

A Treatise on the Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism

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I. Baptism [German, die Taufe] is called in the Greek language baptisimos, in Latin mersio, which means to plunge something entirely into the water, so that the water closes over it. And although in many places it is the custom no longer to thrust and plunge children into the font of baptism, but only to pour the baptismal water upon them out of the font, nevertheless the former is what should be done; and it would be right, according to the meaning of the word Taufe, that the child, or whoever is baptized, should be sunk entirely into the water, and then drawn out again; for even in the German tongue the word Taufe comes undoubtedly from the word tief, and means that what is baptized is sunk deep into the water. This usage is also demanded by the significance of baptism, for baptism signifies that the old man and the sinful birth of flesh and blood are to be wholly drowned by the grace of God, as we shall hear. We should, therefore, do justice to its meaning and make baptism a true and complete sign of the thing it signifies.

II. Baptism is an external sign or token, which so divides us from all men not baptized, that thereby we are known as a people of Christ, our Captain, under Whose banner (i. e., the Holy Cross) we continually fight against sin. Therefore in this Holy Sacrament we must have regard to three things — the sign, the significance thereof, and the faith. The sign consists in this, that we are thrust into the water in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost; but we are not left there, for we are drawn out again. Hence the saying, Aus der Taufe gehoben. The sign must, therefore, have both its parts, the putting in and the drawing out.

III. The significance of baptism is a blessed dying unto sin and a resurrection in the grace of God, so that the old man, which is conceived and born in sin, is there drowned, and a new man, born in grace, comes forth and rises. Thus St. Paul, in Titus 3:5, calls baptism a “washing of regeneration,” since in this washing man is born again and made new. As Christ also says, in John 3:5, “Except ye be born again of water and the Spirit of grace, ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.” For just as a child is drawn out of its mother’s womb and born, and through this fleshly birth is a sinful man and a child of wrath, so man is drawn out of baptism and spiritually born, and through this spiritual birth is a child of grace and a justified man. Therefore sins are drowned in baptism, and in place of sin, righteousness comes forth.

IV. This significance of baptism, viz., the dying or drowning of sin, is not fulfilled completely in this life, nay,, not until man passes through bodily death also, and utterly decays to dust. The sacrament, or sign, of baptism is quickly over, as we plainly see. But the thing it signifies, viz., the spiritual baptism, the drowning of sin, lasts so long as we live, and is completed only in death. Then it is that man is completely sunk in baptism, and that thing comes to pass which baptism signifies. Therefore this life is nothing else than a spiritual baptism which does not cease till death, and he who is baptized is condemned to die; as though the priest, when he baptizes, were to say, “Lo, thou art sinful flesh; therefore I drown thee in God’s Name, and in His Name condemn thee to thy death, that with thee all thy sins may die and be destroyed.” Wherefore St. Paul says, in Romans 6:4, “We are buried with Christ by baptism into death”; and the sooner after baptism a man dies, the sooner is his baptism completed; for sin never entirely ceases while this body lives, which is so wholly conceived in

sin that sin is its very nature, as saith the Prophet, "Behold I was conceived in sin, and in iniquity did my mother bear me"; and there is no help for the sinful nature unless it dies and is destroyed with all its sin. So, then, the life of a Christian, from baptism to the grave, is nothing else than the beginning of a blessed death, for at the Last Day God will make him altogether new.

V. In like manner the lifting up out of baptism is quickly done, but the thing it signifies, the spiritual birth, the increase of grace and righteousness, though it begins indeed in baptism, lasts until death, nay, even until the Last Day. Only then will that be finished which the lifting up out of baptism signifies. Then shall we arise from death, from sins and from all evil, pure in body and in soul, and then shall we live forever. Then shall we be truly lifted up out of baptism and completely born, and we shall put on the true baptismal garment of immortal life in heaven. As though the sponsors when they lift the child up out of baptism, were to say, "Lo, now thy sins are drowned; we receive thee in God's Name into an eternal life of innocence." For so will the angels at the Last Day raise up all Christians, all pious baptised men, and will there fulfill what baptism and 'the sponsors signify; as Christ says in Matthew 24:31, "He shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather unto Him His elect from the four places of the 'winds, and from the rising to the setting of the sun."

