



# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE MYSTERY OF HOLY BAPTISM

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## **In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.**

First among the Mysteries of the Church<sup>1</sup> that a person encounters in his lifetime is the Mystery of Baptism. Through this Mystery, a person who believes in Christ and expresses faith in Him is cleansed of his sins and reborn into a new, holy, and spiritual life through immersion in water that is transformed and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Without this Mystery, a person cannot become a member of the Church, receive the other Mysteries, or gain eternal life, as our Savior teaches us, “Verily, verily, I say to you, unless one is born of water and Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God” (Jn 3:5). The Mystery of Baptism, then, is the hinge upon which all of the other Mysteries in the Church turn. We must therefore understand it, as it affects all other aspects of our identities as Christians.

In this introduction, we are going to examine the following topics: (1) the importance of Holy Baptism in our lives; (2) the foundations of Holy Baptism in the Holy Scripture<sup>2</sup>; and (3) the Coptic rite of Holy Baptism. Although the separate but related Mystery of Chrismation is typically celebrated immediately after the Mystery of Holy Baptism, it is not addressed in this curriculum for reasons of time and space.

## DO YOU NEED HELP?

Do you have a question on this material? You may contact me at [frmoses@lacopts.org](mailto:frmoses@lacopts.org) to ask a question or point out any typos/mistakes.

At the very end, I have included some sample questions to give you an idea as to how this material might be tested.

May God help you and grant you understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> In the West, the word “sacrament” is oftentimes used, but I will use the preferable word “mystery,” which matches the Coptic, Greek, and Arabic words used to describe Holy Baptism and the other “sacraments” of the Church. The word “sacrament” comes from the Latin word *sacramentum*, which was used by Latin-speaking Western Christians whereas “mystery” comes from the Greek word *mysterion*, which is used by Greek-speaking Eastern Christians, including the Copts.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all references to the Old Testament come from the Septuagint (LXX) and all references to the New Testament come from the New King James Version (NKJV).

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# THE IMPORTANCE OF HOLY BAPTISM IN OUR LIVES

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*Introduction to Holy Baptism*

*Section 1*

## I. WHAT IS HOLY BAPTISM?

Holy Baptism is one of the great Mysteries of the Church that our Savior Himself instituted. It is a Mystery that was foreshadowed from the beginning of creation as the will of God for all mankind.

As with any Mystery in the Holy Church, Holy Baptism involves the invisible working through the visible. For example, in every Divine Liturgy, it is the invisible Divine Grace of the Holy Spirit that transforms the visible bread and wine into the Holy Body and Precious Blood of Christ. It is the same with Holy Baptism, as St. Gregory the Theologian said in *Oration 40* on Holy Baptism (c. 381 AD):

As we are created of a body and a soul, the first visible and the second invisible, so the washing in baptism comes as seen and unseen work, of water and Spirit. The body receives the work of the water according to the visible, and at the same time the work of the Spirit takes place invisibly away from the body. The water is a sensible truth, while the Spirit, who washes the depths, is an unseen truth. This is what the birth offers to us and makes us new, instead of the old.

What is the result of this? One who is baptized receives rebirth, purification, salvation,<sup>3</sup> and membership in the Body of Christ. He also receives the ability to be conformed to the pure and perfect likeness of Christ, which aids him in the Christian life to fulfill the commandments and do what is pleasing to God. As the Holy Apostle Paul teaches us, “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Ro 8:29), and also, “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together” (Ro 8:16–17). These great gifts, which are beyond human comprehension, are granted to us freely through the Mystery of Holy Baptism.

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<sup>3</sup> See Part III below in which we deal with Holy Baptism and salvation in more detail.

## II. THE NECESSITY OF HOLY BAPTISM

In light of this, the Mystery of Holy Baptism is necessary for every human being after the Fall of Mankind. When Adam and Eve, our ancestors, disobeyed God, the whole creation fell and the very nature of mankind changed. Before the Fall, as St. Gregory the Theologian teaches us, mankind was clothed in the glory of God and healthy in his nature. For this reason, Adam and Eve did not know they were naked before the Fall. Afterwards, however, the glory of God departed from them because of their free choice to disobey God and separate themselves from Him Who is the Source of Life. From that time until now, every human being is born into the world with a nature that carries the malady or sickness of sin.<sup>4</sup>

The Mystery of Holy Baptism exists to address this malady. When a person is immersed in the waters sanctified by the Holy Spirit, he begins to share in our Lord Jesus Christ's victory over sin and its consequence, death. This is the very goal of our Lord's lifegiving work: He came into the world to destroy sin and grant us an opportunity to inherit an everlasting and joyful life in His presence in the Kingdom of Heaven. Holy Baptism is the first step in the path of salvation, the way to the Kingdom.

This does not mean, however, that a person is completely freed from temptations or spiritual struggles after receiving Holy Baptism. Temptations are unavoidable in this fallen world. A person who has received Holy Baptism and strives to live according to it, however, is given Divine Grace and power to struggle and fight against temptation; he is liberated from the bondage of sin through his struggle and the Divine Grace that supports him. And for those who do fall into sin after Baptism, there is the Mystery of Repentance/Confession, which serves as a second baptism in one's own tears.

In the Holy Scriptures, we find several passages that speak about the necessity of Holy Baptism. Consider these passages on which you may be tested.<sup>5</sup>

- ✦ “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mk 16:16).
- ✦ “Jesus answered, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God’” (Jn 3:5).

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<sup>4</sup> In our Orthodox Christian understanding, we do not say that we inherited the actual and specific sin of Adam and Eve (original sin). Instead, we inherited from Adam and Eve the state of sin (ancestral sin). St. Athanasius the Apostolic discussed this in his *Four Discourses Against the Arians*: “For as when Adam had transgressed, his sin reached unto all men.” St. Cyril of Alexandria explained it further, saying, “Human nature has, therefore, contracted the sickness of sin through the disobedience of one man, Adam. It is in this way that the many have been made sinners – not as though they had transgressed with Adam (for they did not yet exist), but because they are of his nature, the nature that fell beneath the law of sin.”

<sup>5</sup> You are not required to memorize the passages themselves, but rather, have a familiarity with each of them and their reference.

- “And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Ac 22:16).
- “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit” (1 Co 12:13).
- “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Ga 3:27).
- There is also an antitype which now saves us—Baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, (1 Pe 3:21).

### III. SALVATION THROUGH HOLY BAPTISM

As Orthodox Christians, our understanding of salvation has much to do with the forgiveness and remission of our sins, iniquities, and transgressions. The Holy Apostle Paul teaches that there is no remission of sins, however, without the shedding of blood (Heb 9:22). Our Lord Jesus Christ shed His Blood on our behalf. When we could not save ourselves, He condescended in great humility and emptied Himself, even unto death, in order to save us. Thus, salvation is possible for us only if we share in His Death and Resurrection. As Paul said, “...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Php 3:10–11).

