

Baptism a Consecration

By BRO. EUGENE KAVANAH, O. P.



FROM the known we rise to the unknown, from things visible we rise to a knowledge of the invisible, and from our knowledge of natural things we learn of the supernatural. Realizing this, the Church has always taught her children through signs and symbols even as her Founder, Christ, taught His hearers by parables. When He wished to teach the Providence of God, He said, "Consider the ravens for they sow not neither do they reap—and God feedeth them."* In the catacombs, representations of the sufferings of Christ were placed before the eyes of the early Christians to teach and fortify them against temptations and persecutions. Pictures, calling to mind the fortitude of the martyrs suffering most cruel torments, served to teach the members of the true Church the wonderful effects of grace in those martyrs.

As in the earliest days of her history, so today Holy Mother Church makes use of signs and symbols. She has always considered liturgy "the highest form of dogma, as well as its most popular form." By her solemn and expressive ceremonies, she would have her children penetrate into the hidden things of their faith. Jesus Christ instituted the sacraments and placed them in the guardianship of the Catholic Church. She must preserve them unchanged and surround them with ceremonies which will insure their veneration, and enhance their usefulness to the faithful. The ceremonies serve to render a fuller and more fruitful application of the sacraments by impressing upon the mind their immediate effect.

It was for this reason that Holy Mother Church instituted the beautiful rites of baptism. St. Bernard sees in these ceremonies a similiarity to the ceremonies performed in the consecration of a church. Truly it seems as if the words of St. Paul were to be brought home in a forcible manner, "Know you not that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God

* S. Luke, 12. 24.

dwelleth in you?" The Church would remind all that as the martyrs preserved their temples, so we too must keep our temples ever undefiled. We must never choose the devil and his pomps, which in this sacrament we renounce. By the reception of this sacrament which is the gate to all the other sacraments, man becomes the temple of God.

When a church is to be consecrated, the bishop passes about the church three times sprinkling it each time with holy water. After the third time he orders the doors opened and signs them with the sign of the cross to expel all unworthy images. In baptism a kindred ceremony takes place. Three times the priest breathes upon the face of the one to be baptized to drive forth the unclean spirit and to prepare a fit dwelling place for the Holy Ghost. He signs him with the sign of the cross saying, "Receive the sign of the cross * * * and act in a manner that you may be the temple of God." The next act of the bishop is to open the doors of the church. In baptism the senses, which so to speak are the doors of the soul, are now opened to God. The unclean one is driven forth from the soul of the one to be baptized, "Whom God didst call to be the temple of the Holy Ghost," and the senses of smell and hearing are wet with saliva, as Christ did in the Gospel, while the priest says, "Be ye opened." Then as if to insure that the temple as the dwelling place of God forever, the devil and all his pomps are renounced.

After entering the church, after throwing open its doors to the King of eternal glory, the bishop proceeds to consecrate the altar anointing it with holy oils. "May this altar be sanctified in the honor of Almighty God. . . ." Likewise in the human temple, the altar of the heart is anointed, "I anoint thee with the oil of salvation in Christ Jesus our Lord. . . ." Saying this the priest makes the sign of the cross on the chest and shoulders of the one receiving baptism. This is to protect the altar of the heart, to remind it that it is holy unto God, that the altar, the heart must be the center of prayer and sacrifice. This anointing reminds the christian that he must ever respond to the tempter, "I am consecrated, I am holy unto God."

After consecrating the altar the bishop sprinkles it and goes about the church asperging the walls and floor as if to purify them from every stain. The waters of baptism are poured upon the head of the one to be baptized. Three times the waters are

poured, "I baptize thee in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." By this act the soul is purified and consecrated forever as a temple of the one triune God. Grace pours into that soul making it more resplendent than the most beautiful cathedrals. It has become a mirror of that heavenly family, the most Holy Trinity, and God looks upon this soul as if to contemplate himself therein.

Relics are placed in the altar by the bishop. In baptism a relic is placed upon the soul of the one baptized. A character is there imprinted, marking that soul as one reborn in Christ. The rites and ceremonies of baptism pass, grace too, often passes, but that indelible mark remains for all eternity. As the bishop anoints the receptacle of the relic with holy oils, so the priest, to remind the baptized person of his sacred mark, anoints him with chrism.

St. Bernard sees in the cement, with which the bishop encloses the relics in the altar, a sign of charity the bond of perfection. The charity which the grace of baptism brings with it is signified by a lighted candle. This recalls the ardent charity which must ever burn in the heart of a christian. Finally, both the consecrated church and the baptized person are placed under the patronage of some saint. To God alone are temples built. But the saints are friends of God and as such are deserving of honor from us. This respect is paid them by dedicating churches in their names. In baptism the recipient is dedicated to God alone, but he is placed under the patronage of a saint whose virtues he is to emulate. In each church there is an image of its patron. In the heart of the baptized person there should be the image of his patron, a living image upon which he should model and rule his life. St. John Damascene tells us to honor the saints by erecting statues in their honor, but it is a greater honor to become their living images. The saints now enjoy eternal beatitude because they were true temples of the living God. Each and every one who receives baptism is reminded that he is a temple of God, and if he would obtain heaven, he too must keep holy that temple as did the saint whose name he bears.