VI. Baptism was presaged of old in Noah's flood, when 'the whole world was drowned, save Noah with three sons and their wives, eight souls, who were kept in the ark. That the people of the world were drowned, signifies that in baptism sins are drowned; but that the eight in the ark, with beasts of every sort, were preserved, signifies that through baptism man is saved, as St. Peter explains. Now baptism is by far a greater flood than was that of Noah. For that flood drowned men during no more than one year, but baptism drowns all sorts of men throughout the world, from the birth of Christ even till the Day of Judgment. Moreover, it is a flood of grace, as that was a flood of wrath, as is declared in Psalm 29:10, "God will make a continual new flood, For without doubt many more people are baptized than were drowned in the flood.

VII. From this it follows that when a man comes forth out of baptism, he is pure and without sin, wholly guiltless. But there are many who do not rightly understand this, and think that sin is no more present, and so they become slothful and negligent in the killing of their sinful nature, even as some do when they have gone to Confession. For this reason, as I said above, should be rightly understood, and it should be known that our flesh, so long as it lives here, is by nature wicked and sinful. To correct this wickedness God has devised the plan of making it altogether new, even as Jeremiah shows. The potter, when the pot "was marred in his hand," thrust it again into the lump of clay, and kneaded it, and afterwards made another pot, as it seemed good to him. "So," says God, "are ye in My hands." In the first birth we are marred; therefore He thrusts us into the earth again by death, and makes us over at the Last Day, that then we may be perfect and without sin.

This plan He begins in baptism, which signifies death and the resurrection at the Last Day, as has been said. Therefore, so far as the sign of the sacrament and its significance are concerned, sins and the man are both already dead, and he has risen again, and so the sacrament has taken place; but the work of the sacrament has not yet been fully done, that is to say, death and the resurrection at the Last Day are yet before us.

VIII. Man, therefore, is altogether pure and guiltless, but sacramentally, which means nothing else than that he has the sign of God, i.e., baptism, by which it is shown that his sins are all to be dead, and that he too is to die in grace, and at the Last Day to rise again, pure, sinless, guiltless, to everlasting life. Because of the sacrament, then, it is true that he is without sin and guilt; but because

this is not yet completed, and he still lives in sinful flesh, he is not without sin, and not in all things pure, but has begun to grow into purity and innocence.

Therefore when a man comes to mature age, the natural, sinful appetites — wrath, impurity, lust, avarice, pride, and the like — begin to stir, whereas there would be none of these if all sins were drowned in the sacrament and were dead. But the sacrament only signifies that they are to be drowned through death and the resurrection at the Last Day. So St. Paul, in Romans 7:18, and all saints with him, lament that they are sinners and have sin in their nature, although they were baptized and were holy; and they so lament because the natural, sinful appetites are always active so long as we live.

IX. But you ask, “How does baptism help me, if it does not altogether blot out and put away sin?” This is the place for the right understanding of the sacrament of baptism. The holy sacrament of baptism helps you, because in it God allies Himself with you, and becomes one with you in a gracious covenant of comfort.

First of all, you give yourself up to the sacrament of baptism and what it signifies, i.e., you desire to die, together with your sins, and to be made new at the Last Day, as the sacrament declares, and as has been said. This God accepts at your hands, and grants you baptism, and from that hour begins to make you a new man, pours into you His grace and Holy Spirit, Who begins to slay nature and sin, and to prepare you for death and the resurrection at the Last Day.

