

# Baptism-Confirmation

*By Father Homer F. Rogers*

A sacrament is “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” Every Episcopalian can recite that definition practically in his sleep.

There is little point in talking about the outward and visible sign; these are well enough known and understood, and belong, at any rate, to the discipline of liturgics. We are rather going to concern ourselves with the inward and spiritual graces granted.

However, there is a correspondence, an analogous relationship, between the outward and the inward parts. The signs are not arbitrary; the inward part is like the outward part, so that the outward part yields clues as to the nature of the grace granted.

Further, it should be noted that the sacrament is an efficacious sign, a sign which effects, accomplishes, what it signifies. This is because God is the active agent in the sacrament. For example, it is often urged that we should not baptize infants because the infant cannot know what he is doing. The answer is that he is not doing anything; God is doing something to him, and God surely knows what he is doing. The scholastic term for this is ex opera operato, (i.e. from the work wrought); they are always the sacraments of the church performed under mandate of Christ and lay claim to the promises of the Gospel. They are not magical rites. The faith required is the faith of the church rather than that of the individual minister or recipient. As sacraments of the church they are primarily actions of Christ in and through his Mystical Body. Let us try to understand this.

Jesus said to his disciples, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst.” This does not refer to just any casual gathering of Christians; to be gathered “in Jesus’ name” means something like what the policeman means when he knocks on the door and says, “Open, in the name of the law.” It means that we are gathered on official business. We are gathered “as church” to do what Christ commanded us to do.”

We can add, “Lo, I am with you always,” and “He that heareth you heareth me,” and “As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you,” and “Whatsoever you bind or loose on earth is bound or loosed in heaven.” The official acts of the church are acts of Jesus. There is an automatic and immediate correspondence between the outward sign validly performed and the inward grace conferred.

So we might offer another definition of a sacrament: a sacrament is an occasion in space and time in which the Christian is brought infallibly into contact with God. Something done and something said – and a spiritual consequence follows.

Jesus said he would be with his church continuously, intimately, through time, until his return. Rather a mind stretching idea. How to get this across to his disciples? Was this perhaps the purpose of the post-resurrection appearances?

The disciples were going about their daily business (e.g. fishing) when from time to time, without warning, Jesus appeared in their midst. It was a kind of “now you see him, now you don’t” sort of thing. On that night in the upper room when the doors were shut for fear of the Jews, and Jesus appeared, he did not walk through the closed door as if he had been outside and entered their presence. He had been there all along. His appearance was a making visible and tangible what had all along been invisible and real. When he disappeared at Emmaus after he had explained the scriptures and made himself known “in the breaking of the bread,” he did not just wander away into the crowd; he just faded from their sight.

At any moment he might be there visibly, his sudden appearances interrupting their ordinary activities, until they got the message that he was always with them, now visibly, now invisibly. His resurrection appearances were visible signs of an invisible presence; the signs were intermittent, the presence continuous. They were outward and visible signs of an

inward and spiritual grace – the grace of his continuous presence with them. The post-resurrection appearances of Christ were sacraments; sacraments are post-resurrection appearances, making visible what Christ is doing spiritually.

Those who had been with Jesus throughout his public ministry and had witnessed the resurrection were changed men. There was no way their lives could ever be the same again. And what had caused the change in them was their relationship to Jesus. He had told them to go into the world and make disciples of others, of those who had not known Jesus in the flesh. How could those who had not known Jesus become changed men and women in the way the disciples had? How could they also know Jesus and experience the power of his resurrection?

The answer to that was the developed liturgy of the church. By liturgy I mean not only the regular Sunday cycle of the church year, but more especially the liturgical performances of the sacraments.

In the liturgy we re-live our own history. We do this by gathering together to listen to the reading of the story of our own past in the words of scripture. The past still lives in us today. The apostles are our contemporaries. The overwhelming majority of Christians are alive and well and walking about in heaven. "...we are compassed about by so great a cloud of witness..." "...with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven..." We are who we are because of our collective past, and we re-live that past in the annual cycle of the liturgy, by means of which we re-experience the events of our origins. Moderns call this sort of thing psycho-drama.

