

THE THREE SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

1. HOLY BAPTISM - *the gift of Divine Sonship*

(Catechism of the Catholic Church 1213-1284)

Introduction

Baptism and Confirmation are two of the sacraments of initiation into the Church, which is the universal sacrament of salvation – the visible making-present of Jesus Christ on earth. In receiving these two sacraments, the candidate is drawn into visible unity with the Church (Baptism), and then that unity is deepened as we grow in maturity and responsibility (Confirmation). This, however, is simply the visible effect of the sacraments - this visible effect is important because it expresses the more important invisible change that comes over us through the reception of Baptism and Confirmation. The Church is inseparably bound into Christ: this we are told by Christ himself. It follows that whoever is bound into visible unity with the Church, is also bound into the person of Christ himself. Thus, in receiving the sacraments of initiation into the Church (of which Baptism and Confirmation are two), we receive, as pure gift from God, the very person and life of Jesus Christ. Each of the seven sacraments achieves this in a different way and for a distinct function. Baptism and Confirmation were designed by God as the specific means of *visibly incorporating the disciples of Christ into the new creation – which is the Church.*

1. Baptism - the Seal of Eternal Life

Baptism is the most fundamental sacrament of all. It has the most dramatic effect on the recipient and is literally life changing. All of the ministries we carry out in the Church and in the world (such as reading at Mass, singing in the choir, acts of charity, work for justice etc., even up to the vocation to marriage and raising families, and the vocation to Holy Orders – deacons, priests and bishops) all and without exception flow from Baptism – they are specific ways God has called us to live out the implications of our Baptism. In a nutshell: Christ challenged us to *"be holy as your heavenly Father is holy"*. This is completely beyond us without the grace and strength of God - so he provides this grace (his divine life - himself) in Baptism. What we then go and do to become holy (marry, work for the sick, seek ordination etc.), is only made possible because of the grace of Baptism, giving us the strength to choose and pursue the good to which Christ invites us.

- *Baptism is entry into the Church. All other effects of Baptism flow directly from this. cf. C.C.C 1267-1271*

A. Washing

'Baptism' comes from a Greek word meaning *washing* or *cleansing*. Old Testament religious law prescribed ritual bathing to cleanse the people of Israel from ritual impurity. It is important to remember that Jews did **not** see ritual impurity as the same as sin. To offer sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem, people had to be ritually pure - prepared to offer their sacrifice (just as a modern surgeon is expected to wash before performing an operation, not because he is sinful but as a preparation for the operation). BUT the people of Israel did not believe that by becoming ritually pure (through the ritual bathings that were mandatory) they became sinless: they never believed that merely washing the body was enough to forgive the guilt of sin in the soul. Nevertheless, from the Law given through Moses at Sinai, God did require the individual to wash before offering him sacrifice. For this reason, when King Herod rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem as the place where sacrifice was offered to God, he constructed a battery of small bathing cubicles for the devotee to clean him- (or her-) self before proceeding to worship. These bathings were necessary for two reasons:

1. to cleanse themselves from ritual impurity. Man could become ritually impure in two main ways - the activities of everyday life that made them dirty in a physical sense (ploughing the land, helping the goats or sheep to give birth etc.) AND the necessities of life which have to be done but which were not worthy of God and from which we should be distanced before coming in front of him (such as the cut and thrust of the market square, haggling over prices, doing the washing for the family etc.). Neither of these were considered sinful as such, so they did not need forgiveness for them, but they did need to wash if only to take themselves from a mundane chore and remind them that they were to perform a sacred duty - the worship of God in the form of ritual. Refusing or neglecting to wash *was* considered sinful, because it demonstrated a certain contempt for the holiness of God. In a similar way, we would consider it rude and contemptuous towards the Queen to receive an honour from her at the Palace without wearing clean clothes and having washed from our daily work.
2. as a reminder that God's plan of salvation for Israel would culminate in a last-day, ultimate cleansing of his people from the guilt of their actual sin (which, naturally, they realised would not be removed simply by having a bath!). This would be accomplished by God drenching his people in himself: pouring out on them the Spirit, reconciling them to himself, restoring them to their original holiness and planting deep within them the gift of His own life. In their minds would have been the prophecy of Ezekiel which summarises this great expectation: *"I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you will be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will clean you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh your heart of stone, and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. You shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers; and you shall be my people and I will be your God."* (Ezekiel 36:24-28). See C.C.C. 1217-1222. This washing was a way of showing the desire for re-union with God, and was a symbolic way of requesting forgiveness for sin and the grace to live according to the plan of

God. "O wash me more and more from my guilt, and cleanse me from my sin" (Ps. 50:2). However it was simply a solemn ritual which expressed longing for the expected cleansing, rather than carrying it out.