Again, you pledge yourself to continue in this, and more and more to slay your sin as long as you live, even until your death. This too God accepts, and trains and tries you all your life long, with many good works and manifold sufferings; whereby He effects what you in baptism have desired, viz., that you may become free from sin, may die and rise again at the Last Day, and so fulfill your baptism. Therefore, we read and see how bitterly He has let His saints be tortured, and how much He has let them suffer, to the end that they might be quickly slain, might fulfill their baptism, die and be made new. For when this does not happen, and we suffer not and are not tried, then the evil nature overcomes a man, so that he makes his baptism of none effect, falls into sin, and remains the same old man as before.

X. So long, now, as you keep your pledge to God, He, in turn, gives you His grace, and pledges Himself not to count against you the sins which remain in your nature after baptism, and not to regard them or to condemn you because of them. He is satisfied and well-pleased if you are constantly striving and desiring to slay these sins and to be rid of them by your death. For this cause, although the evil thoughts and appetites may be at work, nay, even although you may sin and fall at times, these sins are already done away by the power of the sacrament and covenant, if only you rise again and enter into the covenant, as St. Paul says in Romans 8:1. No one who believes in Christ is condemned by the evil, sinful inclination of his nature, if only he does not follow it and consent to it; and St. John, in his Epistle, writes, “If any man sin, we have an Advocate with God, even Jesus Christ, Who has become the forgiveness of our sins.” All this takes place in baptism, where Christ is even us, as we shall hear in the remainder of the treatise.

XI. Now if this covenant did not exist, and God were not so merciful as to wink at our sins, there could be no sin so small but it would condemn us. For the judgment of God can endure no sin. Therefore there is on earth no greater comfort than baptism, for through it we come under the judgment of grace and mercy, which does not condemn our sins, but drives them out by many trials. There is a fine sentence of St. Augustine, which says, “Sin is altogether forgiven in baptism; not in

such wise that it is no longer present, but in such wise that it is not taken into account." As though he were to say, "Sin remains in our flesh even until death, and works without ceasing; but so long as we do not consent thereto or remain therein, it is so overruled by our baptism that it does not condemn us and is not harmful to us, but is daily more and more destroyed until our death."

For this reason no one should be terrified if he feel evil lust or love, nor should he despair even if he fall; but he should remember his baptism, and comfort himself joyfully with it, since God has there bound Himself to slay his sin for him, and not to count it a cause for condemnation, if only he does not consent to sin or remain in sin. Moreover, these wild thoughts and appetites, and even a fall into sin, should not be regarded as an occasion for despair, but rather as a warning from God that man should remember his baptism and what was there spoken, that he should call upon God's mercy, and exercise himself in striving against sin, that he should even be desirous of death in order that he may be rid of sin.

XII. Here, then, is the place to dismiss the third thing in the sacrament, i.e., faith, to wit, that a man should firmly believe all this; viz., that this sacrament not only signifies death and the resurrection at the Last Day, by which man is made new for an everlasting, sinless life; but also that it assuredly begins and effects this, and unites us with God, so that we have the will to slay sin, even till the time of our death, and to fight against it; on the other hand, that it is His will to be merciful to us, to deal graciously with us, and not to judge us with severity, because we are not sinless in this life until purified through death. Thus you understand how a man becomes in baptism guiltless, pure and sinless, and yet continues full of evil inclinations, so that he is called pure only because he has begun to be pure, and has a sign and covenant of this purity, and is always to become more pure. Because of this God will not count against him the impurity which still cleaves to him, and, therefore, he is pure rather through the gracious imputation of God than through anything in his own nature; as the Prophet says in Psalm 32:1, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven; blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity."

This faith is of all things the most necessary, for it is the ground of all comfort. He who has not this faith must despair in his sins. For the sin which remains after baptism makes it impossible for any good works to be pure before God. For this reason we must hold boldly and fearlessly to our baptism, and hold it up against all sins and terrors of conscience, and humbly say, "I know full well that I have not a single work which is pure, but I am bap-tised, and through my baptism God, who cannot lie, has bound Himself in a covenant with me, not to count my sin against me, but to slay it and blot it out."