How can we share in Christ’s Death and Resurrection? Quite simply, through Baptism. The Holy Apostle Paul teaches us in his Epistle to the Romans,

Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through Baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life (Ro 6:3–4).

It is therefore our death and burial with Christ in Baptism that grants us the possibility of salvation and eternal life in the glory of His Resurrection, as Paul continues,

For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him (Ro 6:5–8).

Thus, we are promised eternal life with Christ if we first die to sin in the waters of Baptism and continue to live a life that is dead to the world and sin. St. John Chrysostom comments on the Holy Apostle Paul’s words saying: “... he did not say ‘His death’, rather ‘*the likeness of His death*’ because the two deaths are not the same, since His death is the body’s death but ours is a death of sin.” As long as we continue in this death to the world and sin, we are saved, but once our

desire for the world and sin is raised up, our salvation is in jeopardy, because, again, salvation only comes through death. For this reason, Paul exhorts us, “Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Ro 6:11), and also, “For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Ro 8:13), and again, “Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col 3:5). In Holy Baptism, we shared in the Death and Resurrection of Christ, but after Baptism, we are called to continue living a life that is dead to the world and to sin so that we may be truly alive in Christ. For this reason, the Holy Church prays in the first Troparion of the Ninth Hour of the Agpeya, “O, Who tasted death in the flesh in the ninth hour for our sake, we the sinners, put to death our carnal lusts, O Christ, our God, and deliver us.”



# THE FOUNDATION OF HOLY BAPTISM IN THE HOLY SCRIPTURE

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*Introduction to Holy Baptism*

*Section 2*

## **In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.**

It should not be surprising that the Mystery of Baptism is firmly rooted in the Holy Scriptures, since everything in the Orthodox Church has a scriptural basis. Holy Baptism is not found only on the pages of the New Testament (NT), in which we read about how our Lord Jesus Christ was baptized in the waters of the Jordan by St. John the Baptist. The symbols of the Mystery of Baptism rather appear in the Old Testament (OT) and throughout the entire Holy Scripture.

## **A. HOLY BAPTISM IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

In the OT, there are several symbols of Holy Baptism. These are all historical events that symbolize and anticipate the later events of our Lord's Baptism and our baptism in Him. Let us consider some of them.

### *1. The Spirit of God over the Waters of Creation*

In the story of Creation, we see how the Spirit of God moved over the water and both light and life sprang forth.<sup>6</sup> The new creation was from water and Spirit. It is both a symbol and a prophecy about the work of the Holy Spirit in the waters of Holy Baptism to recreate us, to confer upon us Divine Grace, and to grant us the possibility of salvation in Christ.

### *2. Noah's Ark in the Great Flood*

In Gen 7, we see how the waters of the Great Flood did two things simultaneously: they purged sin from the face of the earth and saved the righteous Noah and his family in the Ark. The ark was surrounded by water, a symbol of Holy Baptism, whereas the dove which returned with the olive branch is a symbol of the Holy Spirit and the peace we receive through reconciliation with God. St. Peter interpreted the story of Noah's Ark in the Great Flood as a symbol of Holy Baptism:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine

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<sup>6</sup> In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth. But the earth was unsightly and unfurnished, and darkness was over the deep, and the Spirit of God moved over the water. And God said, Let there be light, and there was light. And God saw the light that it was good, and God divided between the light and the darkness (Ge 1:1-4 LXX).

longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us —Baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him (1 Pe 3:18–22).

### *3. Circumcision as a Type of Holy Baptism*

When God made a covenant between the Holy Patriarch Abraham and his descendants in Gen 17, the sign of the covenant was circumcision by which all male descendants were made heirs of the covenant and members of the people of God:

And God said to Abraam, “Thou also shalt fully keep my covenant, thou and thy seed after thee for their generations. And this is the covenant which thou shalt fully keep between me and you, and between thy seed after thee for their generations; every male of you shall be circumcised. And ye shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between me and you. And the child of eight days old shall be circumcised by you, every male throughout your generations, and the servant born in the house and he that is bought with money, of every son of a stranger, who is not of thy seed. He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with money shall be surely circumcised, and my covenant shall be on your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised male, who shall not be circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin on the eighth day, that soul shall be utterly destroyed from its family, for he has broken my covenant (Ge 17:9–14).

Just as circumcision was the sign of the covenant between God and His people, Israel, through Holy Baptism we become members of the Holy Church, Body of Christ, which is the new Israel.

The Holy Apostle Paul, in his Epistle to the Colossians, interprets circumcision as a type and symbol of Holy Baptism:

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in Baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, Who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross (Col 2:11–14).

We notice in this beautiful passage the relationship between the death of Christ and our Baptism. For this reason, in every baptism, we commemorate how the baptizand dies and is buried with Christ in the water and later emerges as a new creation. This is made possible only through the Death and Resurrection of our Savior.

#### 4. *Crossing the Red Sea as a Symbol of Holy Baptism*

In Ex 14, we see how the Israelites crossed through the waters of the Red Sea into a new life while the same waters purged sin and evil, represented by the enslaving Egyptians. The Holy Apostle Paul offers this interpretation:

Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ (1 Co 10:1–4).

Here, we find a beautiful symphony of symbols: the Red Sea is a symbol of the waters of Holy Baptism; the cloud is a symbol of the Holy Spirit Who works in the water; the spiritual food and drink is the Body and Blood of Christ; and Pharaoh, who drowned in the Red Sea, is a symbol of Satan whose power was destroyed by our Savior's lifegiving work.

#### 5. *A Symbol of Holy Baptism in the Holy Prophets*

And I will take you out from the nations, and will gather you out of all the lands, and will bring you into your own land: and I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be purged from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols, and I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and will put a new spirit in you: and I will take away the heart of stone out of your flesh, and will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you, and will cause you to walk in mine ordinances, and to keep my judgments, and do them. And ye shall dwell upon the land which I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be to me a people, and I will be to you a God. And I will save you from all your uncleannesses... (Eze 36:24–29).

In this passage, the Lord addresses His people Israel, who are a symbol of the Holy Church, the “new Israel” (Eph 2:12), and promises a purging and cleansing from sin<sup>7</sup> and the creation of a new heart and spirit. These are given through the sprinkling of water. Finally, the Lord promises to give us His own Holy Spirit to reside within us, quench our thirst,<sup>8</sup> and fashion us into a new creation<sup>9</sup>. The end result is power to walk in His commandments and keep them while He reigns over us as our God and we are subjected to Him as His people. In his commentary on this passage, St. Jerome emphasizes its relationship to the Mystery of Baptism: “Careful consideration should be given to what a new heart and a new spirit is given when the water has been poured and sprinkled.”<sup>10</sup> As members of the Holy Church, these words are effectively addressed to each and every one of us.

<sup>7</sup>“In that day every place shall be opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for removal and for separation” (Zec 13:1). See also Is 1:16 and 4:4.