In Christian Baptism, this expectation is truly but incompletely realised.

The 'not yet' aspect: Christian Baptism is not the great final washing in the Holy Spirit which was longed for because that ultimate washing will usher in the age of perfection when mankind will live in the presence of God in all perfection for all eternity – in short, heaven. In other words, Baptism does not make us perfect - we still have to cope with fallen human nature, which means we are predisposed towards choosing sin, and we still do so, even after Baptism. In this sense, our Baptism awaits its completion at the end of time, when we will be completely cleansed of sin – our natures will be re-made, all inclination to sin will be cleaned from us and we will live, and want to live in the fullest harmony with God. To put it simply, baptism does forgive us the sins of our lives up to that point, BUT we have not yet been thoroughly drenched in the Holy Spirit so that every aspect of our lives, soul, and character is free from the attraction of sin. We still live with the effects of sin in our lives - traditionally the Church has called this *concupiscence*: the inclination within us to choose what we know to be contrary to the will of God and harmful to others and ourselves.

The 'already' aspect: But, Baptism is the inauguration of this final age of perfection. This Baptism (the Baptism instituted by Christ and administered in the Church) is not simply man's expression of his *desire* for forgiveness (as the ritual bathing was for the Jews in the Old Testament) - it is also the means God has established for granting that wish: in Baptism, our sins are forgiven. This happens because in Baptism, the great washing of the last age is begun (but not fully completed yet): we are drenched in the water of the Holy Spirit and radically united to Christ because the Spirit that animated and inspired him has been given to us. Only Christ has been fully immersed into the Father, or in other words, had the great washing, the full and complete Baptism. We are washed in Holy Baptism only in so far as we share in the complete washing (or Baptism) of the fully Baptised one - Christ.

B. Baptism "into Christ": entry into the Church

The Acts of the Apostles talks about the newly converted being baptised "*into Christ*" (Acts 2:38, 8:16 etc.): this is an important point. We are entered, through the water-rite of Baptism into a relationship with a person, not just into some strange group of like-minded people. We need to remember that Baptism confirms and deepens a spiritual relationship that each one of us has developed with the personal God who made us - it's not just a bizarre initiation rite into a club but a ritual expression of the deepening of a relationship with God. This makes Christian Baptism different from all other ritual forms of washing which attempt to express repentance and seek reconciliation. In the words of Sacred Scripture, we are incorporated "*into Christ*" (Galatians 3:4, 3:28).

The essential Messianic promise in the idea of the great washing was *reconciliation with God* - this means the forgiveness of our sins and the restoration of harmony

between God and us (C.C.C. 1263). How do we achieve this? Only one human being has managed it: the human being who was also God – Jesus Christ. All those fully reconciled to Christ relate to the Father as Christ did (i.e., they are fully reconciled to the Father through Christ) not because of their own strength or holiness but because they are “*in Christ*”. So: how do we join ourselves to Christ if he is no longer visible? We do so by faith in him - this means by joining ourselves to the community to which he has united himself: the Church. By being baptised into the community of the Church, we become a part of Christ, a member of his body:

"Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptised into one body ... and all made to drink of one Spirit. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." (1 Cor. 12:12-13, 27)

Through Baptism, we become one with the Church, Christ's visible body on earth, and if we are united with his body, we are one with Christ himself, the Head of the body, by being given his Holy Spirit. While we live in the Church, we live and move and have our spiritual being in Christ. Therefore if Christ calls God '*Father*', then so do we; if Christ is the anointed one, drenched in the Holy Spirit, then so are we; if he is closely united to the Father, then so are we – because ***all he has we share in, because we have been grafted on to him.***