XIII. So, then, we understand that the innocence which is ours by baptism is so called simply and solely because of the mercy of God, which has begun this work in us, bears patiently with sin, and regards us as though we were sinless. This also explains why Christians are called in the Scriptures the children of mercy, a people of grace, and men of God's good-will. It is because in baptism they have begun to become pure, and by God's mercy are not condemned with their sins that still remain, until, through death and at the Last Day, they become wholly pure, as the sign of baptism shows.

Therefore they greatly err who think that through baptism they have become wholly pure. They go about in their unwisdom, and do not slay their sin; they will not admit that it is sin; they persist in it, and so they make their baptism of no effect; they remain entangled in certain outward works, and meanwhile pride, hatred, and other evils of their nature are disregarded and grow worse and worse. Nay, not so! Sin and evil inclination must be recognized as truly sin; that it does not harm us is to be

ascribed to the grace of God, Who will not count it against us if only we strive against it in many trials, works, and sufferings, and slay it at last in death. To them who do this not, God will not forgive their sins, because they do not live according to their baptism and covenant, and hinder the work which God and their baptism have begun.

XIV. Of this sort are they also who think to blot out and put away their sin by “satisfaction,” and even regard their baptism lightly, as though they had no more need of it after they had been baptised, and do not know that it is in force all through life, even until death, nay, even at the Last Day, as was said above. For this cause they think to find some other way of blotting out sin, viz., their own works; and so they make, for themselves and for all others, evil, terrified, uncertain consciences, and despair in the hour of death; and they know not how they stand with God, thinking that by sin they have lost their baptism and that it profits them no more.

Guard yourself, by all means, against this error. For, as has been said, if any one has fallen into sin, he should the more remember his baptism, and how God has there made a covenant with him to forgive all his sins, if only he has the will to fight against them, even until death. Upon this truth, upon this alliance with God, a man must joyfully dare to rely, and then baptism goes again into operation and effect, his heart becomes again peaceful and glad, not in his own work or “satisfaction,” but in God’s mercy, promised him in baptism, and to be held fast forever. This faith a man must hold so firmly that he would cling to it even though all creatures and all sins attacked him, since he who lets himself be forced away from it makes God a liar in His covenant, the sacrament of baptism.

XV. It is this faith that the devil most attacks. If he overthrows it, he has won the battle. For the sacrament of penance also (of which we have already spoken) has its foundation in this sacrament, since sins are forgiven only to those who are baptized, i.e., to those whose sins God has promised to forgive. The sacrament of penance thus renews and points out again the sacrament of baptism, as though the priest, in the absolution, were to say, “Lo, God hath now forgiven thee thy sin, as He long since hath promised thee in baptism, and as He hath now commanded me, by the power of the keys, and now thou comest again into that which thy baptism does and is. Believe, and thou hast it, doubt, and thou art lost.” So we find that through sin baptism is, indeed, hindered in its work, i.e., in the forgiveness and the slaying of sin; yet only by unbelief in its operation is baptism brought to naught. Faith, in turn, removes the hindrance to the operation of baptism. So much depends on faith.

To speak quite plainly, it is one thing to forgive sins, and another thing to put them away or drive them out. The forgiveness of sins is obtained by faith, even though they are not entirely driven out; but to drive out sins is to exercise ourselves against them, and at last it is to die; for in death sin perishes utterly. But both the forgiveness and the driving out of sins are the work of baptism. Thus the Apostle writes to the Hebrews, who were baptized, and whose sins were forgiven, that they shall lay aside the sin which doth beset them. For so long as I believe that God is willing not to count my sins against me, my baptism is in force and my sins are forgiven, though they may still, in a great measure, remain. After that follows the driving out of my sins through sufferings, death, etc. This is what we confess in the article [of the Creed], “I believe in the Holy Ghost, the forgiveness of sins, etc.” Here there is special reference to baptism, for in it the forgiveness takes place through God’s covenant with us; therefore we must not doubt this forgiveness.

