Cor. 12, 13). We tend to weaken the great image of Christians as members of Christ, thinking of it as little more than a metaphor. But Paul's language is quite unequivocal: 'You are the body of Christ, and members of member' (1 Cor. 12, 27) he tells the Corinthians. Baptism could not make us members of the kingdom of heaven unless it united us to our king. Such union must affect our whole Christian life. For just as the head of the body acts through each member of the body, so Christ acts through us. Whatever we do, so long as it is not sinful, is Christ's action as well as ours. Our natural life is not destroyed by grace, but is transfigured. We can indeed say 'with Christ I am nailed to the cross. And I live, now not I; but Christ liveth in me' (Gal. 2, 19-20). As Christ's, our actions are now pleasing to God; yet they remain at the same time entirely our own, meriting for us eternal life in union with him. This is the meaning of St Paul's statement that 'as many of you as have been baptized in Christ, have put on Christ' (Gal. 3, 27). It is the Christian's astonishing privilege to have been allowed to share the divine nature (cf. 2 Peter 1, 4.)

But what is this land of Egypt from which the new Israelite

flees to Christ? The world into which every man is born, given over to Satan who is its prince since he brought about the sin of our first parent Adam. This doctrine of original sin is difficult to explain except from the point of view which has been developed above. The very fact of being born a member of the human race gives each man a solidarity with Adam, who is the head of that race. The nature which has passed from him through countless generations to us must be a nature subject to death, as his was after the fall. For though he had been granted the grace of immortality, along with many other benefits, while his mind and will were united with God, God withdrew these gifts as incompatible with Adam's new state after he fell. If Adam had never sinned, we too should possess human nature as he originally possessed it; now physical death is the inevitable consequence of birth. For this reason is it natural to speak of baptism as a new birth. We remember the words of our Lord to Nicodemus: 'Amen, amen I say to thee, unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.' (John 3, 5.) For in the waters of baptism we are released, as it were by death, from our bondage to Adam, and are joined to him who by accepting death overcame it. We have become the spiritual descendants of a second Adam. The contrast is developed by St Paul in the balanced antitheses of Romans 5: for example 'as by the disobedience of one man, many were made sinners; so also by the obedience of one many shall be made just'. (v. 19.)

Since baptism brings about a total change in those who receive it, it can never be repeated. The Church has always condemned as heresy the suggestion that the lapsed could be rebaptized. A man who has once passed through the healing waters need never go through them again, since God has sealed him with a special mark. St Paul says: 'Grieve not the holy spirit of God, whereby you are sealed unto the day of redemption.' (Ephes. iv. 30). We must distinguish this ineffaceable seal from those effects of baptism which require certain right dispositions in the person receiving it. A man, for example, can refuse to accept the gift of faith which is offered to him as a member of Christ. Yet if he is baptised faith will be given him as soon as he ceases to reject it. The question is indeed sometimes asked how infant baptism can be effective if baptism requires the possibility of faith. It is one of the most striking demonstrations of the real

unity of the mystical body that faith can here be supplied by the Church. As the child is brought to the doors of the baptistry the question is put: 'What do you ask of the Church of God?' And the answer: 'Faith'.

Baptism then is the means by which we are joined to the body of our Redeemer. It is therefore the gateway to all the other sacraments, which would be meaningless and ineffective to those who had not been so joined. Indeed it is not possible to understand the other sacraments until we have grasped the significance of baptism as the cause of our incorporation in Christ. I hope to develop this theme in later articles.



THE SACRAMENT OF FAITH

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.

ONE of the early names for Baptism was the 'Sacrament of Faith', and those who were baptized became the 'enlightened'. To think of this Sacrament simply as an initiation rite, performed once and then left in the background as one would walk through the front door of a house and shut it before settling down in the drawing room to be comfortably at home; to think of it simply as the formal entry into the Church is to miss its constant power to raise the Christian to the heights of holiness. The earlier Christian understood that it brought an entirely new light into the newly baptized's life and that light shone and transformed everything so that as his eyes grew accustomed to its power they could eventually perceive the glory of God, and sustained by baptismal grace reach to the heights of prayer and union with God. For the spiritual reality into which the Christian is introduced cannot be divided into neat little pieces to be digested stage by stage as the Christian makes his way along the road, refreshed by one grace after another. Ultimately every grace is the same, a share in the divine life, which is undivided and indivisible. It has sometimes been thought that the mystical life of unitive prayer and the heights of contemplation were above the normal life of faith, that the gifts of the Holy Spirit brought something quite different from the general run of grace and faith. But this would make a radical division