- Christ is Spirit-filled and therefore spotless and sinless: we are “*Temples of the Spirit*” (1 Cor. 6) and therefore are washed clean of our sins, sanctified and justified by the presence of the same Spirit in us (1 Corinthians 6). C.C.C. 1262, 1265-1266.
- Christ is the only-begotten Son of God: we are adopted as sons (Galatians 3:29 - 4:7, 1 John 3:1). This is expressed in the rite of Baptism especially whenever the Gospel of Christ's baptism in the Jordan is chosen as the Gospel reading - the words heard when Christ was baptised (“*This is my Beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.*” Mt. 3:17, Mk. 1:11, Lk. 3:22) are now true of the one who has been baptised, because he or she is “*in Christ*”. The fathers of the early Church talk of Baptism in terms of '*fili in Filio*' (literally '*sons in the Son*'). This concept takes us back to Adam: he was created, with Eve, as a human son of a divine Father - God was his natural father. When he sinned, Adam rejected this natural sonship and his relationship with his Father - as a result, he was dis-graced: he lost that special grace of sonship of the Father. We, as human beings, are born into that same state, where our sonship of God has been forfeited and we live in a state of deprivation of grace (or Father/son relationship with God). Christ reverses this: he is, of his own nature, the Son of God, not by adoption or special favour but by virtue of whom he is. In Baptism, Christ incorporates us into himself: he is God's beloved Son, so those incorporated into him share that Father/Son relationship. Note, however, that Baptism is not simply the correction and restoration of all that went wrong in Eden. Baptism does not simply put back the clock and restore the relationship between God and Adam. That was a natural relationship of Father to son. Through Baptism, we are allowed to share in the Father/Son relationship existing between God the Father and God the Son: this is a super-natural

family relationship. We now relate to the Father not simply as creatures to the creator (as Adam did), but as blood relatives, co-heirs. We have become as intimate with the Father as only Christ is. Baptism is the way the Father adopts us into his Son, making us adopted sons in his Son. The Sacred Scriptures make reference to this mystery in the Letter to the Hebrews, when our divine sonship in Christ is brought to perfection in the Kingdom of Heaven:

*"You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to the innumerable angels in festal gathering and to **the assembly of the first-born sons** who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant and to the blood for purification which pleads more insistently than Abel's." (Hebr 12:22-24)*

- Christ is anointed with the Holy Spirit: we are anointed and marked with God's seal of ownership (2 Corinthians 1). This is symbolised in the rite of Baptism by being anointed with the Oil of Chrism.
- Christ is "*the first-born of all creation*" (Colossians 1:15), the new head of the human race, superseding Adam (Romans 5): we are a "*new creation*" (2 Corinthians 5). This is symbolised in the rite of Baptism by the white garment, worn by the newly baptised.
- Christ died on the cross but was raised from the dead because God would not permit the sinless one to know corruption (Acts 2:27); we die to sin and live to God "*in Christ Jesus*" (Romans 6:11), as Christ was buried and raised so we are buried (to sin) and raised (to Christ's life of reconciliation with God) (Colossians 2).

Being "in Christ" is the heart of Baptism. Because we are given the Holy Spirit of Christ, we live with His life: in St. Paul's words "*I live, or rather it is not I who live but Christ who lives in me*" (Gal 2:20). For this reason, we are called to live a life that conforms to the Spirit who dwells within us - living our lives "*dead to sin but alive to Christ Jesus, our Lord.*" We have been given a new relationship with God - Christ's unique relationship of the Son to his divine Father. Sin is deliberately to diminish this relationship and therefore is incompatible with being baptised (Romans 6:12-23). This is the reason that the Church calls us so often to repentance - all sin is an assault on our baptismal sonship, the purity that Christ has given us because we have sought it. Repentance is only needed because the way of life to which we aspire (the life of the Spirit in Baptism) is more demanding than we care to admit - and often we lack the courage truly to seize it. St. Paul puts it beautifully - "*I, the prisoner in the Lord, implore you, therefore, to lead a life worthy of your vocation.*" (Ephesians 4:1)

2. A word about God as "Father"

Many religions speak of the creator in terms of fatherhood. In the Old Testament, the Jews on a number of occasions refer to God as the Father of Israel in terms of an analogy - as a father is to his children, so God is to Israel. Thus he defends and

protects them, he provides food for them through the progress of the seasons and the fertility of the earth etc. This raises the question - are we saying anything more than this when we call God our Father? In short, yes, we are saying *much* more than this.