XVI. It follows, therefore, that baptism makes all sufferings, and especially death, profitable and helpful, since these things can only serve baptism in the doing of its work, i.e., in the slaying of sin.

For he who would fulfill the work and purpose of his baptism and be rid of sin, must die. It cannot be otherwise. Sin, however, does not like to die, and for this reason it makes death so bitter and so horrible. Such is the grace and power of God that sin, which has brought death, is driven out again by its own work, viz., by death.

You find many people who wish to live in order that they may become righteous, and who say that they would like to be righteous. Now there is no shorter way or manner than through baptism and the work of baptism, i.e., through suffering and death, and so long as they are not willing to take this way, it is a sign that they do not rightly intend or know how to become righteous. Therefore God has instituted many estates in life in which men are to learn to exercise themselves and to suffer. To some He has commanded the estate of matrimony, to others the estate of the clergy, to others, again, the estate of the rulers, and to all He has commanded that they shall toil and labor to kill the flesh and accustom it to death, because for all such as are baptized their baptism has made the repose, the ease, the plenty of this life a very poison, and a hindrance to its work. For in these things no one learns to suffer, to die with gladness, to get rid of sin, and to live in accordance with baptism; but instead of these things there grows love of this life and horror of eternal life, fear of death and unwillingness to blot out sin.

XVII. Now behold the lives of men. Many there are who fast and pray and go on pilgrimage and exercise themselves in such things, thinking thereby only to heap up merit, and to sit down in the high places of heaven. But fasting and all such exercises should be directed toward holding down the old Adam, the sinful nature, and accustoming it to do without all that is pleasing for this life, and thus daily preparing it more and more for death, so that the work and purpose of baptism may be fulfilled. And all these exercises and toils are to be measured, not by their number or their greatness, but by the demands of baptism; that is to say, each man is to take upon him so much of these works as is good and profitable for the suppressing of his sinful nature and for fitting it for death, and is to increase or diminish them according as he sees that sin increases or decreases. As it is, they go their heedless way, take upon themselves this, that, and the other task, do now this, now that, according to the appearance or the reputation of the work, and again quickly leave off, and thus become altogether inconstant, fill in the end they amount to nothing; nay, some of them so rack their brains over the whole thing, and so abuse nature, that they are of no use either to themselves or others.

All this is the fruit of that doctrine with which we have been so possessed as to think that after repentance or baptism we are without sin, and that our good works are to be heaped up, not for the blotting out of sin, but for their own sake, or as a satisfaction for sins already done. This is encouraged by those preachers who preach unwisely the legends and works of the blessed Saints, and make of them examples for all. The ignorant fall eagerly upon these things, and work their own destruction out of the examples of the Saints. God has given every saint a special way and a special grace by which to live according to his baptism. But baptism and its significance He has set as a common standard for all men, so that every man is to examine himself according to his station in life, to find what is the best way for him to fulfill the work and purpose of his baptism, i.e., to slay sin and to die. Then Christ's burden grows light and easy, and it is not carried with worry and care, as Solomon says of it, "The labor of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city." For even as they are worried who wish to go to the city and cannot find the way, so it is with these men; all their life and labor is a burden to them, and yet they accomplish nothing.

XVIII. In this place, then,, belongs the question whether baptism and the vow which we there make to God, is something more or something greater than the vows of chastity, of the priesthood, of the clergy, since baptism is common to all Christians, and it is thought that the clergy have 'taken a special and a higher vow. I answer: From what has been said, this is an easy question to answer. For in baptism we all make one and the same vow, viz., to slay sin and to become holy through the work and grace of God, to Whom we yield and offer ourselves, as clay to the potter; and in this no one is better than another. But for a life in accordance with baptism, i.e., for slaying sin, there can be no one method and no special estate in life. Therefore I have said that each man must prove himself, that he may know in what estate he may best slay sin and put a check upon his nature. It is true, then, that there is no vow higher, better, or greater than the vow of baptism. What more can we promise than to drive out sin, to die, to hate this life, and to become holy?