<sup>8</sup>“For I will give water to the thirsty that walk in a dry land: I will put my Spirit upon thy seed, and my blessings upon thy children: and they shall spring up as grass between brooks, and as willows on the banks of running water” (Is 44:3).

<sup>9</sup>“Thou shalt send forth thy Spirit, and they shall be created; and thou shalt renew the face of the earth” (Ps 103:30).

<sup>10</sup> St. Jerome, *Commentary on Ezekiel 11.36.1–15*, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1953), 75:506.

## 6. A Symbol of Holy Baptism in the Psalms

The Voice of the Lord is upon the waters:  
 The God of glory has thundered:  
 The Lord is upon many waters.  
 The Voice of the Lord is mighty;  
 The Voice of the Lord is full of majesty (Ps 28:3–4).

Psalm 28 is a psalm about the glory and holiness of God. The full psalm depicts the powerful Voice of the Lord booming seven times in a tumultuous storm, but ends with Him peacefully reigning over His people. For our purposes, we see the Voice of the Lord upon the many waters (vv 3-5). It brings to mind the Spirit of God hovering over the continually moving waters of creation (Ge 1:1-4), the pillar of fire and smoke in the midst of the waters of the Red Sea which stood up as a wall before Moses and the Israelites (Ex 14:19-22), and the angel of the Lord who descended to stir the waters of the Pool of Siloam in the story of the man paralyzed for 38 years (Jn 5), among other things. The holiness, majesty, and glory of the Lord is seen in the moving of the waters. In Holy Baptism, the presence of God in the waters transforms all those who are baptized in them in spiritual men and women. As St. Basil the Great said,

The waters are also the saints, because rivers flow from within them, that is, spiritual teaching that refreshes the souls of the hearers. Again, they receive water that springs up to eternal life, wherefore it becomes in those who receive it rightly “a fountain of water, springing up unto life everlasting” (Jn 4:14). On such waters, then, is the Lord.<sup>11</sup>

These symbols of the Mystery of Baptism in the OT clearly show us that these events have lasting spiritual significance for us in addition to their historical significance as narrative events.

## B. HOLY BAPTISM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament (NT), there are likewise several symbols and events relating to Holy Baptism.

### 1. The Baptism of St. John the Baptist

All four Gospel accounts tell us that, before our Savior’s own Baptism, St. John was baptizing people with a baptism of repentance. His baptism took place in the Jordan River, which is significant. This same river was the site of Israel crossing into the Promised Land (cf. Jos 3). It is where they crossed into a new life, the land of milk and honey. Standing at the banks of the Jordan River, St. John once again offered new life to Israel and to all mankind. This

<sup>11</sup> St. Basil the Great, *Homilies on the Psalms* 13.4, *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1947-), 46:201–2.

new life would be realized in the Baptism and all of the other redemptive work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Although we use the word “baptism” to describe what St. John did on the banks of the Jordan River, we must be careful and realize that his baptism was not the same as the Mystery of Baptism in the Church. St. John’s baptism did not have the power to cleanse a person’s soul from sin like Christian Baptism. Instead, his baptism was more an external sign of true and sincere repentance in the heart. When a person approached St. John the Baptist to receive baptism, he would acknowledge that the Kingdom of God was at hand, confess his sin, and vow to change his life. Indeed, St. John himself declared, “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Mt 3:11).

The superiority of Baptism through the Holy Spirit and fire was symbolized in 1 Kgs 18, in the story of the Holy Prophet Elias (Elijah) and the wicked priests of the false god, Baal. Elias challenged the priests of Baal to a contest. Each of them would slaughter an ox and put it on an altar. Each of them would pray to their god, and whichever god sent fire for the sacrifice was the true God. Elias not only put his sacrificial ox on the altar, but he also doused it with 12 water pots filled with water so that even the trench around the altar was full of water. Then, he prayed to the Lord God and fire descended from Heaven. In a small, but crucial detail, we see that the *fire* from Heaven licked up the *water* that was in the trench!

That is exactly what St. John the Baptist was speaking about: the fire from Heaven is greater than the water of the earth. He is baptizing with water, but Christ is coming, and He will baptize with fire, because He is greater. His baptism of fire and the Holy Spirit will have the power to transform men from within, and cleanse them from their impurities. This is why, in the Orthodox Church, after we baptize a person, we Chrismate them immediately, so that they might receive the fire of the Holy Spirit throughout their lives. St. John was prophesying about the coming of this day.

## *2. The Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

The most important NT passage on Holy Baptism is the account of the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ by St. John the Baptist (Mk 1:9-11, Mt 3, Lk 3:1-21, Jn 1:29-34).

Our Savior, after insisting, receives Baptism from St. John. The servant baptizes the Master in all humility and love. Our Lord stripped Himself and walked down into the waters of the Jordan and was immersed, and then He emerged from the waters of the river. He Who needed no help from the water was baptized in it. He needed no sanctification or cleansing from the water, but rather, the water needed His presence to become sanctified and an agent for our cleansing and purification. In His humility, our Lord was immersed, and when He was under the water during His Baptism, it was a foreshadowing of His death and burial. And when He came up out of the water, it was a foreshadowing of His Resurrection.

In Christ's Baptism, the world witnessed a second creation. At the first creation, described in the Book of Genesis, the Spirit hovered and moved above the waters before the first man, Adam, was created. At His Baptism, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Second Adam, stood next to the water upon which the Holy Spirit hovered, ushering in the beginning of a new creation.

This was the event to which the OT symbols and events were pointing. According to St. Ephrem the Syrian, in our Lord's Baptism, all of the historical events converged in Christ: the same Holy Spirit that hovered over the waters in Genesis, over the Red Sea, and over the Jordan likewise hovered over Christ and sanctified the recipient. Moreover, just as Christ descended into the waters of the Jordan river and sanctified it, He sanctifies the waters of the baptismal font. Christ descended in the water, bathed in it, sanctified it, and conferred on it the power of the Holy Spirit to give life and make it a "womb which begets people spiritually." St. Athanasius the Apostolic teaches us that what Christ did while in the flesh (i.e., incarnate), He did to teach us to do the same. Thus, what our Savior did in the waters of the Jordan was and continues to be for our benefit and salvation.

### *3. The Blood and Water that Flowed from the Pierced Side of Christ*

We also see a symbol of Holy Baptism in the water and Blood that flowed from our Crucified Savior's side. The Blood, of course, is the Blood of the Eucharist of which we partake in every Divine Liturgy, but the water symbolizes the waters of Holy Baptism. St. John Chrysostom, in one of his Baptismal Homilies, insisted that water came out of the wound first and blood second, since the order of the Mysteries is Baptism first and Eucharist later. He goes on to liken Christ's Body with a Holy Temple that contains priceless treasures — the Water of Baptism and the Blood of the Eucharist. In another homily, he explains how Christ fashioned these Mysteries of the Church, His spotless Bride, from His side just as He formed the woman, Eve, from Adam's side.