God is, first of all, Father in a material way - he gives us life. From this, we give the name father to our human father. In other words, far from saying God is like a father to us because he does something similar to what our human father does, we go in the other direction - it is God who is truly the Father, and we give the same name to our human fathers because what they do is a lesser reflection of the fatherhood of God - *"This, then, is what I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every family, whether spiritual or natural, takes its name" (Ephesians 3:14-15)*

But all this is material fatherhood - fathering the material creature, giving us bodies and physical life. God is, in this sense, Father of all who live: and this goes for Christian and non-Christian alike. God is creator and originator of us all and thus he is, in a material sense, Father of all.

As Christian people we go further: God is Father in a more significant way. His very nature is FATHER, before anything material was created – when there was nothing other than God, he was Father (and Son and Holy Spirit). Fatherhood describes God as he IS, not just as he does (like ‘originator, redeemer and sanctifier’). But we go even further: God is not just a Father in himself – he has also become OUR Father. He created us to share in the divine life of the Trinity through adoption into his Son, Jesus Christ:

*"Before the world was made, he chose us, chose us in Christ, to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence, **determining that we should become his adopted sons**, through Jesus Christ, for his own kind purposes, to make us praise the glory of his grace, his free gift to us in the Beloved." (Ephesians 1:4-5)*

God is more than the forgiver of our sins - he is the adopter of our nature (by taking human nature in the incarnation) and he is the donor of the divine life (by offering to us the life of Jesus Christ through the Church). The prayers of the Mass make this explicit - as the deacon or priest pours water into the chalice containing wine (before the consecration) he prays quietly *"By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity."* Baptism is the moment when God the Father places the Spirit of his Son within you and me: he gives us the very presence of his Son so that you and I are spiritually adopted as his sons. For this reason, St. Paul refers to the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of adoption: possessing the Spirit makes us sharers in the divine life and newborn children of God in a relationship to the Father which is based on the relationship between Christ and the Father:

*"When the appointed time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born a subject of the Law, to redeem the subjects of the Law and to enable us to be adopted as sons. **The proof that you are sons is that God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts: the Spirit that cries, 'Abba, Father', and it is this that makes you a son**, you are not a slave any more; and if God has made you a son then he has made you heir." (Gal. 4:6-7)*

We are baptised into Christ himself - so we turn to God as 'Father' because Christ does so (and now we are in him). Through Baptism, God is no longer simply Father in a material sense but also (and far more importantly) Father in a supernatural sense. He is Father in a way that can only be true for the baptised, for only through Baptism does the Father place the life of his eternal Son within us, adopting us into the divine household and sharing with us divine glory.

In short, we are sons because we share the Spirit and thus the life of the Son, Jesus Christ - we are truly sons in the Son.

*“Everyone moved by the Spirit is a son of God. **The Spirit you received is not the Spirit of slaves bringing fear into your lives again; it is the Spirit of sons, and it makes us cry out 'Abba, Father'.** The Spirit himself and our spirit bear united witness that we are children of God. And if we are children we are heirs as well: heirs of God and coheirs with Christ, sharing his sufferings so as to share his glory.” (Romans 8:14-17)*

St. Paul is assuming that his readers understand that this is an explanation of the effects of Baptism – this Spirit that we have received is the Spirit that adopts us into the divine family of the Trinity. He does not need to go further and explain *how* we have received this spirit of adoption because it is obvious from the earlier chapters of his letter that deal with **Baptism** at some length. It was when we were baptised that we were incorporated into the Spirit-filled community (the Church) and so united to the Spirit. Through this we have been adopted as the sons of God. It all flows from the act of entering the Church (remember the *sacramental ladder*? Whoever becomes a part of the Church through her sacramental actions is grafted onto Christ who is made present in the Church – and whoever is grafted onto Christ is united unbreakably to the Father, because to have seen Christ is to have seen the Father, to be joined to Christ means being joined to the Father, because Christ and the Father are so wholly united).