Over and above this vow, a man may, indeed, bind himself to some special estate, if it seems to him to be suitable and helpful for the completion of his baptism. It is just as though two men went to the same city, and the one went by the foot-path, the other by the high-way, according as each thought best. So he who binds himself to the estate of matrimony, walks in the toils and sufferings which belong to that estate and lays upon himself its burdens, in order that he may grow used to pleasure and sorrow, avoid sin, and prepare himself for death better than he could do outside of that estate. But he who seeks more suffering, and by much exercise would speedily prepare himself for death and soon attain the work of baptism, let him bind himself to chastity, or the spiritual order; for the spiritual estate, if it is as it ought to be, should be full of torment and suffering, in order that he who belongs to it may have more exercise in the work of his baptism than the man who is in the estate of matrimony, and through such torment quickly grow used to welcome death with joy, and so attain the purpose of his baptism. Now above this estate there is another and a higher, that which rules in the spiritual order, viz., the estate of bishop, priest, etc. And these men should be well practiced in sufferings and works, and ready at every hour for death, not only for their own sake, but for the sake of those who are their subjects.

Yet in all these estates the standard, of which we spoke above, should never be forgotten, viz., that a man should so exercise himself only to the end that sin may be driven out, and should not be guided by the number or the greatness of works. But, alas! how we have forgotten our baptism and what it means, and what vows we made there, and that we are to walk in its works and attain its purpose! So, too, we have forgotten about the ways to that goal, and about the estates, and do not know to what end these estates were instituted, and how we are in them to keep at the fulfilling of our baptism. They have been made a gorgeous show, and little more remains of them than worldly display, as Isaiah says, "Thy silver is become dross, thy wine mixed with water." On this may God have mercy! Amen.

XIX. If, then, the holy sacrament of baptism is a thing so great, so gracious and full of comfort, we should pay earnest heed to thank God for it ceaselessly, joyfully, and from the heart, and to give Him praise and honor. For I fear that by our thanklessness we have deserved our blindness and become unworthy to behold such grace, though the whole world was, and still is, full of baptism and the grace of God. But we have been led astray in our own anxious works, afterwards in indulgences and such like false comforts, and have thought that we are not to trust God until we are righteous and have made satisfaction for our sin, as though we would buy His grace from Him or pay Him for it. In truth, he who does not see in God's grace how it bears with him as a sinner, and will make him blessed, and who looks forward only to God's judgment, 'that man will never be joyful, in God, and

can neither love nor praise Him. But if we hear and firmly believe that He receives us sinners in the covenant of baptism, spares us, and makes us pure from day to day, then our heart must be joyful, and love and praise God. So He says in the Prophet, "I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son." Wherefore it is needful that we give thanks to the Blessed Majesty, Who shows Himself so gracious and merciful toward us poor condemned worms, and magnify and acknowledge His work.

XX. At the same time, however, we must have a care that no false security creeps in and says to itself: "Baptism is so gracious and so great a thing that God will not count our sins against us, and as soon as we turn again from sin, everything is right, by virtue of baptism; meanwhile, therefore, I will live and do my own will, and afterwards, or when about to die, will remember my baptism and remind God of His covenant, and then fulfill the work and purpose of my baptism."

Baptism is, indeed, so great a thing that if you turn again from sins and appeal to the covenant of baptism, your sins are forgiven. Only see to it, if you thus wickedly and wantonly sin, presuming on God's grace, that the judgment does not lay hold upon you and anticipate your turning back; and beware lest, even if you then desired to believe or to trust in your baptism, your trial be, by God's decree, so great that your faith is not able to stand. If they scarcely remain who do no sin or who fall because of sheer weakness, where shall your wickedness remain, which has tempted and mocked God's grace?

Let us, therefore, walk with carefulness and fear, that with a firm faith we may hold fast the riches of God's grace, and joyfully give thanks to His mercy forever and ever. Amen.