### *4. Our Savior's Institution of the Mystery of Holy Baptism*

In addition, our Lord Himself instituted the Mystery of Baptism in plain words. After His Resurrection, He appeared to His disciples and said,

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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 that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age (Mt 28:18-20).

The necessity of this baptism was reiterated by our Lord when He said, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16:16).

After the Lord's ascension into Heaven, the Holy Apostles continued the practice of Baptism. On the day of Pentecost, they were baptized by the Holy Spirit in the likeness of tongues of fire and immediately performed the Mystery of Holy Baptism for all those who believed in Christ. In Acts 2:38, we read about how 3,000 were baptized in a single day!

### *5. Holy Baptism in the Pauline Epistles*

The Holy Apostle Paul also spoke of this Mystery repeatedly. He tells us, “As many of you were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal 3:27). He also speaks of us a “new creatures” after Baptism (2 Cor 5:17).

In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul further reveals the significance of Holy Baptism: “Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through Baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Ro 6:3–4). As discussed above, in His lifegiving Death on the Holy Cross, our Savior carried all of our sins with Him and cleansed us. Thus, when we are immersed into the death of Christ through Holy Baptism, we are immersed into the purification of Christ’s death, which has the power to destroy every sin. If we fall into sin afterwards, our Savior grants us the Mystery of Repentance and Confession, which is like a second baptism in our own tears.<sup>12</sup>

This is just a sample of the foundations of the Mystery of Baptism in the Holy Scriptures. The Church Fathers and other spiritual commentators have written extensively about these and other symbols. I encourage you to seek and read them to further enrich your understanding.

Let us now move on to the next topic of our discussion, the rites of Baptism.

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<sup>12</sup> Notice the symbolism of Holy Baptism in Psalm 50, the psalm of repentance: “Thou shalt sprinkle me with hyssop, and I shall be purified: thou shalt wash me, and I shall be made whiter than snow” (Ps 50:7).



# THE RITE OF HOLY BAPTISM IN THE COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH

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*Introduction to Holy Baptism*

*Section 3*

The Early Church consisted of one faith followed by different peoples in different places. There were Christians in Alexandria, Rome, Antioch, Jerusalem, and many other places after the Holy Apostles preached the Gospel throughout the world. Each group of people oftentimes had a different language, background, culture, etc. For this reason, we do not have a single, common Rite of Baptism. Every locality practiced this Mystery with some slight variations in practice. We do, however, have a common outline of the Rite, which is, more or less, still used by most traditional churches today, including the Coptic Orthodox Church.

## *1. The Timing of Holy Baptism*

Although the Mystery of Holy Baptism may be performed at any time throughout the year, there were several times throughout the liturgical calendar at which Holy Baptism was celebrated in the Early Church.

The first and most prominent is the time around the Feast of Pascha (the Feast of the Resurrection or Easter). Tertullian, an early Christian writer who lived in the second and early third centuries, said, “The Passover affords a more than usually solemn day for Baptism; when, nevertheless, the Lord's passion, in which we are baptized, was completed.”<sup>13</sup> Baptism was seen as a “passing over” from death to life in the context of our Lord's Death and Resurrection. This practice of celebrating Holy Baptism on Pascha became widespread throughout all Christendom and is practiced in many Orthodox churches to this day. Also, the Great Holy Fast developed in part as a preparation for Baptism on this day.<sup>14</sup>

The second is the Feast of the Theophany (or Epiphany) in which we celebrate our Savior's Holy Baptism by St. John the Baptist. Since Baptism is a participation in the life of Christ, many chose to receive the Mystery on this day as the Church commemorated His own Baptism.

The third is the Feast of Pentecost, following the account in Ac 2:41 in which 3,000 were baptized on that feast.

Finally, in the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Sixth Sunday of the Great Holy Fast, also known as the Sunday of the Man Born Blind, developed into a popular time for the Mystery of

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<sup>13</sup> Tertullian, *On Baptism* 19, ANF 3.

<sup>14</sup> For a wonderful introduction to the complex development of the Great Holy Fast in the Holy Church — and the unique role that the Coptic Church had therein — see Fr. John Paul Abdelsayed's article in the wonderful book, *Great Lent*, published by St. Paul Brotherhood Press.

Holy Baptism. Our Savior's healing of the man born blind by anointing his eyes with clay and commanding him to wash in the Pool of Siloam was recognized as one of the many symbols of Baptism in the NT.

## *2. Types of Oil in Holy Baptism*

In what follows, there will be mention of anointings of several different types of oil. The Coptic Orthodox Church utilizes three types of oil in the Mystery of Holy Baptism. In order of their holiness, they are:

(1) Simple Oil (which becomes the Oil of the Catechumens) — This is pure, simple olive oil that is found in the vigil lamps of the church. It is also the oil that is present during the Vigil of Apocalypse (or Bright) Saturday. The priest prays that this oil may be transformed into an anointing that helps the catechumen understand the word of God and the faith of the Church.

(2) *Hagielaion* (or "Oil of Gladness" or "Oil of Joy") — This is the oil that remains after the mixture and sanctification of the Holy Chrism. It is made when the sediments of the ointments of the Holy Chrism are boiled after it has been filtered. The priest prays that this oil helps the soul to rejoice in the word of God and the faith through the work of the Holy Spirit. According to ancient custom, it is called the "Oil of Gladness," because the Holy Spirit is the source of spiritual gladness.

(3) Holy Chrism (or *Myron*) — This is the holiest oil in the Orthodox Church that is sanctified every number of years at the hands of our fathers, the Pope and the bishops. It represents the seal and action of the Holy Spirit. In Holy Baptism, the water receives the Chrism so that it might be transformed into the holy waters of Baptism. The person being baptized also receives the Chrism after Baptism to become a temple of the Holy Spirit.

## **I. PREPARATION FOR HOLY BAPTISM**

Baptism in the Early Church is something that was prepared for over a long period of time. In the Early Church, baptism of newcomers to the Church, referred to as catechumens, was prepared for over a period of nearly three years. They were prayed for continually, instructed, and their sins were confessed. What follows is a description of the preparation for Holy Baptism that one might find in a modern parish.

### *A. Inquiring into the Faith (for adults only)*

The first step of receiving Holy Baptism in the Orthodox Church for adults in the process of inquiring into the faith. A series of initial interactions take place in which one visits an Orthodox parish, researches Orthodoxy online, discusses the faith with an Orthodox friend, etc. Depending on how these initial interactions go, a person may seek further information about the Orthodox faith by attending meetings, Bible Studies, and perhaps even a Divine

Liturgy at an Orthodox parish. It may take time to become accustomed to the unspeakable beauty that is found in Orthodox worship — the beautiful iconography, the ancient hymns, the aroma of sweet incense, etc. — but with prayer, time and patience, a person will gain more of an understanding of the Orthodox faith through the Church’s worship, following the ancient Latin dictum *lex orandi, lex credendi*.<sup>15</sup> Throughout this time, which should last at least one month, the person is considered an inquirer or seeker in the church.