During Advent we are Old Testament Jews, yearning for the coming of the redeemer. At Christmas we are the shepherds, called to the manger to worship the new born King. At Epiphany we are the wise men, bringing our adoration and our gifts to the Christ Child. On the feast of the Transfiguration we are Peter and James and John, hearing the voice out of the mist saying, "This is my beloved Son; hear him." On Palm Sunday we join the demonstration as Jesus enters the Holy city, waving our palm branches and shouting "Hosannah to the Son of David; blessed is he who cometh in the name of the Lord." On Maunday Thursday we are the disciples, watching in wondering awe as Jesus breaks bread and says, "This is my body." From Maunday Thursday until the Good Friday mass of the pre-sanctified, we watch in the garden of Gethsemane with the disciples. On Good Friday we stand in shocked sorrow at the foot of the cross and see our beloved Master suffer a cruel and unjust death. On Easter we are the Magdalene at the empty tomb and hear the angel cry, "He is not here; he is risen." On Ascension Day we watch as a cloud receives him out of our sight. Sunday by Sunday we follow Jesus and hear his parables, watch as he heals the sick and even raises the dead. This is what the liturgy is all about.

C.S. Lewis says: "Humanity does not pass through phases as a train passes through stations; being alive, it has the privilege of always moving yet never leaving anything behind. Whatever we have been, in some sort we are still."

We are what we are and do what we do because of where we have been and what we have seen and heard. When the Epistle is read we are the curious throng in Athens, always anxious to hear some new thing, listening to the words of St. Paul.

When we participate in the Eucharist we are the disciples at Emmaus; to us also he opens the scriptures and is known in the breaking of bread. Jesus sent his apostles into the world to preach the gospel and baptize; we are still doing that for we have a direct commission from the Lord.

There is something timeless about the liturgy. It is an on-going thing, two thousand years old, yet it is also something from beyond time. It is a thing contemporary to each of the twenty centuries since Christ. What we see and experience in the church Sunday by Sunday is what our ancestors saw and experienced one hundred or one thousand years ago, linking all generations together into one church by a shared experience of what happened two

thousand years ago. We can say that we are going back to experience what happened then, or with equal truth (for Jesus is still with us) we can say that what happened then is happening now, and will continue to happen in each generation until Christ returns in glory, when the Gospel is read we are hearing the very words of Jesus. The liturgical church is the means Jesus uses to make his Incarnation extend through time, to make his redeeming work present in every town and hamlet around the world in every generation.

This is the background against which we must see the sacraments.

We have but six opportunities to discuss the seven sacraments. This is all very well, for baptism and confirmation ought never to have been separated; they are actually indivisible parts of the same sacrament of initiation and we shall consider them as such.

I should like to describe for you a baptism as it was performed in the very early church. The account is taken from the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus, who was an old man writing shortly after the year 200; it purports to be his recollection of the way things were done in his youth.

Remember that all this occurred when the church was under the pressure of persecution. The congregation gathered, usually after dark, in the private home of the bishop, behind drawn blinds and locked doors for fear of the Roman authorities. The church building was the atrium of a Roman house. The baptistery was the *impluvium*, originally a cistern to catch rainwater shed from the inward sloping roof of the peristyle, but this time an outdoor bathtub, or wading pool, in the center of the atrium.

The candidate was instructed for three years, as a rule. Compare this to our common six or eight hour adult confirmation instruction. It might be less than three years, or it could be longer, for no one was admitted to baptism until his character and conduct were approved. Since the candidate, once enrolled in the catechumenate, faced the possibility of martyrdom, it was explained to him about the baptism of blood – that if he were martyred before baptism God would credit his good intention.

Near the time of his baptism (which was always on Easter eve) he was exorcised, the first of several exorcism. He was instructed to fast on Friday and Saturday. On the night of his baptism he was exorcised again, he was expected to renounce the Roman world and all its foibles, which was regarded by the church as wholly under the dominion of Satan. He had been instructed to bring his own bread and wine as his part of the offering of the Eucharist, which he was to see and participate in for the first time.

“At the hour of the cock’s crowing they shall pray over the water.” And “Let the water be pure and flowing.” The neophytes are then stripped naked and their clothing laid aside. “Little children are baptized first; if they can answer for themselves they do so; if not, let their parents answer for them.” Afterward the grown men, and then the women.

The bishop blesses the oil. Deacons carry the oil of thanksgiving and the oil of exorcism and stand on either side of the presbyter at the impluvium. The candidate again renounces Satan and is anointed with the oil of exorcism. Then the naked candidate and the deacon step down into the water. Questions are put to the candidate in the form similar to our 1979 rite – it is the Apostles’ Creed put in the form of a three-fold question. Upon the profession of faith the candidate is baptized three times, once for each person of the Trinity mentioned in the Creed.

He comes out of the water, is dried off with a towel, and is anointed again with the oil of thanksgiving. He puts on new clothing of white linen. He is given a new name.

