

## Day 136 (Saturday, Aug 1)

### **New life, new birth, new light**

To be baptized is to be given new birth and new life (John 3:5). It is interesting to note that some of the early baptismal fonts had the shape of “a womb,” to emphasize the new birth/new life aspect of the sacrament. This image is related to the darkness-light theme that is also associated with Baptism (Hebrews 6:4). In birth we emerge from the darkness of the womb to the bright light of a new world. Some early initiation liturgies had the baptismal candidates first turn to the west—where the sun sinks into darkness—to renounce Satan, and then turn to the east—the direction of dawning light—to accept Christ.

The new life motif of Baptism is intimately associated with Christ’s passion, death and resurrection. In discourses with his disciples regarding his approaching death, Jesus said, “I have a baptism to receive. What anguish I feel till it is over!” (Luke 12:50). When asking James and John if they really knew what they were requesting by wanting to sit at his side, he asked if they were ready to share in his death. “Have you the strength...to be baptized with the baptism I am to be baptized with?” (Mark 10:38). Paul reiterates Jesus’ questions when he asks: “Are you not aware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?...we were buried with him so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead...we too might live a new life” (Romans 6:3).

It is not an accident that the baptismal liturgy of the year is the Easter Vigil, the grand celebration of Christ’s Resurrection. Through Baptism we become an “easter people.” The giving of a candle lighted from the paschal candle helps spell out this reality. It is also the way that the Church, through baptismal sponsors who represent the total community, “passes the torch” of Christian commitment to those being baptized.

### **Off with the old, on with the new**

Baptism ushers us into a new era. We no longer need be slaves to sin. We put our allegiance with God and good (Romans 6 and Colossians 3:9). To symbolize this old/new theme, the newly baptized is dressed in a white garment during the ritual of Baptism. In the early Church, the newly initiated were expected to wear the white garment and keep it unsoiled for the 50 days of Easter. Today, in most cases, it has become a symbol that is present only for the duration of the ritual and then is packed away with other family memorabilia. Among other things, the white garment symbolizes the Church’s belief that Baptism sets us free from Original Sin.

But just what is Original Sin? The Church continues to insist on this doctrine and upon the reality of evil in the world—a point clearly echoed in our daily newspapers. The killings, violence, greed and dishonesty we see mirrored in the media are reminders that all human beings inherit the sinful tendencies and structures passed on to us by previous generations, beginning with our first parents.

Part of the beauty of Baptism is its assurance that through this sacrament we share in Christ’s victory over the power of darkness in the world. Yet, the doctrine of Original Sin does not eclipse the good news that God’s mercy and saving love are stronger than the power of sin—even before the baptismal waters are poured. In other words, we must be careful not to look upon unbaptized infants and adults as outside the scope of God’s saving power.

Tad Guzie comments on similar issues in *The Book of Sacramental Basics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981): “The doctrine of Original Sin as we have inherited it developed only gradually. No one will deny the truth about the reality of evil that it affirms. We are certainly born into an ambiguous world where the force of sin impinges on us as quickly as the force of love. And we are certainly born with inner tendencies which, once they become conscious, show a propensity for selfishness as much as for self-giving. But in addition to this dimension of life which the doctrine of Original Sin has rightly recognized, we also need to be attentive to what it has left unsaid. God loves us from the first moment of our conception.”

*In the light of eternity, we’re here for a very short time, really. We’re here for one thing, ultimately: to learn how to love, because God is love. - James Finley*

Sincerely,  
Fr. Jim Kaptein

