


# FOUNDATIONAL, OVERLOOKED, AND FORGOTTEN

*More than once and done, baptism shapes  
our discipleship for a lifetime*

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By: *Mary Birmingham*



**W**e are a Eucharistic people. Eucharist is the heart of our faith. A person is not fully initiated, not fully Catholic, until he or she has feasted at the Lord's Table. Eucharist nourishes, strengthens and exhorts us to go out and become what we have received. Feasting on the Lord's Body and Blood is what makes Catholics Catholic.

It is no wonder that our passion for this primary sacrament can overshadow or cause us to forget the critical nature of baptism and how important it is to our life of discipleship. We are baptized to give birth; the way we give birth is through baptism.

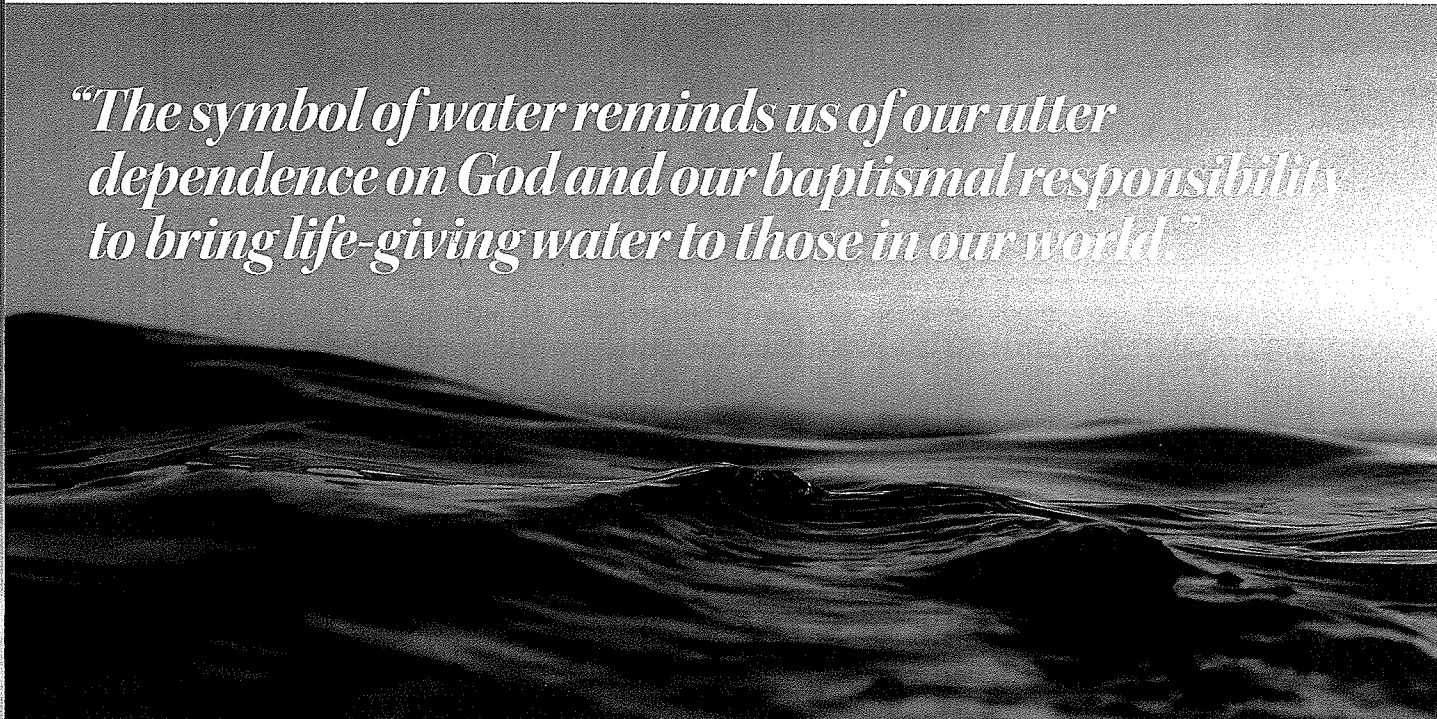
The hope inherent in this article is to foster a renewed sense of appreciation for this threshold sacrament that leads us into the fullness of Christian life. The great liturgist, Aidan Kavanagh, sets forth an image of the Christian "as one who has attained a degree of maturity in faith, that is manifested in a strong sense of Christian identity . . . in which belief in Jesus Christ has become a way of living together with others...This living together begins and ends as an act of worship of him from whom all good comes. It is a life of style suffused with vigor which the world by itself cannot give. It lies only in the gifts of God through Jesus Christ, gifts that cannot be merely received but must be corresponded with, entered into, made one's own."<sup>1</sup>

In short, it is a life of deeply rooted conversion and commitment to the Lord and Savior of the world and our lives.