He is then led up to where the bishop is sitting and is introduced to the head of the Christian family, who lays his hand on his head and prays for the Holy Spirit – the esprit de corps of the Church – to enter the new Christian. Let us pause and notice what has happened here. The scripture puts these words into the mouth of the Spirit: “My abode is in the full assembly of the saints.” The original reading of the last paragraph of the Creed was “I believe in the Holy Spirit in the Holy Catholic Church.” The Holy Spirit, like the Logos, is

identified with the Church in a most intimate way. What the bishop says, in effect, in his prayers is "Let the Spirit which is in this gathering be also in you." Webster defines esprit de corps as "the common spirit existing in the members of a group and inspiring enthusiasm, devotion, and strong regard for the honor of the group." The Holy Spirit is not given merely for our private and personal sanctification, but that the character and mind of a community may grow in each of its members. The Holy Spirit in the Church functions much as He does in the Trinity, as the bond of love between the persons.

After the prayer for the Spirit, the bishop and the new Christian exchange the kiss of peace, saying, "The Lord be with you," and the response, "And with thy spirit."

Then the new Christian is given a drink of mingled milk and honey, signifying not just "the land flowing with milk and honey," but also the proper food for the newborn. Modern baby formula is often milk and Karo syrup.

There are several verses in the New Testament which suggests that this was primitive and Apostolic practice. St. Paul, in I Cor. 3:2 says "I have fed you with milk and not with meat, for hitherto ye were not able to bear it..." In I Peter 2:2 we read, "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby..." In Heb. 5:12, 13 we read, "For when ye ought to be teachers... ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat, for every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe." The suggestion of all of these is of a beginner still in need of further instruction.

After the drink of milk and honey the candidate is set aside until all candidates have been baptized; then the bishop celebrates the Eucharist and the newly baptized are the first to receive. Then, and then only, is he considered a Christian, fully initiated.

What we today call baptism, confirmation, and first communion is the logical sequence of events by which a person is made to be a member of Christ. The events described by Hippolytus are those which make up almost any rite of passage from infancy to maturity – they are found in puberty rites in primitive peoples, in the initiation ceremonies of the Mystery religions, and for that matter, in fraternity and sorority initiations even today.

These may be very briefly listed as 1) the renunciation of an old and former life style and value system and the affirmation of the principles of a new value system; 2) the change of clothing, the laying aside of an old "habit" and the putting on of a new "habit" or uniform; ("Habit" is defined by Webster as first, a condition or character, then as clothing or costume characteristic of a calling, rank, or condition, then as the prevailing disposition of a person's thoughts and feeling, mental make-up, and finally as one's usual manner of behaving.); 3) fasting – to rid the system of even the food of the old life, and feeding, first with baby food, and then with the sacramental Body and Blood of the Christ; 4) washing, the cleansing of the body from the dust and filth of the old life; 5) anointing, with its medicinal implications of healing the wounds of sin, and also the coming of the Holy Spirit to bestow rank or vocation; 6) a formal reception into the new community, by the action of the bishop in laying hands upon the head of the neophyte, and blessing, and the conferring of the esprit de corps.

This is a common pattern of initiation; it is a universal human thing, doubtless conforming to something akin to Jung's archetypes.

Let us take a look at the symbolism implied in the actual washing. First of all, and obviously, it is taking a bath. But it is much more than that. The Children of Israel passed through the Red Sea into freedom. They crossed the Jordan into the promised land. There is that implicit in baptism. But also it is a return to the primal waters of chaos out of which the Holy Spirit, brooding on the waters, brought forth a divine order of creation. IT is also a new birth – each of us spends the first nine months of his life in an aqueous environment; we emerge at birth from water. The prophecies read at the Holy Saturday liturgy suggest all of these images. This is psycho-drama with a vengeance.

What is the essential rationale of this elaborate symbolism?

The first thing to be noted is that my identity is conferred on me by my community. I am the product of those groups or associations of which I am a member. This is easy to see. If I had been given, as an infant, to a Chinese peasant family in the interior of China, I would not be me. I would speak a different language; I would have a whole different set of memories, values, aims, understanding. Remember the quote from C. S. Lewis: "Humanity does not pass through phases as a train passes through stations; being alive, it has the privilege of always moving yet never leaving anything behind. Whatever we have been, in some sort we are still."

I am who I am because I am the child of a particular set of parents, grew up in association with particular siblings, lived in a certain neighborhood, went to a particular school, graduated from a certain college and not some other, worked in certain jobs, attended a particular seminary and not some other, became a priest of the Episcopal Church and not a Baptists minister, or a surgeon, or a school teacher, or an insurance salesman. I have been the rector of a particular parish in a certain city and not some other. I have had one particular set of friends and not another. All of this is what makes me me. Strip away everything that is mine because of past associations and there is very little left.

