

Baptism: New Life in the Body of Christ

Liturgical Theology 102
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Today, when most Orthodox Christians think of baptism, they probably think of a small private ceremony done on a Saturday afternoon - squeezed in between the 1:00 p.m. and the 4:00 p.m. weddings - or done on a Sunday immediately after the Divine Liturgy. Unfortunately, what so many Orthodox Christians today do not realize is that baptism is a highly complex sacrament of transformation that an individual (a child in most cases today) undergoes and experiences. When one considers baptism as it is performed today, two questions come to mind: 1) Is baptism a private or an ecclesial (i.e. church) event? and 2) Does the actual rite today make this clear?

The Orthodox Church is the Body of Christ. It is an organic, living entity made alive by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the individual members that make up the church. Since the church is the Body of Christ, then it is possible to discuss various church phenomena in biological terms. It is the intent of this author to demonstrate that baptism is an ecclesial event of entry involving the entire Body of Christ just as new cellular life is a systemic event involving the entire human body. In doing so, it will also be illustrated that today's rite falls short of this truly ecclesial event.

In any complex multicellular organism like a human, the basic unit of life is the cell. The continuation of life within the body relies on the formation of new individual living cells from previously existing ones. Within the human body, cells die and are replaced ("born") throughout life for the purpose of growth and repair. The formation of a new cell requires a biological symphony of metabolic activity that is dependent on the proper functioning of the body as a whole to nourish, modulate, and nurture each new cell. Even though each one of the trillions of cells in the body is an individual, it requires the complex interaction of all the cells together to make a functioning human being and to generate new cells.

Extrapolating this line of thinking to the church, one can think of each baptized member as

an individual cell in the Body of Christ. The life of the church is dependent upon the inseparable functioning of all of the individual members together. Through baptism, an individual dies to this world and is "born again" in Christ through the Holy Spirit and becomes a new "cell" in the Body of Christ. Since the Body of Christ is likened to our bodies, then the addition of new individuals should be, and is meant to be, a corporate and systemic event involving the entire Body. In theology, this concept of baptism as a whole church event would fall under the term *leitourgia*, the corporate worship and function of the people that make up the Body of Christ. As discussed below, this *leitourgia* is seen in the way baptisms were performed early in church history at a time when primarily adults were baptized.

In New Testament times, baptism had a rather simple formula. The gospel was preached to individuals and in response to that preaching one made a choice of faith. Baptism followed and then the individual entered into life in a Spirit-filled community. New individuals were spiritually nourished and integrated into the Body by this church community. Even though individual conversions and baptisms were common, the ecclesial nature of baptism in these times is seen (if perhaps only dimly in the New Testament texts) in the incorporation into and life within the Christian community as a whole.

As time went on, the rite of baptism grew in complexity and in its ecclesial nature. The Didache, a late first century document, mentions a pre-baptismal teaching by the church on the Two Ways - the Way of Life and the Way of Death. This was a primitive catechetical period for potential new initiates into the church. The text of The Didache implies a community effort in the teaching and the witnessing of these individuals, followed by baptism and incorporation into the Church.

In Justin Martyr's First Apology, one finds more evidence of the ecclesial nature of baptism. One was baptized after being introduced to the Gospel and deciding to follow Christ. Justin further writes concerning the things that the Church taught and he also states that the community prayed and fasted with the catechumens. Following baptism, the new members of the Body of Christ are

introduced to the church members and they would all pray and worship together.

From the time of Hippolytus in the early third century and on into the fourth century, a fully-developed complex catechumenate arose. It was a three year program involving moral instruction, Old Testament teachings, and a basic introduction to Christ and the Gospels. During the Lenten period before Pascha, the catechumens underwent an intense training period. For several hours a day during Lent, the bishop and sometimes the presbyters would teach the catechumens Scripture, the Lord's prayer, the Creed, and basic Church doctrines. In addition, the catechumens also fasted and prayed; in parallel, the entire church prayed and fasted along with the catechumens. Lent, therefore, was an ecclesial event of preparation for the entire Body of Christ in anticipation of the baptism of the catechumens.

The climax of all of this preparation occurred during the Paschal celebration when the catechumens were finally baptized. Immediately following baptism, the newly initiated were led into the church for full participation in the Paschal Eucharistic Liturgy. Thus, through the work of the community - teaching, prayer, and fasting - and through the Grace of the Holy Spirit, new individuals, or new "cells", were born into the Body of Christ. This event was not some secluded obligatory rite done with only close family and friends, but it was a church-wide event, a full part of the *leitourgia* of the community and a joyous celebration of new life in Christ for the entire worshipping community.

This ecclesial nature of baptism is made more evident in the whole cycle of worship during Pascha. The Paschal liturgy itself is a baptismal liturgy, made evident by the singing of "As many as have been baptized into Christ..." at the time when the trisagion is normally sung. Also during the Paschal liturgy, clergy wear white vestments symbolizing newness in Christ - truly a baptismal theme. Before this, on Holy Saturday, several of the fifteen prescribed Old Testament readings can have baptismal interpretations – for example, Exodus 13:20-15:19, Isaiah 61:1-9, and Jeremiah 31:31-34. In fact, the reason for these fifteen long readings was to allow time for the catechumens to

be baptized before being brought into the Church. Additionally, the epistle reading for that same service is Romans 6:3-11 which features St. Paul's commentary on baptism. Thus, it is evident how baptism, resurrection, and new life were all intertwined in this great **baptismal** feast of Pascha.

In this day and age, legalistic liturgical theology has narrowed the meaning of baptism to a simple initiatory rite. Very few adults are baptized and infant baptisms are the norm. As a result, the great catechetical period involving the entire Church has been lost. All that remains is a re-theologized period of fasting during Great Lent and the remnants of the baptismal themes in the Paschal worship services. No longer is baptism a liturgical celebration of new life in Christ, but is simply a necessary rite of passage for a child that the family performs with a few close friends, some relatives, the priest, and the chanter. Lost is the true theology of the transformation that one undergoes during baptism. Lost is the understanding that one "dies" to the old life and is made new in Christ. Lost is the understanding that through baptism an individual is recreated and grafted onto the Body of Christ and becomes a living, functioning "cell" in that Body. Like a new cell in the human body, this Christological cell is also fully dependent on the rest of the Body for its life. Lost is the understanding that it is the entire Church community - the entire Body of Christ - that witnesses and partakes in this transformation into new life through baptism.

Today, baptism has essentially degenerated to "artificial new life". Just as one can remove cells from the body and culture them to make more new cells, so do we Orthodox separate and culture new members into the Body of Christ. Unfortunately, they are brought to life in the Body through an event that now takes place out of the fullness of the Body. Gone is the organic influx of life brought to the new individual by the *entire* Body of Christ who prepare, nurture, and witness this life changing event. Some may argue that today the ecclesial catechetical period occurs after baptism through the action of Sunday school, godparents, and family. That argument warrants discussion, but is beyond the scope of this essay.

To answer the question "is baptism an ecclesial event?" one must answer with a firm YES!

Just as new cells arise within the body as a function of the life of the body, so to do new members of the Body of Christ receive their new life with and through the living Body of Christ. They must be formed by the Body, witnessed to by the Body, and ultimately must dwell within the Body. To answer the question "does the actual rite today make this clear?" one must answer NO. Baptism today is a private affair for individual families, a rite of passage for an infant with little thought as to what baptism is all about. Hopefully, in the future, the church will seek to revitalize the theology of baptism, to make it a real event in the life of the Body of Christ so that each new life, each new "cell" may experience what baptism and what life in Christ is truly meant to be.

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