## *B. Enrollment*

### **1. For Adults**

After serving as an inquirer for some time, a person makes a decision to turn away from his previous life and faith, and to seek Holy Baptism in the Coptic Orthodox Church. He is then officially enrolled as a catechumen by proclaiming his sincere intention to receive Holy Baptism to the parish priest or bishop. In ancient practice, the bishop at this time would write the catechumen’s name in a register, which symbolizes the Book of Life in which is written all of the names of those who are saved.

At this stage of enrollment, the priest may choose to pray the Litany of the Catechumens in which he asks God to have mercy on them and allow His Word to abide in their hearts, that they may be worthy of the New Birth (which is Baptism) for the forgiveness of their sins and prepare to be temples of the Holy Spirit (which is accomplished in Chrismation after Baptism). He may also pray the following prayer found at the beginning of the Coptic Rite of Baptism:

O Master, Lord Jesus Christ, Who bowed the heavens and came down to earth, whose word smites the rocks more mightily than swords, before Whose face the waters were troubled and fled backwards. Heal these children (or this child) who come to be made catechumens. Show them (or him or her) the way in which it is meet for them to walk; instruct them in the grace of Your Holy Spirit that they may abide in the imperishable gift of Your Holy Spirit; and bestow upon them remission of their sins; and grant them by Your grace that they may be healed from destroying sin, that they may be made worthy of the Holy Baptism of the new birth, in order that they may receive also the washing of the spotless Baptism of Your Holy Spirit, that they may see with holy vision unto sure understanding, and may give glory to You, O God, for Yours is the glory with Your good Father and the Holy Spirit forever. Amen.

### **2. For Infants**

Children who are baptized in the Coptic Orthodox Church are enrolled as catechumens on the day of Baptism by their parents, who serve as sponsors for their spiritual development. Thus, the prayers mentioned above are prayed on the day of Baptism with the intention that the newly baptized child will be catechized throughout his life in the Church.

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<sup>15</sup> Loosely translated as “The law of prayer is the law of faith.” In other words, the Church prays according to Her faith, and Her faith is reflected in how She prays.

### *C. Catechesis*

After enrollment, the person undergoes a period of instruction known as catechesis. This is a word that comes from the Greek word *echo*. The idea is that the candidate for baptism “echo” the instructions he receives in his mind and in his conduct. From this point until the time he is actually baptized, he is called a “catechumen.” The person instructing the catechumen, whether a priest or a servant, is called the “catechist.”

During this period, the catechumen receives instruction by reading the Holy Scripture and listening the interpretation thereof by the bishop or the priest. Some of the most popular and edifying patristic works are catechetical homilies from Fathers such as St. John Chrysostom and St. Cyril of Jerusalem. The catechumen is also instructed in the Creed during this time. The catechist “hands down” the Creed to the catechumen with explanations of each part. Later, immediately before baptism, when the catechumen fully understands the Dogma of the Church as expressed in Her Creed, he “returns” the Creed to the priest after he has memorized it. In addition to this study of the Holy Scripture and the Creed, the catechumen is encouraged to immerse himself in the life of the Church by attending Divine Liturgies, meetings, Bible Studies, community service activities, etc. It is only by both study and experience that one can truly benefit from the richness and depth of the Orthodox faith.

### *D. The Role of the Sponsor*

Every person received into the Holy Church is given a sponsor or godparent. In the case of infant baptism, the parents typically assume this role. In the case of an adult baptism, the role is usually assumed by a dedicated and faithful member of the parish with permission from the priest. The role of the sponsor is extremely serious and not to be taken lightly. For this reason, not every member of a parish is qualified to be a sponsor.

In the early Church, sponsors were integral to the Mystery of Baptism. They were members of the Christian community who were entrusted with two primary tasks. First, they testified as to the character and seriousness of the catechumen as he entered the period of the catechumenate. In this context, sponsors guaranteed the seriousness of the catechumen’s intentions and the adequacy of his training to the Church. Second, they took responsibility for the guidance and education of the catechumen. As the Church grew throughout the world after the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, it wasn’t possible for the clergy to provide individualized attention to each and every catechumen and help them in their Christian formation. As a result, the sponsor/godparent became a spiritual guide and teacher to them. These duties can be traced back to New Testament Christianity. In Acts 8, for example, St. Philip the Apostle is sent by God to an Ethiopian eunuch who was reading the Book of Isaiah. When questioned by the apostle whether he understood what he was reading, the eunuch replied “How can I, unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:31) St. Philip then spoke and “proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.” (Acts 8:35) Immediately thereafter, the eunuch received the Mystery of Baptism and continued his travels rejoicing. In this account, St. Philip

carried out the function of a spiritual guide and sponsor before the eunuch was baptized, teaching him about the Lord and guiding him until the moment of his baptism. Every sponsor/godparent today should remember this story and meditate on the greatness of their responsibility.

In light of this intimate and holy relationship that developed between sponsors/godparents and their spiritual children, and in view of the great responsibilities involved, the Holy Church established canons that forbid marriage between godparents and their godchildren.

## II. HOLY BAPTISM

### *A. Liturgy of the Consecration of the Water*

The first action in the Mystery of Baptism is the sanctification of the water, which is accomplished by the Liturgy of the Consecration of the Water. In many ways, it is similar in its structure to the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

#### OUTLINE OF THE LITURGY OF THE CONSECRATION OF THE WATER

##### I. Prayer of Thanksgiving

##### II. Readings

- A. Pauline Epistle (Ti 2:11-3:7)
- B. Catholic Epistle (1 Jn 5:5-14)
- C. *Praxis* or Acts of the Holy Apostles (Ac 8:26-39)
- D. Litany of the Gospel
- E. Psalm (Ps 31:1, 2)
- F. Holy Gospel (Jn 3:1-21 - Our Savior's dialogue with Nicodemus)

##### III. Prayers

- A. Seven Long Litanies
  - 1. Litany of the Sick
  - 2. Litany of the Travelers
  - 3. Seasonal Litany (i.e., waters, air of heaven, seed and herbs, etc.)
  - 4. Litany of the Ruler
  - 5. Litany of the Departed
  - 6. Litany of the Oblations
  - 7. Litany of the Catechumens<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For a brief explanation, see section on Inquirers above.