The concept "person" had hardly occurred to philosophers until Christian theologians began to wrestle with the doctrine of the Trinity. It could almost be said that people became aware of "persons" in the Godhead before they became aware of persons in society. From our Trinitarian theology we learn that a "person" is a subsistent relationship." In simpler language, our identity is conferred by our community.

Now a person in the "world" has an identity, a set of priorities, goals, aims, ambitions, supplied by the world. This might be easier to understand if we think of such phrases as "the world of business," or "the world of the theater," or "the world of professional baseball." There are presuppositions, even dogmas, that are taken for granted, received without question, from "the world," which define us, structure our thinking. We might call it "twentieth century mentality," or "the American way of life." We are familiar with the "Eastern Seaboard Establishment," or "Ivy League mentality," or "the culture of the Old South."

By the sacrament of baptism we leave the world, abandon an old self or identity, and enter a new world, the world of Jesus Christ, the world of the Bible, the world of the historic church. St. Paul says that our citizenship is in heaven.

In the baptismal rite (it is somewhat obscured in the language of the '79 book) we renounce the flesh, the world, and the devil. These are the principles of life in "the world."

"The flesh" in the scriptures does not refer to the biological self. It is a technical term and means the way the natural man naturally seeks happiness. When I am an infant happiness is mother's breast and a dry diaper. A little later happiness is a bright red plastic rattle, and then a toy train or a Barbie doll; later on it is a tricycle, then a bicycle, then a Honda, then the keys to the family car, then a college education, a loving wife, a fine home in the suburbs with a swimming pool in the patio, a good job with regular vacations in the Bahamas, two fine children who make "A's" in school and do not smoke pot, a nice retirement plan, good health, and a rich portfolio of blue chip stocks.

Nobody tells us that that is where happiness is. It is a natural assumption of the unredeemed man. Splendid as it sounds, it is pretty empty in the long run. Usually, somewhere around our sophomore year in college, we discover that that's not "where it's at." This is usually a traumatic experience. It is the first great spiritual crisis. Some people never make the discovery. But when we do we feel that we have been lied to, cheated, deceived. Remember how our hippie children accused us of being materialists and adopted the uniform of the poor. They had renounced the flesh.

The "flesh" is actually a heresy of God the Father, the Creator. I want to be my own creator, to make my own world, and to run it by my providence. I believe that I know what is

good for me, and I plan and contrive and labor to control my destiny, and in particular to control and dominate the world around me.

When one renounces the “flesh,” what happens next? Over night our flower children turned into hard eyed, steel jawed revolutionaries, determined to make the world a better place in which to live. They marched on Selma and Montgomery, disrupted the Chicago Democratic convention, burned R.O.T.C. buildings, demonstrated for peace in Viet Nam and for Woman’s Liberation. They were going to save the world. Our hippie children turned over night into a mob of little Messiahs. Never mind that the world did not want to be saved by them; never mind that the blacks in the South chanted “Whitie, go home.”

“The world” is a heresy of God the Son, the Savior. The radicals, the so-called students in front of the American embassy in Tehran are at this stage. They have a sublime sense of their own rectitude, a terrible sense of justice, and a frightening inability to imagine that they might be wrong. Almost everyone goes through this stage, usually in the early twenties. By the time you are thirty you begin to doubt yourself. “After thirty you’re dead.” There is nothing quite as ridiculous as a middle-aged revolutionary.

This is often the motivation behind a lot of social gospel theology. People who have not discovered what the church is for, and who feel a strong urge to do something meaningful and valuable, try to channel the church’s funds and energies into social reform. People in “the world” are concerned about “the poor;” mature Christians are concerned about “this poor person.” In “the world” we want to feed the poor with other people’s money. The Symbionese Liberation Army is a textbook example. Christians dig into their own pockets and open their homes.

There is a subtle form of this heresy which lingers on into maturity and is much more insidious. It is an individual rather than a social activity. It is the blind and foolish notion that I know what is good for my neighbor, that he could solve all his problems if he would just follow my advice. It may range from gentle hints as to how another should behave, to a domineering attempt to control the life of another. Parents do this to children, husbands and wives do it to each other. It is a particular temptation to priests and others in the helping professions. It is a disguise worn by an ego trip at my neighbor’s expense.

I was recently reading Letters of C.S. Lewis, edited by his brother, and came across this delightful bit. It was during World War II, and he was talking about the inconvenience of having to put up blinds on his windows during blackouts. “Luckily,” he said, “I do it myself, so it doesn’t take as long as if I had assistance.”