Since we are sharers in the divine life of Christ, we share in Christ's unique and glorious divine Sonship - as he is the eternal Son of the Father, Son from before time, so we become the supernatural and adopted sons of the Father, sons by the grace and will of the Father and not born as such but made able “*to share the divine nature*” (2 Peter 1:4):

- *“Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in his great mercy has given us **a new birth as his sons**” (1 Peter 1:3)*
- *“Think of the love the Father has lavished on us by letting us be called God's children; **and that is what we are.**” (1 John 3:1)*

All this is what Christ is referring to when he has that rather cryptic conversation with Nicodemus at the start of St. John's Gospel. Although neither Christ nor Nicodemus uses the word, the subject of their discussion is *Baptism*:

“Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him,

"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him."

Jesus answered him,

*"Truly, truly, I say to you, **unless one is born anew**, he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

Nicodemus said to him,

"How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus answered,

*"Truly, truly, I say to you, **unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God**"." (John 3:1-5)*

What is going on here? It is what we spoke about in terms of the new creation. Just as your mortal human life was begun (outside the womb) through the process of birth, so too Christ speaks of the spiritual life being begun through a new birth. The one who is spiritually re-born is of a new order, not of this world but born into a supernatural family, the Trinity. This is called *regeneration*. Baptism brings us to a new kind of life – if you like, it brings us to birth as the new creation, soaked in the Holy Spirit as the adopted child of God. Nicodemus misunderstands, thinking that Christ is speaking of a re-run of our first birth, the birth from our physical human mothers. Christ is making it clear in his response that this re-birth or regeneration takes place in a different way – by “*water and the Holy Spirit*”: through the washing of water which confers the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is about a coming to life in a new way, as a child of God. This means there is a dying also – our old way of life, guided by the thinking of the world and without reference to Christ, has died in Baptism and we are raised to a new life. St. Paul uses the image of Christ's resurrection to help us understand this dying and rising that happens in Baptism:

- *“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by Baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Romans 6:1-5)*

Baptism is joining Christ in his death by choosing to “die” to the old way of life, lived without faith in him, and joining Christ in his resurrection by rising to the new way of life of the children of God. God, to the baptised, is now Father in a deeper sense – he has given us his divine nature, his Holy Spirit and regenerated us as children of the new covenant, the new creation fashioned after the model of Christ, incorporated into him and motivated by the Spirit of holiness.

SO - calling God “Father” is an explicit reference to the miracle of Baptism. It is not primarily a reference to God having made us. That is a lesser act of fathering. We call God “Father” because that is the consequence of Baptism - we have been adopted into the life of the Trinity and call on God with the same intimacy of his sole-begotten Son. Until Baptism, God is father only in the material sense, as he is the source of

natural life. After Baptism, God is Father to us because we bear the character of Christ and because he has become the source of the divine life within us.

- See C.C.C. 1227-1228, 1265-1269, and 1272-1274.

3. Some other issues

1. *How are we baptised - washed in God's Holy Spirit?*

The ordinary means of being incorporated into Christ is to be visibly joined to the community where the Holy Spirit of Christ is visibly at work - i.e., through the sacrament of Baptism into the Church. This means being washed in water in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit - i.e., into the whole faith of Jesus Christ. Today, this is the means of entry into the Church for practically all people.

However there are 2 other ways of receiving the grace of Baptism - i.e., of being reconciled to the Father through radical unity with Christ - if there is not the opportunity of the normal water-rite. It should be noted that these are not *alternatives* to Baptism – they *are* Baptism too, only alternatives to the water rite of Baptism and can only be used when it is impossible to administer Baptism in the usual way

A. Baptism by Desire: if it is not possible to bring to Baptism one who desires it (for instance because of sudden illness before the Baptism could be arranged), then the Church reasons that the same faith of the parents and community which carries a baby to Baptism, is sufficient to carry to Christ one who could not be baptised the ordinary way. The Church stands as guarantor of the faith of the recipient, and as compassionate administrator of the grace of this sacrament of salvation. The Church extends this to those who live and die with no knowledge of the faith, but attempt to live their lives according to natural concepts of right and wrong: the Church argues that had they known about the faith and Christ, they would or could have chosen Baptism for themselves, and therefore are implicitly baptised by desire. See C.C.C. 1258. Also C.C.C. 1249

B. Baptism by Blood: in the early Church period, the Roman authorities sought to stamp out the Catholic Church by targeting two main groups - the clergy (to decapitate the communities) and those under instruction but not yet received (to discourage people even from finding out about the faith, let alone actually joining it). As a result, many un-baptised catechumens were martyred. The Church always proclaimed that although they were never formally reconciled to God through the water rite of Baptism, nevertheless they were baptised in the faith through the blood they shed for Christ. See C.C.C. 1259.

