

LESSON 3

THE SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

BACKGROUND READING



The Church has seven Sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance and Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Holy Matrimony. Of those seven Sacraments, we recognize three as the Sacraments of Initiation because they introduce us to and make us members of the Church, strengthen us for our life's journey, and give us our vocation, or calling, as Christians.

To be initiated means formally to become a part of a group or society. In general, initiations may involve taking an oath, passing a challenge, or enduring a trial. Then upon initiation, the person has a common bond with other members and is given a role or mission. The Sacraments of Initiation resemble this pattern. The Christian life begins with baptismal promises, and then through God's grace we are made members of Christ's Body, the Church. We receive the mission shared by all disciples of Christ to become holy, and to bring the Good News to the world. In Confirmation our baptismal grace is perfected, and we receive a strengthening of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In the Eucharist, the source and summit of the Christian life,

we receive the very Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ, which nourishes us in our mission to evangelize. We will learn more about these Sacraments throughout the year.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches us, "Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist are sacraments of Christian initiation. They ground the common vocation of all Christ's disciples, a vocation to holiness and to the mission of evangelizing the world. They confer the graces needed for the life according to the Spirit during this life as pilgrims on the march towards the homeland" (1533). In other words, the vocation of each Christian person is holiness and the mission of bringing the Gospel to every person in the world. The true home of a Christian is not earth but Heaven.

Our Vocation to Holiness

Jesus tells us in Matthew's Gospel: "So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48). He tells us more about what that means in Matthew 22:37-39: "He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first

commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus’ saying from the second passage (Matthew 22:37-39) helps us to understand His saying from the first passage (Matthew 5:48). To be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect means to love Him first above all else and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

We are all called to be holy. Because of the Sacraments of Initiation – Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist – we are given the vocation of holiness that all of Jesus’ disciples share, and we are strengthened by the Sacraments of Initiation to be able to attain that holiness. To be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect is to be holy. And Jesus then tells us how to be holy, which is to obey the two greatest commandments, to love God above all else, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. This is how we become saints.

Indeed, the lives of the saints give us powerful examples of how to be holy. The *Catechism* tells us “the holiness of the People of God will grow in fruitful abundance, as is clearly shown in the history of the Church through the lives of so many Saints” (CCC 2013).

The Mission to Evangelize

Pope Paul VI wrote that the Church “exists to evangelize.” Evangelization is the sharing

of the Gospel by word and example of life. Jesus Himself gave the Apostles this mission before He ascended into Heaven. “Then Jesus approached and said to them, ‘All power 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 behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age’” (Matthew 28:18-20). Evangelization is doing exactly what Jesus commanded His Apostles to do. The Sacraments of Initiation, as we’ve learned, give us the same vocation as all of Christ’s disciples, which includes evangelization.

The word *evangelization* comes from the Latin word *evangelion*, which means “gospel.” Our word *gospel* comes from the Greek word *eungelion* which means “good message” or “good news.” Although we often use the word *gospel* to mean the four books of the Bible by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the word has a much richer meaning. The gospel is the Good News of Jesus Christ: that He came down from Heaven, died for us on the Cross, and rose from the dead to offer us salvation. At its heart, the call to evangelization means we are called to share the Good News in our lives.

BAPTISM

BACKGROUND READING



The Catechism of the Catholic Church provides a simple explanation for what Jesus does for us in Baptism: “Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word” (CCC 1213).

Baptism is necessary for salvation and has been prefigured throughout salvation history, to prepare for its institution by Christ’s own Baptism and His command to His Apostles. By Baptism, we are made new creations, and with the support of the whole Christian community, we advance on the journey toward salvation.

Matter and Form

All Sacraments have matter and form. The matter is the physical material used. The form refers to the words that are spoken. In the Sacrament’s most fundamental form, the minister of Baptism (ordinarily a priest) immerses the person being baptized three times in water (or pours water three times upon his head) while saying the words given

to us by Jesus, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (see Matthew 28:19).

This bath in water spiritually cleanses the baptized, removing all sin from his soul, including the stain of Original Sin inherited from Adam and Eve. The sins of the baptized are removed, and sanctifying grace, the free and undeserved gift of God’s very life, which is necessary for salvation, is conferred upon the soul. (However, the weakness of our fallen nature remains, and we are still prone to sin. This tendency to sin is called concupiscence.)

Baptism also initiates the baptized into the Church, serving as a communal rite of passage that bestows on the person all the rights and privileges – as well as all the responsibilities – that come with being a member of Christ’s Church.

Baptism Instituted and Prefigured

Jesus Himself was baptized at the beginning of His public ministry, not because He needed to be, but because it was fitting that He be baptized, in order to serve as our model of holiness and to show us the way to salvation.

At the end of His earthly dwelling, as Matthew 28 tells us, Jesus commanded His Apostles to go to all the nations and make

disciples of them, “baptizing them” in the Trinitarian formula we use today, and “teaching them to observe all” that He taught them. Jesus’ Baptism and His commissioning of the Apostles to baptize are the culmination of thousands of years of preparation for the Sacrament, as God prefigured the Sacrament of Initiation throughout His saving work in salvation history.

From the very beginning, when the Spirit of God hovered over the primordial waters, to Noah and the Great Flood, to the crossing of the Red Sea and the River Jordan, we have always understood the signs that have pointed the way to Baptism. God’s people pass from chaos, death, slavery, and sin, through powerful and life-giving waters, to new life in grace and freedom as a new creation.

The Fruits of Baptism

The sins of the baptized are forgiven and the gifts of the Holy Spirit are infused into their

souls. The baptized are made new creatures in the sight of God, partakers of the divine nature and members of Christ Himself, co-heirs with Him to all God’s promises. The baptized are made members of the Church and allowed access to all the other Sacraments by right and are tasked with a share in the mission of the Church: to share the Good News of the Gospel and make disciples of Jesus Christ. An indelible spiritual mark is also placed on the baptized person’s soul, much like the mark a king makes in wax to seal a letter, ensuring the letter is his. No sin can remove this seal from the soul. It marks him forever as belonging to God, set apart for the day of redemption and eternal life with Him.

Baptism is a visible sign that effects what it signifies, as given to us directly by Christ. The graces of Baptism, nurtured by the whole Christian community, can bear much fruit and lead the baptized on the journey toward salvation.