



# Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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## What is Baptism?

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We are called to live out our Baptism every day as the present reality of our lives. If we manage to follow Jesus and to remain in the Church, despite our limitations and with our weaknesses and our sins, it is precisely because of the Sacrament of Baptism, whereby we have become new creatures and have been clothed in Christ.

Pope Francis, [Audience, 8 January 2014](#).

### 1. What is Baptism?

Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the [Church](#) and made sharers in her mission.

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1213

### 2. Why is it called Baptism?

This sacrament is called Baptism, after the central rite by which it is carried out: to baptize (Greek *baptizein*) means to “plunge” or “immerse”; the “plunge” into the water symbolizes the catechumen’s burial into Christ’s death, from which he rises up by resurrection with him, as “a new creature” (as St Paul explains to the Corinthians and Galatians, 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15).

This sacrament is also called “the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit,” for it signifies and actually brings about the birth of water and the Spirit without which no one “can enter the kingdom of God” (as the Gospel of St John says, Jn 3:5).

Having received in Baptism the Word, “the true light that enlightens every man,” the person baptized has been “enlightened,” he becomes a “son of light,” indeed, he becomes “light” himself.

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1214-1216

### Contemplating the mystery

Through Baptism we are made bearers of the word of Christ, a word which

soothes, enkindles and reassures the wounded conscience. For Our Lord to act in us and for us, we must tell him that we are ready to struggle each day, even though we realise we are feeble and useless, and the heavy burden of our personal shortcomings and weakness weighs down upon us. We must tell him again and again that we trust in him and in his help: if necessary, like Abraham, hoping “against all hope”. Thus we will go about our work with renewed vigour, and we will teach others how to live free from worry, hate, suspicion, ignorance, misunderstandings and pessimism, because God can do everything.

*Friends of God*, no. 210

There are no second-class Christians, obliged to practise only a “simplified version” of the Gospel. We have all received the same baptism, and although there is a great variety of spiritual gifts and human situations, there is only one Spirit who distributes God’s gifts, only one faith, only one hope, only one love.

And so we can apply to ourselves the question asked by the Apostle: “Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” And we can understand it as an invitation to talk with God in a more personal and direct manner.

*Christ is Passing By*, no. 134

### **3. Why was Jesus baptized?**

The baptism performed by John the Baptist was a rite of penance and a sign of repentance, but not a sacrament.

Jesus begins his public life after having himself baptized by St John the Baptist in the Jordan.

Our Lord voluntarily submitted himself to the baptism of St John. The Spirit descended then on the Christ, and the Father revealed Jesus as his “beloved Son.”

In his Passover Christ opened to all men the fountain of Baptismal grace. After his resurrection Christ gives this mission to his apostles: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”

The fruit of Baptism, or baptismal grace, is a rich reality that includes forgiveness of original sin and all personal sins, birth into the new life by which man becomes an adoptive son of the Father, a member of Christ and a temple of the Holy Spirit.

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1223-1225, 1279

### **Contemplating the mystery**

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him ... and lo, a voice came from heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3:13,17).

In Baptism, our Father God has taken possession of our lives. He has made us sharers in Christ's life and sent us the Holy Spirit.

The strength and the power of God light up the face of the earth.

We will set the world ablaze, with the flames of the fire that you, Jesus, came to enkindle on earth! And the light of your truth, our Jesus, will enlighten men's minds in an endless day.

I can hear you crying out, my King, in your strong and ardent voice: "I have come to bring fire to the earth, and would that it were already enkindled!" And I answer, with my entire being, with all my senses and faculties: "Here I am, because you have called me!"

God has placed an indelible mark on your soul through Baptism: you are a child of God. Child, are you not aflame with the desire to bring all men to love Him?

*Holy Rosary, First Mystery of Light*

This is the great boldness of the Christian faith: to proclaim the value and dignity of human nature and to affirm that we have been created to achieve the dignity of children of God, through the grace that raises us up to a supernatural level. An incredible boldness it would be, were it not founded on the promise of salvation given us by God the Father, confirmed by the blood of Christ, and reaffirmed and made possible by the constant action of the Holy Spirit.

Together with humility, the realization of the greatness of man's dignity – and of the overwhelming fact that, by grace, we are made children of God – forms a single attitude. It is not our own forces that save us and give us life; it is the grace of God.

*Christ is Passing By, no. 133*

#### **4. When did the Church begin to baptize people?**

From the very day of Pentecost the Church has celebrated and administered holy Baptism. Indeed St. Peter declares to the crowd astounded by his preaching: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). The apostles and their collaborators offer Baptism to anyone who believed in Jesus: Jews, the God-fearing, pagans. Always, Baptism is seen as connected with faith: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household," St. Paul declared to his jailer in Philippi. And the narrative continues, the jailer "was baptized at once, with all his family."

According to the Apostle Paul, the believer enters through Baptism into communion with Christ's death, is buried with him, and rises with him:

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:3-4).