This is a Messiah complex, even in disguised and subtle forms, a desperate ploy to discover some meaning and value in my own life. It is the need to be needed. When I discover that I cannot save the world, or even my neighbor, when it is revealed to me that all my best efforts to help others and set them right, is meddlesome interference in their freedom, I pass through the second great spiritual crisis and renounce “the world.”

What happens next? It seems as if the unconscious whispers to me, “the world may go to hell if it chooses but you don’t have to go with it,” and I set about some program of self improvement, a do-it-yourself effort to make myself something I can respect. So I take up Yoga, or Zen Buddhism, or TM, or health food, or jogging, or art, or education, or perhaps even Christianity.

This is the devil, and is a heresy of God the Holy Spirit, for it is He, God’s Holy Spirit, who alone can sanctify me. But before I let Him have a go at it I’ll give it a good try myself. Remember, in Genesis, it was Satan who whispered to Mother Eve, “You can be as God.” He was offering her a quick and easy short cut to godliness. A do it yourself program of sanctification.

And when we discover that we cannot make ourselves into something we can admire and respect we endure the third great spiritual crisis and renounce the devil.

It is then and only then that we are ready for baptism. When we say, "Okay, God, you win. I give up. I surrender. I can't do it; you do it." This is step one, two, and three in the A.A. program, which they borrowed from Christianity, God bless them – and they're right.

Because all infants, and most adults who are baptized, have not made this three-fold renunciation (never mind that in the baptismal rite they say they have) it is something that we have to work our way through after baptism, and is what was called by the medieval theologian "the way of purgation," the first of the three-fold ways, or stages of spiritual growth.

Out there in "the world" you will find everyone seeking for happiness either in control of his material possessions, or in some form of control of his environment or his neighbor, or in some program of frantic self control – all leading to frustration.

The sharp distinction between "the world" and the church was obscured during the long centuries when Europe was at least nominally Christian. It has become more and more evident and troublesome since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Today it is imperative that we become aware once again of this sharp cleavage between the church and the world. When one is baptized he abandons an old identity, and old self, and is given a new self, a new identity. The old self dies; a new self is born.

This is the meaning, surely, of the removal of clothing and being vested in new white garments. This is the meaning of being granted a Christian name. We come to baptism as Charlie; afterward we are George. This is the meaning of the renunciation, the exorcism. It is the church's judgment that "the world" is crazy, demonic, under the dominion of Satan, "the Prince of this world." It is in the church that one finds truth, sanity, loyalty, a wholesome life style, worthy goals for one's life. When the bishop lays his hands on the head of the newly baptized (in what we today call confirmation) and prays for the Holy Spirit to come upon him, he is asking God that the esprit de corps of the church become the spirit of this new Christian, and that the new and different values, priorities, may take root and grown in him. And of course, because the church is the Body of Christ, and is the repository of the Holy Spirit of God, it is that Spirit which is bestowed in the bestowal of the new identity.

This is why baptism and confirmation are not, and cannot be, private ceremonies to which only family and close friends are invited. They should take place in the presence of the full assembly of the faithful, for it is the church's life, which is Christ's, which is being conferred.

This new life is not conferred full grown, any more than I acquire the culture of my college community by matriculating. Hence the milk and honey. Baby food. Rather it is something to be lived, day after day, month after month, year in and year out. But the membership is real from the beginning; the acceptance of me as I am is there. It is real in the sense that a seedling oak is an oak and not a sycamore.

Whatever may be the mystical and ontological dimensions of baptismal regeneration, it is at least the beginning of a new identity because it is the beginning of life in a new community, the Christian church. It is life in the Mystical Body; hence life in Christ. I am now a Christian. That is who I am. That is my identity. I am a child of God, a member of the household of God, a younger brother or sister of Christ, and an heir of the Kingdom of Heaven. I must grow, mature; I must appropriate to myself the riches of the Kingdom which are mine, but there is no doubt but that from the moment of my baptism I am a different person.

Baptism should mark the passage, the transition, from that frantic, hectic world of competition and vain striving after will-o-the-wisps, from what we call the rat-race, into the calm, serene, quiet atmosphere of a community in which life is led according to God's law of love, which is after all, no more than a prescription for happiness.

It is a change, a radical change, from membership in a community centered on self, to membership in a community centered on Christ. From a community based on transient and ephemeral values, to a community based on solid and enduring eternal values.

It is called conversion.

The result is literally a new person – a new subsistent relationship. In the church, in one and the same relationship, we are attached to God and to our brother Christian. Not two similar relationships, but one relationship with two aspects, in two dimensions, for the Church is the Body of Christ.