

The LORD told Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the water may flow back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and their charioteers” (Ex 14:26). The Israelites escaped from slavery and began their journey to the Promised Land. To more fully understand the death of the Egyptians who were caught in the sea as they tried to recapture the fleeing Israelites, we need to look at the sacrament of Baptism.

Baptism means “immersion” and “bath” from the Greek origin of the word. Although we often pour water over the forehead of an infant, the biblical roots for Baptism are connected with the Jordan River. Jesus was immersed in the water, a sign of death. Coming out of the water, one can breathe again and there is a very physical sense of new life beyond all that happens spiritually. When we bathe in the waters of baptism, we are cleansed from any intentional sin as well as the effects of original sin. Saint Paul sums up this truth when he says, “You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col 2:12).ⁱ

We become adopted brothers and sisters of Jesus with our Baptism. With the great gift of the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life ... comes a great responsibility. “For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Mt 12:50). “Reborn as sons of God, [the baptized] must profess before men the faith they have received from God through the Church” and participate in the apostolic and missionary activity of the People of God (CCC 1270).

The Irish Immigrant John Boyle O’Reilly serves as a great witness for the type of brother we are called to be by our baptism. As a young man he worked to advance the cause of Irish independence. The British arrested him for this and sentenced him to a 20-year prison term at the penal colony in Western Australia. Like the Israelites, he escaped and found new freedom in America in Boston.

In time he rose to prominence and became the editor of the Boston Pilot Newspaper for two decades. “He used his gifts as a public speaker, civil rights leader, poet, and novelist to bridge the gap between Catholics and Protestants in nineteenth-century Boston while enhancing Catholic identity in the process ... He used the Pilot as a platform for defending an independent Ireland and addressing the rights of African Americans and Native Americans. He compared the oppression that these minorities were suffering to that which the Irish immigrants were experiencing.”ⁱⁱ With his influential voice, he openly campaigned for political candidates who would work for social justice and equality.

John Boyle O’Reilly went well beyond the ties of blood, religion, and national identity. His words and actions mirror the call of Jesus: “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Mt 12:49b-50).

ⁱ United States Catholic Catechism for Adults. USCCB. Chapter 15

ⁱⁱ Ibid.