St. Bernard has given us a symbolic meaning of these ceremonies, St. Thomas shows their immediate effect upon the soul.* The triple breathing on the subject signifies the expulsion of the

* Summa 3° Q. 71, Art. 2 and 3.

power of the devil who wields this power because of original or even actual sin. While breathing the priest says, "Depart from him, unclean spirit, and give place to the Paraclete, the Holy Ghost. Next blessed salt is put in the mouth of the one being baptized to signify confession of faith, prudence of speech. It also signifies incorruption, that the worm of sin will never putrify that soul and that grace will be augmented. When the priest signs the head of the one being baptized, with the sign of the cross he says, "This sign of the cross which we place upon his head, thou accursed devil, never dare to violate." By this blessing the recipient of baptism is to be made partaker of the kingdom of God, he is to be sanctified by the Holy Ghost and upon him the vigor of heavenly grace is to be conferred. The blessing with the imposition of hands signifies that the devil has been expelled and is to prevent his return to the liberated soul.

Next the lower part of the stole is placed upon the one being baptized and he is led into the church with the words, "Enter into the temple of God that you may have part with Christ forever." To signify faith and trust in God the Credo and Pater Noster are then said. The exorcism which follows is the expulsion of the evil one lest he in any way impede the effects of the sacrament. The wetting of the ears and nostrils with spittle denotes the reception of the truths of faith and approbation of them. Satan is then renounced and the priest anoints the chest and between the shoulders of the one being baptized to give strength against the onslaughts of the devil. Then the saving waters of baptism are poured upon the head and the soul in all its innocence is a glory to God. The waters are poured thrice to signify the trinity of the persons of God.

To represent the regeneration of the soul to the new life of grace a white cloth, replacing the white robe formerly worn by the newly baptized, is placed upon the baptized person. In the early days of the Church, when baptism was conferred solemnly on Holy Saturday, the newly baptized wore this robe for a week laying it aside on the Sunday after Easter, *Dominica in albis* (Sunday in white). This white garment signified Christian purity and innocence, which is to be forever preserved, that in the resurrection all may appear clothed in white, even as when Christ was transfigured on the mount, His robes were as white as snow. In the times when baptism was so solemnly conferred honey and

milk were given to the ones baptized to show that they were newly born in Christ, children of God.

The last ceremony in baptism, the giving a blessed candle to the baptized person is a sign of faith and the protestation of faith at all times. It reminds the one receiving the sacrament that in his every action he must show forth his living burning faith.

These ceremonies do not, of themselves, confer grace. St. Thomas says* they have a certain effect different however from the effect of baptism proper which confers grace for the entire remission of sins. The effect of the exorcism is twofold, in so far as it removes the twofold impediment to the reception of the plenitude of the sacrament. Since the devil will attempt to prevent the salvation of man, the demon's power is driven out by the triple breathing, according to the words of St. Augustine, "They are breathed upon and exorcised in order to expel from them the devil's hostile power which deceived man." That is to prevent the devil from placing obstacles to the reception of the sacrament. Original sin darkened the senses and so prevents them from perceiving the mysteries of salvation. This obstacle, the darkened senses, is removed, for "by the typical spittle and touch of the priest, divine wisdom and virtue bring salvation to the catechumen that his nostrils being opened he may perceive the odour of the knowledge of God, that his ears may be opened to receive the commandments of God, that his senses may be opened in his inmost heart to respond." These things are directed to the removal of the impediments. They do not effect the grace of baptism. The anointing of the top of the head effects the preservation of baptismal grace. The outer ceremonies are mere signs. The white garment signifies the new life of grace, the candle the ardor of faith and charity.

Ceremonies, contributing as they do to the beauty and majesty of divine worship, sustain our piety and increase our devotion, which are so liable to diminish when bereft of external solemnities. By these solemn rites of the Church the attention of the faithful is held and they lead the soul to a more profound intelligence of the sacred mysteries. So the council of Trent said, "The ceremonies serve in some way to show the effects which the sacraments work, and to imprint upon the minds of

* Summa 3^a, Q. 71, Art. III.

the faithful the idea of true sanctity and finally to raise the spirits of those who witness and observe them with care, to thoughts of the sublime realities and excite in them faith and charity.

The sacraments were made for men, they are the sources of the spirituality of men, they are, then, to be adapted to the needs of those for whom they were instituted. To the Catholic Church Jesus Christ has left these sources of grace. They are unchangeable, in essence they must remain as Christ instituted them. Nevertheless the Church has the right to establish and change, according to needs and conditions, the accidental rites performed in the conferring of these sacraments. Men are human and the Church realizes this. She understands that all our knowledge comes from external things and the ordinary process of acquiring knowledge is to learn of the invisible from the visible, to learn of the spiritual from the sensible. Accordingly the Church has instituted ceremonies and rites, which are powerfully expressive, and which striking the imagination cause us to reflect and penetrate into the hidden things of our faith.

By her liturgy she teaches her dogma. By her ceremonies she inspires us with devotion and excites in us thoughts of the sublime mysteries of our faith. In the sacrament of baptism she shows us that we are the temples of the Spirit of God, that we are the children of God and subjects of His eternal faith. She has adapted herself to our needs and correspondence with her will lead us higher in the life of grace which comes to us through her sacraments and teaching.

EVENING!

By BRO. MAURICE M. O'MOORE, O. P.

Slow fades the summer light,
Soft falls the dew,
Faintly the stars of night
Glimmer to view.
Bells on the valley-side
Tinkle and cease;
Darker the shadows glide—
All is at peace!