Neither of these alternative methods of being baptised into Christ is common in the West today. The interesting area of development in the coming generation concerns those who are not brought to Baptism by their parents who wish them to decide for themselves. Usually the grandparents are deeply upset by this decision (but of course powerless to intervene). In addition, naturally, the children are as incapable of deciding for the faith when older as they were when babies because they often have

been taught nothing about the faith, so they never come forward for Baptism. A strong case could be made for holding that the babies have received Baptism by desire on the grounds of the faith of the grandparents who would have brought the babies for Baptism if they had the chance. This is, sadly, likely to become more and more the case today, as so many parents take the opinion that baptising babies is an infringement of the baby's right to choose for him- or her- self.

2. Are the baptised guaranteed salvation? Are the un-baptised denied it?

No, and no! Baptism is called the 'pledge' of salvation: it is offered to us and prefigured in Baptism, but those grafted onto Christ are perfectly capable of denying Him after Baptism through the way they live their lives. After all, faith in the existence of God is no guarantee of salvation - the devil has absolute faith in God's existence, but this does him no benefit!

The un-baptised are not excluded from salvation: but the lack of Baptism does make salvation harder for them, because they do not have the advantage of the help of the Holy Spirit, which Baptism brings. In addition, because Baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the Church, it is called the gateway to the sacraments: once someone is baptised, the possibility of the other sacramental oaths of God are opened up, and the recipient is given the guarantee of God's transformative help through the sacrifice of the Mass, in the sacrament of Reconciliation, through the sacrament of Marriage etc., helping him or her to live their lives in union with God. The un-baptised do not have the advantage of these divinely crafted forms of assisting us to live to our fullest potential according to the law of God. Clearly, however, this does not mean that the Holy Spirit is not at work in them - God has guaranteed to be at work in the sacraments, but he has never said (nor has the Church ever taught) that God is at work only in the sacraments.

Think of crossing the road: if you have all your senses intact, you have all the equipment necessary to get over safely. This doesn't mean you will be guaranteed to make it safely across - if you have the sense of sight but fail to use it, you may still be hit. Equally, if you do not have all the senses at your disposal - for instance if you are deaf) it is not impossible for you to get over in one piece - but it is certainly harder and takes greater care! Crossing the road with the help of none of the senses is little more than luck and very likely to fail. Thus we would say that Baptism in some form (by water, desire or blood) is essential for salvation, because of what Baptism is - the gift of God's Spirit, which restores us to a state of communion with God. Those who are in no way reconciled with God will by the meaning of those words, have great difficulty living for eternity in communion with God. Being in some form of communion with God on earth is critical if we wish to live in perfect communion with God in heaven: or, in a simpler phrase, Baptism is necessary for salvation.

- *"The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude ... God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments." C.C.C. 1257*

3. Do un-baptised infants who die go to Limbo?

The formal teaching office of the Church has never taught that the concept of Limbo is part of the sacred and divinely revealed deposit of faith. As Catholics we are not bound to believe it - and it is not, truly speaking, an authoritative teaching of the Church at all. Unfortunately, many Catholics taught it for many years, even though the Bishops of the Church had given no definitive teaching on the matter.

Limbo is a classic example of popular teaching and preaching going beyond the boundaries of Church teaching. It took root in popular thought as a way of encouraging parents to bring their babies to Baptism as soon as possible after birth. Why? because Baptism is so important in that it grants us the gift of the Holy Spirit to restore us to original grace from our state of original separation from God (original sin), that it is simply not worth the risk of allowing someone whom you love to face God after a sudden death without giving them every benefit and grace which God has given to his Church to dispense. We should remember Baptism by desire: an infant who dies before the parents can arrange Baptism is, the Church teaches, baptised through the faith and desire of his or her parents. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Catechism, in dealing with the death of children before Baptism, makes no mention of the concept of Limbo:

- *"The great mercy of God, who desires that all men may be saved ... allows us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism. All the more urgent is the Church's call not to prevent little children coming to Christ through the gift of holy Baptism." C.C.C. 1261*

Fr Guy de Gaynesford