How then, do we make it our own as Kavanagh suggests? Those of us baptized as infants have had very little formation when it comes to this sacrament. Most of us would define baptism as the sacrament that forgives original sin and makes us a Christian. Such a definition limits the sacrament to a personal, one-time event that has little bearing on our future life. The sacrament is so much more and has much to do with our ongoing, lifelong discipleship.

Sacraments can be defined as God's manifestation of self to the world. Sacraments help us notice who God is and how God acts in our world and in our lives.

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Sacraments give us access to the Christ of history and the Christ whose presence continues today. The source of God’s revelation to us in and through the sacraments is oftentimes referred to as signs.

The Church uses the word *sign* interchangeably with the word *sacrament*. We can explore each sacrament by exploring the *signs* associated with each sacrament. Another word for *sign* is symbol; every sacrament possesses a symbol that expresses the reality of the sacrament.<sup>2</sup>

We are reminded that signs “point to a deeper reality: God’s self-communication in the world. Drawing upon the words and deeds of revelation to express a vision of God’s love and saving power . . .”<sup>3</sup>

## Water as symbol

There are nine dominant sacramental symbols: fire/light, community, cross, word, laying on of hands, water, oil, garment, bread and wine. While every sacrament includes the first four, for the purposes of this discussion we will explore the primary symbol of baptism. To do so, we’ll look to the perspective set forth by an earlier

catechetical document, *Sharing the Light of Faith, National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States*. “The signs of God’s saving activity have come to be classified under four general headings: biblical signs, liturgical signs, ecclesial signs and natural signs. Though closely related, signs of each kind have special characteristics.”<sup>4</sup>

We will, therefore, break open the characteristics of baptism’s primary symbol of water from the perspective of the four signs in hopes of enhancing our understanding and appreciation of this foundational sacrament and ultimately—and most importantly—foster and invite conversion of heart.

Our Church teaches that Jesus is present in our sacramental symbols. The word *baptism* comes from the Greek *baptizein*—to plunge or immerse in water. Thus, we encounter Jesus in the water of baptism. The sign itself conveys the reality of Jesus’ presence.

### Natural Sign: natural properties of water

What is it about water that caused ancient communities to consider it a sign of God’s presence? “Water can cause destruction as well as life and cleansing, lending itself as a symbol of God’s judgment as well as of life and forgiveness.”<sup>5</sup>

Sacramental symbols possess multivalent meanings. Opposites often reside in our signs, and both are true and teach us about *who God is and how God acts* in our world. When we consider water in everyday life, we can imagine many adjectives—soothing, peaceful, calming, cleansing, thirst-quenching, life-giving and death-dealing. Those same adjectives can also be attributed to the God who soothes our wounded and broken hearts, who calms us in the storm, who cleanses our sin-sick souls, who quenches our thirst, and who shares his life with us. “We cannot live without it and we cannot live within it.”<sup>6</sup>

The destructive power of water, on the other hand, reminds us of God’s ultimate power and might. Human beings are born in water and they can die in water. No one can control the force of water, and no one can control the powerful actions of God. When there is an absence of water there is life-threatening thirst. This is especially pertinent today when so much of our world is parched dry due to the ravages of unpredictable weather patterns. When God hides his face or is absent, there is extreme thirst for God.

Reflection on the symbol of water reminds us of our utter dependence on God and our baptismal responsibility to bring life-giving water to those in our world who thirst not only for water, but also for God. And so, we ask: How could I and how could we overlook and forget so great a sacrament?