- B. Prayer of Laying on of Hands<sup>17</sup>
- C. Inaudible Invocation in which the priest confesses his sinfulness and asks God to purify him so that he may be able to accomplish the Mystery.
- D. Three Long Litanies
  - 1. Litany for the Peace of the Holy Church
  - 2. Litany for the Fathers
  - 3. Litany for the Assemblies
- E. The Orthodox Creed

#### IV. Consecration of the Water

- A. As a preparation for the water to receive and be sanctified by the Holy Spirit, the priest takes the *Hagielaion* or “Oil of Gladness” and pours it in the baptismal font three times in the form of the Cross while blessing in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He then prays for the transformation of both oil and water that they may have power to defeat the works of evil. He then breathes three times on the water in the form of the Cross and prays for the sanctification and hallowing of the oil and water. Finally, he seals the water three times in the form of the Cross while praying that God the Father may thunder over it with His Holy Spirit and recreate all who are baptized in it.
- B. Kiss of Peace
- C. Anaphora
- D. Prayers of Submission and Absolution to the Son
- E. The priest takes the Holy Chrism and pours it in the form of the Cross over the baptismal font while blessing in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is the moment in which the Holy Spirit descends upon the water and sanctifies it into the waters of Holy Baptism.
- F. Excerpts from the Psalms
  - 1. Ps 28:3, 4<sup>18</sup>
  - 2. Ps 33:4, 10
  - 3. Ps 65:11
  - 4. Ps 50:7, 9, 10
  - 5. Ps 131:10
- G. Psalm 150

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<sup>17</sup> This is the same prayer that is commonly recited at the end of the Divine Liturgy before the priest sprinkles the congregation with water. It is a reminder of the grace and blessing we received in Baptism and an exhortation to go forth and continue to live accordingly.

<sup>18</sup> See section on Symbols of Holy Baptism in the OT above.

At the conclusion of this Liturgy, the water in the baptismal font becomes living water filled with the Holy Spirit and capable to grant new birth to the soul and body of those baptized in it. It enables them to walk along the path of righteousness and participate in all of the other Mysteries of the Church, including Chrismation, Eucharist, Repentance, Marriage, Priesthood, and more. In short, it enables a person to receive salvation and inherit the Kingdom of Heaven through the lifegiving work of Christ.

### *B. Churching of Women/ Absolution of the Mother (for infants only)*

#### **1. If she gave birth to a male child**

Although a child may receive Holy Baptism at any time, the ancient and standard practice is for mothers to wait until 40 days after delivery of a male child before bringing their sons to receive Holy Baptism. The Holy Church established this 40-day period, known as the “Churching of Women,” as a time to allow new mothers to recover after childbirth before returning to the Church and receiving the Eucharist with their son.

Why 40 days? In the Book of Leviticus, God commanded the children of Israel to observe certain laws for the sake of their sanctity and holiness. The Holy Prophet Moses handed down these laws from God so that His people might remain holy and blameless in front of Him. Among the many commandments of this Law was the churching of women found in Leviticus 12. God instructed Moses concerning a woman who gave birth to a male child:

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the children of Israel, and thou shalt say to them, “Whatsoever woman shall have conceived and born a male child shall be unclean seven days, she shall be unclean according to the days of separation for her monthly courses. And on the eighth day she shall circumcise the flesh of his foreskin. And for thirty-three days she shall continue in her unclean blood; she shall touch nothing holy, and shall not enter the sanctuary, until the days of her purification be fulfilled” (Le 12:1-4).

Our Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled the Law on our behalf, however. There is no more uncleanness under the Law for these natural processes. Nonetheless, the Holy Church adapted the Churching of Women as part of Her love and care towards new mothers. During this time, a woman is asked to remain with her child and recover physically, emotionally, and spiritually before returning to the Church, repenting of her sins, and receiving the Eucharist. With modern medical practices, many women may be physically ready to return before the 40 days are complete, but it is important to remember that physical recovery is not the only goal of the 40 days. There is a spiritual, emotional, and psychological recovery involved, as well, not to mention the awesome responsibility of caring for a newborn. The Holy Church is essentially giving new mothers permission not to practice the rigorous Christian life during these 40 days, but instead, to focus on their recovery and the newborn child. Contrary to what some people argue, the Churching of Women is not intended to be oppressive or discriminatory to women in any way, but rather, reflects the Church’s love and care towards women.

## **2. If she gave birth to a female child**

Whereas the period of churching for mothers of male children is 40 days, it is 80 days for mothers of female children. Again, this is one of the most misunderstood practices in the Holy Church. Some people question why this disparity exists. In Leviticus 12, God Himself established the disparity when He commanded Moses, saying,

But if she should have born a female child, then she shall be unclean twice seven days, according to the time of her monthly courses; and for sixty-six days shall she remain in her unclean blood... (Le 12:5)

Once again, it is clear that there no longer exists any uncleanness under the Law, because of the lifegiving work of our Lord Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, the Holy Church adapted the distinction between male and female children in Her churching practices, reflecting a distinction that God Himself established. In addition, there are other theological, historical, and medical reasons for this distinction, which are beyond the scope of this paper. For now, it is important to remember the pure example of the Holy Theotokos St. Mary. Despite the fact that she conceived Christ miraculously by the Holy Spirit in all purity and holiness, she chose to remain outside of the Temple for 40 days to complete the days of her purification under the Law, even though she needed no purification whatsoever (Lk 2:22-24).

### OUTLINE OF THE SERVICE OF THE ABSOLUTION OF THE MOTHER

#### **I. Prayer of Thanksgiving**

#### **II. Readings**

##### A. Pauline Epistle

1. Male - He 1:8-12
2. Female - 1 Co 7:12-14

##### B. Litany of the Gospel

##### C. Psalm

1. Male - Ps 31:1, 2
2. Female - Ps 44:12

##### D. Holy Gospel

1. Male - Lk 2:21-35 (Presentation of Christ in the Temple)
2. Female - Lk 10:38-42 (Christ in the house of Mary and Martha of Bethany)

#### **III. Prayers**

##### A. Three Short Litanies

1. Litany for the Peace of the Holy Church
2. Litany for the Fathers
3. Litany for the Assemblies

- B. Orthodox Creed
- C. The priest prays a prayer in which he entreats God to send His Holy Spirit and renew the new mother “in her body and her soul and her spirit.” He also asks God to absolve her “from all accusations, and all her deeds, unto a pardoning of all her transgressions.” From these words, it is clear that the Holy Church is not absolving new mothers simply because they are women or because there is something wrong or unclean with childbirth. Instead, the focus is on absolving the new mother of all her deeds, sins, and transgressions that she committed while she, with the Church’s permission, remained outside of the life of the Church to recover and bond with her newborn.
- D. Three Absolutions, including the Absolution to the Son — It is fitting to note that these are the exact prayers the priest prays for anyone who comes to confess his sins – male or female. Again, it shows that the absolution has nothing to do with the uniqueness of womanhood or childbirth, but rather, it is the standard absolution for the forgiveness of sins given to someone who has received permission to abstain from the life of the Church for either 40 or 80 days.
- E. The priest then anoints the mother with simple oil. This is the same oil that any person, male or female, receives when seeking a blessing.

### *C. Holy Baptism*

Everything described above has been a preparation for the moment of Holy Baptism itself. It is in what follows that the Mystery is completed.

