Initiation Into the Body of Christ

by Gerard F. Baumbach

Water.
A tsunami. A typhoon or hurricane.
Rain. Frustrating when absent, overwhelming when endless.
A warm bath. A cleansing. A healing moment when time stands still, when death surrenders to life.

Think of the last time you touched holy water before making the Sign of the Cross. What were you seeking at that moment?

Speaking of initiation

One of the many blessings of the Second Vatican Council was the restoration of an approach to initiation now known as the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). This rite engages and supports people in their ongoing conversion to Christ as they come to accept or strengthen a lifestyle of faith as members of the Catholic Church.

Whether celebrated during a single liturgical moment, such as the Easter Vigil, or separated by the movement of life, the sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist) call us to relationship with God in Christ. We experience the living truth that sacraments "are actions of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body, the Church" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1116).

Initiation surrounds us with people of faith as we share the sacred inheritance of Scripture and Tradition. We live as a people clothed in Christ as we enter the Church’s living memory, grounded in the love of the Father and guided by the indwelling Spirit.

Born of water and Spirit

When we break out an old family album and spot a Baptism photo of ourselves, we are viewing more than a distant memory. Focusing on the power behind a fading picture, we resolve not to lose sight of who we are: witnesses to faith through saving waters.

Jesus said to the inquiring Nicodemus, "[N]o one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (Jn 3:5). Water and Spirit summon us to cleansing, leading to salvation in Jesus. This freedom comes
through holy waters; the power of the Holy Spirit is upon us. Passage through these waters is from death to new life in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Through Baptism we are freed from Original Sin and any personal sins. We become God's own adopted ones and sharers in his life of grace. We trust that the Spirit is with us always. Our baptismal identity is rooted in Christ, the one who asked Zebedee's sons, "Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (Mk 10:38).

We are invited to belong to a welcoming Church and are initiated into it. As Catholics, our developing identity is shaped through the Church we call our home. There is no retracting our Baptism. Now "configured to Christ" (CCC, #1272), we are his.

**Strangers no more**

The glistening lake was clear like glass. Urged on by my children, I swam toward a distant buoy. But sudden pain overtook me as I struggled to return to shore. I flailed about, unable to stay above the surface, until a stranger came to my aid. This event became a “baptismal reminder” for me.

“When am I helpless? Who aids me? Who is the stranger in my life?” The Holy Spirit led me to Scripture: “I was...a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt 25:35).

Looking in life’s mirror, I wondered, “What am I immersed in now? When do I come up for air? Do my ‘self-immersions’ prevent me from building relationships with others?” Finally, the voice of liberating awareness: “How might I hold up another until more help arrives?”

We are strangers no more because of saving waters. Confident that other disciples will hold us up when the going gets rough, we become gentle handlers of others when they risk reaching out to us. Baptism does not fade over time. The call to holiness is always before us as we “live in newness of life” (Rom 6:4).

**Sealed for mission**

Soothing oil penetrates; the oil of chrism penetrates for a lifetime. In the Sacrament of Confirmation, we are marked with the Spirit, sealed for what we are called to be and to do. Jesus’ promise of the Spirit to the apostles is a promise to the whole Church. In Confirmation, the same Spirit received at Pentecost enlivens and strengthens us for mission.

The bishop (or his delegated priest) extends his hands over us and prays that the Spirit will be poured out upon us. The seven gifts of the Spirit named in this prayer—wisdom, understanding, right judgment, courage, knowledge, reverence, and wonder and awe—can become a natural part of our lives as relationships in faith blossom.

Through the anointing with the oil of chrism, we are sealed for mission, strengthened for living each day as witnesses. Our lives testify in word and action to the saving Christ. We witness in continuity with all who have gone before us. Our conversion continues; our witness lives.

**The good life**

I once knew an evening office maintenance person named Lily. Because I often worked late, Lily and I talked regularly. It did not take long to realize that she was a person of deep Christian faith. One evening Lily bade me farewell; she was leaving her job to care for a seriously ill adult daughter. Her last words to me were “Have a good life.”

Through Confirmation, the Holy Spirit strengthens us for the "good life" even though we may be burdened by hardship. As we live by faith we may be challenged to defend what we believe, doing so with charity motivated by love. We remain sealed for mission. I never saw Lily again, but I believe that she continues to live a good life. Her witness lives.
**Summit and source**

TV news anchors entice viewers with the phrase, “Coming up.” For the initiated believer, waiting time is over as God’s promises yield to reality. Each sacrament summons the community of faith to the mystery of dying and rising to new life, the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ.

Jesus gives himself for all in what he says and does. His sacrifice is real and ever before us. In the Eucharist, Jesus pierces time and history, offering himself for all people (friend and foe alike) in this memorial of his life, death and resurrection. What sustains us during this “time of new time” is the Eucharist, “the summit and source of our Christian life” (*U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults*, p. 228).

We gather as one community of faith, thanking God for Christ’s sacrifice, now the sacrifice of the entire Church. We are eager to worship and eager to serve. As we gather, we can recall Jesus washing the feet of his disciples and his institution of the Eucharist.

Our faith deepens our belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. While the sacred elements retain the appearance of bread and wine, “the underlying reality—that is, the substance—is now the Body and Blood of Christ” (*USCCA*, p. 223). Christ is not almost present, or present if I think he is, but “substantially present in a way that is entirely unique” (*USCCA*, p. 229).

**Here and now**

Jesus nourishes us. When we present ourselves for Holy Communion, “we are not changing Christ into ourselves. Jesus is transforming us into himself” (*USCCA*, p. 227). Jesus’ covenant with us is not “coming up” but is here and now, a gift woven from a tapestry of unconditional love and eternal hope. Life beyond initiation is not the same as watching a game clock run down to “0:00.” Our formation in faith continues. Initiation draws us into memory never forgotten. Time is no measure here, for new life is forever.

We belong to Christ. No wonder the two disciples on the road to Emmaus yearned for the stranger who joined their walk to stay with them. We can make their words our own as we pray, “Stay with us...” (Lk 24:29).

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