The baptized have “put on Christ.” Through the Holy Spirit, Baptism is a bath that purifies, justifies, and sanctifies.

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1226-1227

### **Contemplating the mystery**

I would like you to meditate on a fundamental point, which brings home to us the responsibility we have for our own consciences. Nobody else can choose for us: “men’s supreme dignity lies in this, that they are directed towards the good by themselves, and not by others”. Many of us have inherited the Catholic faith from our parents, and, by the grace of God, supernatural life began in our souls from the moment we were baptised as new-born infants. But we must renew throughout our lives, and every day of our lives, our determination to love God above all things. ‘He is a Christian, a true Christian, who subjects himself to the rule of the one and only Word of God,’ without laying down conditions to his obedience, and being ever ready to resist the devil’s temptings by adopting the same attitude as Christ did: ‘Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and serve none but Him.’

*Friends of God*, no. 27

An apostle – that is what a Christian is, when he knows that he has been grafted onto Christ, made one with Christ, in baptism. He has been given the capacity to carry on the battle in Christ’s name, through confirmation. He has been called to serve God by his activity in the world, because of the common priesthood of the faithful, which makes him share in some way in the priesthood of Christ. This priesthood – though essentially distinct from the ministerial priesthood – gives him the capacity to take part in the worship of the Church and to help other men in their journey to God, with the witness of his word and his example, through his prayer and work of atonement.

Each of us is to be *ipse Christus*: Christ himself. He is the one mediator between God and man. And we make ourselves one with him in order to offer all things, with him, to the Father. Our calling to be children of God, in the midst of the world, requires us not only to seek our own personal holiness, but also to go out onto all the ways of the earth, to convert them into roads that will carry souls over all obstacles and lead them to the Lord. As we take part in all temporal activities, as ordinary citizens, we are to become leaven acting on the dough.

*Christ is Passing By*, no. 120

## 5. How is Baptism celebrated?

The essential rite of the sacrament [...] signifies and actually brings about death to sin and entry into the life of the Most Holy Trinity through configuration to the Paschal mystery of Christ. Baptism is performed in the most expressive way by triple immersion in the baptismal water. However, from ancient times it has also been able to be conferred by pouring the water three times over the candidate's head.

In the Latin Church this triple infusion is accompanied by the minister's words: "N., I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." In the Eastern liturgies the catechumen turns toward the East and the priest says: "The servant of God, N., is baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." At the invocation of each person of the Most Holy Trinity, the priest immerses the candidate in the water and raises him up again.

The anointing with sacred chrism, perfumed oil consecrated by the bishop, signifies the gift of the Holy Spirit to the newly baptized, who has become a Christian, that is, one "anointed" by the Holy Spirit, incorporated into Christ who is anointed priest, prophet, and king.

In the liturgy of the Eastern Churches, the post-baptismal anointing is the sacrament of Chrismation (Confirmation). In the Roman liturgy the post-baptismal anointing announces a second anointing with sacred chrism to be conferred later by the bishop Confirmation, which will as it were "confirm" and complete the baptismal anointing.

The white garment symbolizes that the person baptized has "put on Christ," has risen with Christ. The candle, lit from the Easter candle, signifies that Christ has enlightened the neophyte. In him the baptized are "the light of the world."

The newly baptized is now, in the only Son, a child of God entitled to say the prayer of the children of God: "Our Father."

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1239-1243

### Contemplating the mystery

Baptism makes us *fideles*, faithful. This is a word that was used – like *sancti*, the saints – by the first followers of Jesus to refer to one another. These words are still used today: we speak of the *faithful* of the Church.

Think about this.

*The Forge*, no. 622

In baptism, our Father God has taken possession of our lives, has made us share in the life of Christ, and has given us the Holy Spirit. Holy Scripture tells us that God has saved us "through the baptism of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit; whom he has abundantly poured out upon us through Jesus Christ our

Saviour, in order that, justified by his grace, we may be heirs in hope to life everlasting.”

The experience of our weakness and of our failings, the painful realization of the smallness and meanness of some who call themselves Christians, the apparent failure or aimlessness of some works of apostolate, all these things which bring home to us the reality of sin and human limitation, can still be a trial of our faith. Temptation and doubt can lead us to ask: where are the strength and the power of God? When that happens we have to react by practising the virtue of hope with greater purity and forcefulness, and striving to be more faithful.

*Christ is Passing By*, no. 128

The best way of showing our gratitude to God is to be passionately in love with the fact that we are his children.

*The Forge*, no. 333

I would like us to reflect now on the sacraments, which are foundations of divine grace. They are a wonderful proof of God’s loving kindness. Just meditate calmly on the Catechism of Trent’s definition: “Certain sensible signs which cause grace and at the same time declare it by putting it before our eyes.” God our Lord is infinite; his love is inexhaustible; his clemency and tenderness toward us are limitless. He grants us his grace in many other ways, but he has expressly and freely established, as only he can do, seven effective signs to enable men to share in the merits of the redemption in a stable, simple and accessible way.

*Christ is Passing By*, no. 78