#### OUTLINE OF THE HOLY BAPTISM

- I. **Absolution (for infants only)**
  - A. The priest begins with an absolution over the mother and her child in which he brings to mind the Law in Lev 12 and entreats God to absolve the mother from all her impurities, which we understand spiritually, not physically. He prays that she be made worthy to receive Communion without condemnation. He also prays for the child, that God may “bless, purify, bring [him/her] to full age and stature, that he/she may grow up according to Your holy will” in the Orthodox faith.
- II. **Prayer for the Catechumens**
  - A. Litany of the Catechumens
  - B. Another Prayer for the Catechumens — The priest entreats God to forgive their sins and make them worthy of Holy Baptism, and to enlighten their hearts to see in purity the way of eternal life, and glorify God all the days of their lives.
- III. **Anointing with the Oil of the Catechumens**

- A. Prayers over the Oil of the Catechumens — The priest entreats God to make the oil powerful against the works of evil and become an anointing for faith in Christ. At the end of these prayers, he ensures the one(s) to be baptized are not wearing any jewelry, because any foreign object that touches the sanctified waters of Holy Baptism must be kept by the Church so as not to be desecrated.
- B. The priest takes the Oil of the Catechumens and anoints the child on his forehead, breast, hands, and back while praying the appropriate prayers.

#### IV. Prayers of Enrollment

- A. In these prayers, the priest asks for the name of the child and prays that God may inscribe that name in the Book of Life, bless them and make them worthy of Holy Baptism.

#### V. Renunciation of Satan/Exorcisms/Acceptance of Christ/Profession of Faith

- A. Renunciation of Satan — At the beginning of this section of Holy Baptism, the catechumen (or parent/sponsor of an infant) undresses as a reminder that Adam and Eve realized their nakedness when they fell into sin (Ge 3:7-10). He faces the West, which symbolizes evil, darkness, and death, because the light of the day begins when the sun rises in the East, but the darkness of the night comes when the sun sets in the West.<sup>19</sup> The catechumen (or parent/sponsor of an infant) raises his hands in a stopping motion while still facing West and renounces Satan and his demons with these words:

I renounce you Satan, and all your unclean works, and all your wicked angels and all your evil demons, and all your power, and all your abominable service, and all your evil cunning and error, and all your host, and all your authority and all the rest of your impieties.  
I renounce you! I renounce you! I renounce you!

With these words, the catechumen (or parent/sponsor of an infant on his behalf) expresses his intention to break away from the bondage of Satan by refusing all his works so that the Holy Spirit may dwell within him unto eternal life. The words of this renunciation are effectively a promise to live an entirely new life rejecting evil in any form.

- B. Prayers of Exorcism — These prayers ask that those who are about to be baptized become free from the influence of the devil and his evil spirits. Prayers of exorcism are

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<sup>19</sup>“For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life; Weeping may endure for a night, But joy comes in the morning” (Ps 30:5).

traditionally prayed for catechumens throughout their catechesis,<sup>20</sup> as well, and serve as a tremendous help in the struggle of the catechumens to break the hold of evil and to achieve purification. It does not mean that the baptizand is possessed by a demon or that he is an idol worshipper. Instead, in these prayers, we see that the Church understands that the existence of evil powers is very real, and that especially when people begin to make the journey to unite themselves to Christ, immediately a war is declared. In fact, many have said that once they make the decision to enter the Church, they begin to face many struggles, both spiritually and otherwise. We must especially pray for those entering the Church that they be freed from the bondage of evil and from anything that has occurred in their past lives that opened themselves up to the influence of the devil. Thus, in these prayers (in the name of the Holy Trinity and by the power of Jesus Christ), Satan and his demons are commanded to depart from those who are about to be baptized.

- C. Acceptance and Profession of Faith in Christ — Rejecting Satan and evil is not enough for salvation, however. For this reason, the catechumen (or parent/sponsor of an infant) then turns towards the East, which symbolizes new birth and illumination as the sun rises from the East.<sup>21</sup> He stretches out his arms in an accepting manner while confessing his faith in Christ and professing allegiance to Him with these words:

I profess You, O Christ my God, and all Your saving laws, and all Your quickening service, and all Your lifegiving works.

- D. Profession of Faith — As mentioned above, the catechumen spends time during his catechesis memorizing and understanding the Creed of the Church. Here, he (or parent/sponsor of an infant) “returns,” so to speak, what was handed down to him in the presence of the Church by proclaiming this ancient Creed:

I believe in one God, God the Father, the Pantocrator, and His Only-Begotten Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, and the Holy, Lifegiving Spirit, and the resurrection of the flesh, and the One, Only, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

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<sup>20</sup>“After this, let the deacon say: Go out, catechumens, in peace. And after they have gone out, let him say: You energumens, afflicted with unclean spirits, pray, and let us all earnestly pray for them, that God, the lover of humankind, through Christ, may rebuke the unclean and wicked spirits, and deliver the faithful from the dominion of the adversary. May he that rebuked the legion of demons, and the devil, the prince of wickedness, even now rebuke these demons which have turned away from piety. May God deliver his own workmanship from their power, and cleanse those creatures which he has with great wisdom created.” *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* 8.2.6.

<sup>21</sup> Consider the following relevant passages from the Holy Scripture describing what happens when a person leaves darkness and embraces the light of Christ: “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death Light has dawned” (Mt 4:16); “For it is the God Who commanded light to shine out of darkness, Who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ” (2 Co 4:6); and “Through the tender mercy of our God, with which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Lk 1:78–79) [describing the coming of Christ Who is the “Dayspring from on high”].

The priest will then ask him (or the parent/sponsor) three times if he believes: “Do you believe?” The catechumen (or the parent/sponsor) will answer, “I believe” three times if this has truly become his faith. Afterwards, the priest prays, entreating God to confirm his new faith in Him. He then kneels while the priest prays over them, asking God to enlighten his eyes and soul while protecting him from evil and the works of darkness as he prepares to become a temple of the Holy Spirit.

## VI. Anointing with the *Hagielaion*

A. The priest then anoints him with the *Hagielaion*, or “Oil of Gladness, on his breast, arms, over and behind his heart, and between his hands in the form of the Cross while saying, “I anoint you, \_\_\_\_\_, with the Oil of Gladness, availing against all working of the adversary, unto your grafting into the sweet olive tree<sup>22</sup> of the Holy Catholic Church of God. Amen.”

B. Prayer of the Laying Hands on the Catechumens

## VII. Triple Immersion in the Waters of Holy Baptism

A. Rite

1. For an infant — The deacon receives the naked child from his mother at the left side of the baptismal font. He then presents the child to the priest who holds him over the font. Gently, he fully immerses the child the first time, saying, “I baptize you, \_\_\_\_\_, in the Name of the Father...”, after which he breathes into the face of the child. He then immerses the child fully the second time, saying, “...and of the Son...”, after which he breathes into the face of the child. Finally, he immerses the child fully a third time, saying, “...and of the Holy Spirit...”, after which he breathes into the face of the child and holds him in a manner to clear his mouth and nose of any water. He then returns the child to his mother on the right side of the baptismal font, remembering how the lifegiving work of Christ brought us from the left (the side of wickedness) to the right (the side of power and majesty).<sup>23</sup>
2. For an adult male — It is largely the same, but the adult male may privately undress himself and enter into the baptismal font up to his neck. The priest may then come and fully immerse him three times as mentioned above.