### **Biblical sign: biblical uses of water**

The Bible contains a plethora of examples in which God is present in the sign of water. Water is named more than any other resource. Israel was a dry, arid, desert land. Water was scarce. When storms did erupt, flash floods occurred out of nowhere. The people lived in constant fear of water’s shortage and absence. It was a powerful sign of God’s presence. Without it, they would die; it was a sign of their utter dependence on God. It is no wonder that our biblical texts express water as the revealer of the “God of Mystery who is its source and faithful dispenser.”<sup>7</sup>

At creation, God hovered over the waters; the generative, birthing power of the Holy Spirit unleashed God’s power and action into the lives of human beings. The great flood of Genesis

purged the earth of sin. God’s judgment came upon the earth, and water purified the human race. God led the Israelites through the Red Sea, drowning Pharaoh in the process. The Israelites were afforded safe passage through the sea to the Promised Land and after crossing the hazardous Jordan, were made citizens of a new land.

Scripture understands water as a sign of God’s divine and loving care for those he calls his own. God showers it down in abundance yet holds it back in the face of sin.<sup>8</sup> Water in Scripture as in our natural world, is a sign of death and of life. It is a sign of God’s birthing presence—we are born in water and the Holy Spirit, and we are called to assist God in bringing others to birth in that same water.

Water is a primary symbol of the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of God is present in the waters of baptism. Scripture considered water a sign of purification (foreshadowing baptismal washing of original sin). Purification baths were celebrated before community rituals. The reading from Ezekiel at the Easter Vigil recalls the transforming power of the Spirit to transform the hearts of God’s people, transformation that is ritualized in the water bath of baptism.

Water also plays an important role in the New Testament and conveys multiple meanings. Matthew challenged baptized Christians to go out and baptize all nations. He compared this baptism to Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan insisting that we, too, are incorporated into his baptism. The heavens were opened and God’s Spirit addressed Jesus saying, “You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.”<sup>9</sup> We vicariously share in his beloved-ness, the intimate love between Father, Son and Spirit. What greater implications for our life of servanthood could there be?

John’s Gospel tells us that the new water the Samaritan woman received at Cana was imbued with God’s Truth and God’s Spirit—life-giving water.<sup>10</sup> Water heals as in the story of Jesus healing the blind man in the pool of Siloam. Jesus used water as a sign of service, love and forgiveness when he washed the feet of his disciples. Water and blood came forth from Jesus’ side on the cross, understood

as the advent of the Holy Spirit upon the church. The water from Jesus' side was a sign of baptism and his blood a sign of Eucharist—the means by which the Church gives birth to new Christians.

When it comes to the symbol of water used in sacred Scripture, we are invited to ask ourselves: How does the Scripture's use of water have anything to do with my life and the life of our community? In what way is the Spirit of God alive and operative in my life and the life of our community? Where in my life and in the life of our community are the healing waters of God's love needed?

Knowing that baptism is intimately tied to justice we ask the question: "Whose feet does God want me to wash today?"<sup>11</sup> To whom is God sending me and us to baptize so as to bring others into his cleansing, regenerative presence? Through the Biblical signs associated with water we are led into the heart of a God who loves us and who sends his Spirit to be with us until the end of the age.

### **Ecclesial sign: the Church's theology and practice of baptismal waters**

The Church teaches that baptism incorporates us into the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ—his life, passion, death, resurrection and sending of the Spirit. The implications of that truth are profound. When we join the joys and sorrows of our lives we share in the ongoing redemption of the world.

Whether baptized as an infant or an adult we entered the purifying waters of death and resurrection. We were born again in Christ; we emerged from the watery womb as a new child of God. What could be more important to our lives than to accept that we are God's beloved children?

I remember one Easter Vigil homily in which the pastor threw away his notes and demanded that we sing the words that emerged from our Genesis reading: "and God saw that it was good." He demanded we sing that phrase over and over again. "Do you believe it? Do you really believe in your intrinsic goodness?" He insisted that the world

would be a better place if every Christian embraced the truth of our baptism—that we are good—that we are created in God's image—that we are his adopted children—and that he continues to love us and set us free from all that holds us in bondage.

Baptism is about death and resurrection and it is about safe passage to a new life. Water purifies, justifies and makes us holy. "Sin is buried in the water."<sup>12</sup> As a result of this purification, justification and holiness we become enlightened members of the Body of Christ. Sin is washed away but more than that we become God's children who commit to a lifetime of following him to and through the cross.