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<sup>22</sup> The Holy Apostle Paul speaks about this image of being grafted into the Holy Church in his Epistle to the Romans: “And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.’ Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear” (Ro 11:17–20).

<sup>23</sup> cf. Mt 25:31-46. Consider also the Syrian Fraction in which the priest prays, “On behalf of the sins of the whole world, the Son died on the Cross. He turned us from the way on the left towards the right.”

3. For an adult female — In the Early Church, the rank of deaconess existed to help in the baptism of adult women. Nowadays, the common practice is to permit a woman to privately wear a white tunic and immerse herself up to her neck in the font. Afterwards, the priest may come and fully immerse her three times as mentioned above.

#### B. Meaning

1. In this triple immersion, the Mystery of Baptism is perfected. The baptizand dies with Christ and is raised with Him. As Christ descended into the depths of Hades after His death, the baptizand descends into the depth of the waters. As Christ rose out of the tomb with His glorified Body on the third day, the baptizand is immersed three times and rises out of the baptismal font as a new creation. As the Holy Apostle Paul teaches us, “Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Ro 6:3–4). He is now granted the possibility of salvation that our Savior accomplished with His lifegiving work.

#### C. Notes on Triple Immersion

1. According to the meaning of the ancient practice, complete immersion in water is required and not sprinkling (or even pouring). The Orthodox Church preserves this requirement. Immersion in water signifies dying to sin and coming up out of the water signifies a resurrection for a new life in Christ. Consider the following points on the necessity of a complete immersion:
  - a) Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself was baptized by complete immersion (Mt 3:16, Mk 1:10).
  - b) When St. Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, he did so by complete immersion. We are told that both of them went down to the water (Ac 8:38, 39). If sprinkling were permitted, then Philip would have baptized the eunuch even in the chariot, without the need for either of them to go down into the water.
  - c) In the Coptic Orthodox Church, one of the Arabic names for the Feast of the Theophany (Epiphany) is *Eid al-Ghettas*, which is translated “Feast of Immersion.” It reveals that this is an ancient practice.
  - d) The very word “baptism” comes from the Greek word *baptizo*, which means “to immerse or submerge.”
  - e) Baptism is dying and raising with Christ, as the Holy Apostle Paul said, “Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also

should walk in newness of life” (Ro 6:4). To be buried with Him by Baptism can only be achieved by immersion, where coming out of the baptismal font represents rising up with Christ after dying with Him. Sprinkling cannot represent this process of dying then being risen.

2. Nonetheless, out of Her economy, the Church allows baptism by sprinkling water only where there is a medical necessity or it is a matter of life or death.
3. In fact, so important is Holy Baptism for salvation that the Church allows any Orthodox Christian (male or female) to perform the Mystery in a life or death situation when a priest is not available.
4. The three immersions must be accompanied by the Trinitarian formula: “I baptize you, \_\_\_\_\_, in the Name of the Father (first immersion), and of the Son (second immersion), and of the Holy Spirit (third immersion).” This formula reflects the words of our Savior to His Holy 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 that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age (Mt 28:18-20).

#### **VIII. Prayer for Discharge of the Waters of Holy Baptism**

- A. The priest prays that God may return the waters to their original state. Afterwards, the water is carefully drained in a manner that does not waste or desecrate it in any way.



## HOW DO I STUDY?

Like everything else in the Orthodox Church, the Mystery of Holy Baptism reflects a depth and beauty that sometimes overwhelms us. There are so many types, symbols, and customs that reflect the infinite wisdom of God and His incomprehensible love for us. As such, this material is necessarily quite dense and full of information.

How, then, can one study? Allow me to offer the following humble suggestions.

First, this curriculum is not only for the YSC 2014. It is good to keep and use it even after the competition, especially when you attend a Baptism and strive to remember your own Baptism continuously.

Second, read everything, including the footnotes, and try to understand things in the context of the whole Mystery and the Christian life generally. That said, you will not be tested on obscure facts, but rather, on the practical meaning of the curriculum.

Third, it is a good idea to read and understand all of the important scriptural passages in this curriculum. For example, if someone were to ask you, “Why is Baptism necessary for salvation?”, it would be nice to remember Jn 3:5, Mk 16:16 and be able to cite at least the references.

Fourth, be as familiar as possible with the outlines presented for the different aspects of the Rite of Holy Baptism (Consecration of the Water, Absolution of the Mother, etc.)

Fifth, if a passage from one of the Early Church Fathers is quoted to support a point, be as familiar as possible with that quote and the Father.

Consider the following sample questions to help you study. These may find their way into the competition questions.

### SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Traditionally, when was the Mystery of Holy Baptism celebrated in the liturgical year?
2. What is the role of the sponsor/godparent?
3. How did the baptism of St. John the Baptist differ from Baptism in the Holy Church?
4. What is the significance of turning to the West to reject Satan and turning to the East to accept/profess faith in Christ? Use as many scriptural references as possible.
5. If you had a friend who wished to become a Coptic Orthodox Christian, what steps should he/she take? Explain the process of preparing for Holy Baptism as much as possible.

6. Can a Baptism, under normal circumstances, be performed by just sprinkling water over the baptizand's head?
7. Name and explain at least three (3) types/symbols of Holy Baptism in the OT.
8. What are the types of oil used in the Mystery of Holy Baptism? Name and explain each.
9. Name and explain at least three (3) types/symbols/events of Holy Baptism in the NT.
10. How do we understand the Prayers of Exorcism in the Rite of Holy Baptism? Does it mean the person receiving Baptism is demon-possessed?
11. Address the necessity of Baptism by triple immersion. Why do traditional churches insist on this practice?
12. What is the difference between the word "Sacrament" and the word "Mystery?"
13. How is salvation attained through Baptism? Does this mean a person is always free from sin after Baptism?
14. What is meant by the Churching of Women? Explain the process as much as possible.
15. Cite and explain the Holy Gospel reading for the service of Holy Baptism. Why is this Gospel chosen specifically?
16. Why should a person be entirely naked at the time of Holy Baptism?
17. What is the significance of the Profession of Faith in the Rite of Holy Baptism? What is being accomplished through it?
18. Is there one Rite of Holy Baptism across the whole Church? Why or why not?
19. In the context of the Mysteries of the Church, how does St. John Chrysostom understand the piercing of Christ's side with a spear?

#### DO YOU NEED HELP?

Do you have a question on this material? You may contact me at [frmoses@lacopts.org](mailto:frmoses@lacopts.org) to ask a question or point out any typos/mistakes.