We are born again to new life and as adopted children of God we share in the priestly, prophetic and royal mission of Jesus. As priest we are the royal priesthood of God; we are the Church and through the dignity of our baptismal priesthood we are called to serve God's people. As prophet we are commissioned to proclaim God's word by the example of our lives—word and deed—and as king to lead people to Christ. It is up to us to carry the banner of evangelization into the world—to go out and repair that world.

We must ask ourselves: are we living up to this awesome responsibility? In what way am I faithful to my baptismal priesthood by serving God's people? In what way am I proclaiming the Good News by the example of my life? When was the last time I led anyone to Christ? The answer to those questions has everything to do with what it means to live out the dignity of our baptism and begs serious reflection: How could I and how could we overlook and forget so great a sacrament?

### **Liturgical sign: use of water in liturgy and sacrament**

Liturgy expresses in ritual action what we experience in our natural world, what we hear proclaimed in Scripture, what we believe and what our Church teaches us about this remarkable sacrament. Water is used in most liturgical blessings and sacraments to remind us of its ongoing efficacy.

Water is blessed at the Easter Vigil. In that blessing we retell the story of passage through the Red Sea into the Promised Land of new life in Christ. Through the ritual waters of baptism, the neophyte is purified, justified, sanctified and incorporated into the Body of Christ, the Paschal Mystery, and the communion of saints.

We recommit to our baptismal promises in order to go out and live another year of committed discipleship—like the woman who went out and took a homeless woman dying of cancer into her home and the man who gave up his job so another man would not lose his.

Baptism converts hearts and souls that are open to that holy fire of conversion. When the symbols are strong in liturgy, when there is water enough to die in, the power of the sacrament speaks not only to the neophyte but also to the entire community. We must ask the question: Are we willing to die in those waters? What sin still lurks above the surface?

One theologian puts in perspective why this sacrament should never be relegated to the cobwebs of forgotten and overlooked rituals. “[O]ne learns to be a Christian, and yet one can never learn the faith, it is always given, like a surprise, a birth, a resurrection from the dead. One is given the gift of faith and the bath, and yet that gift draws to perpetual learning and a change in one’s life.”<sup>13</sup>

How, then, could we, dare we, ever forget and overlook so great a sacrament?

<sup>1</sup> Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation*, (New York, Pueblo, 1978), 153.

<sup>2</sup> Sacramental theology interprets a sacramental symbol as that which embodies the reality it signifies. In other words, if a symbol could speak it would say, “I am”, not “I am like, or I resemble.” Thus, bread becomes the reality of Jesus’ Body; it does not merely resemble or remind us of his Body; it is the Body of Christ.

<sup>3</sup> *Sharing the Light of Faith, National Catechetical Directory for Catholics in the United States*. #42, in *The Catechetical Documents*, A Parish Resource, 1996, Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 226.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> “Joseph E. Grassi, “Water,” in *Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 1060.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Birmingham, *Word and Worship Workbook for Year C*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 253.

<sup>7</sup> Kathleen Hughes, RSCJ, “Water: Pastoral Liturgical Tradition,” *Collegeville Pastoral Biblical Dictionary* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 1062.

<sup>8</sup> Deut. 11: 14-17

<sup>9</sup> Mt 3: 13-17

<sup>10</sup> The early church understood the story of the Samaritan Woman to be one of three premier catechetical texts for those preparing for baptism. (The story of the man born blind and the raising of Lazarus were the other two gospels used in baptismal preparation.)

<sup>11</sup> Foot washing was a primary baptismal ritual in fourth century Milan thus connecting baptism with Jesus’ command to wash the feet of others.

<sup>12</sup> St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 40, 3-4: PGJ.P. Migne, edited by Patrologia Latina Supplement, 36 361C.

<sup>13</sup> Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things, a Liturgical Theology*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Press, 1993), 60.



*Mary Birmingham is the former director of music, liturgy and Christian Initiation at Ascension Catholic Church in Melbourne, Florida, and a former presenter for the North American Forum*

*on the Catechumenate. An accomplished author and national clinician, she is one of the foremost authorities on Christian Initiation. She holds a master’s degree in liturgy/theology from Saint John’s University in Collegeville, Minnesota.*