

INTRODUCTION: BAPTISM



This issue of *Communio* for the Spring 2025 issue is dedicated to Baptism, beginning a seven-year series on the meaning of the seven sacraments in the context of God's plan to recapitulate all things in Christ. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* presents the seven sacraments as "powers that come forth from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving. They are actions of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body the Church" (n. 1116). In the post-Conciliar period, there has been a renewed emphasis on the Christological and ecclesiological dimension of the sacraments. This new emphasis, however, has been accompanied by two challenges: an impoverishment in metaphysical thinking and the growth of anthropocentric, materialistic, and functionalistic ideologies. These ideologies have shut modern man off to the possibility of the transcendent. This series responds to this two-fold difficulty.

This issue on Baptism reflects on the nature of Baptism and explores many of the theological questions surrounding the sacrament, such as infant baptism, the Old Testament origins of the sacrament, and the nature of the character bestowed on us by baptism. It also includes several articles on the deeper philosophical challenges surrounding the theology of sacraments in our present time.

In "Being Born into the Body of Christ: Baptism and the Fruitful Form of the Church," **José Granados** responds to the claim that the "centrality of baptism requires a new reading of *Lumen gentium*," put forth by Christoph Theobald. In Theobald's

assessment, *Lumen gentium* maintains too great of a distinction between the clergy and the laity, and in so doing, implies that the clergy have a greater degree of sanctity than the laity. Granados responds to Theobald's concern by turning to the Biblical foundations of the sacrament of baptism. In particular he looks at the accounts of baptism in the eighth, ninth, and tenth chapters of the Book of Acts. Granados argues that the character bestowed in baptism bears within itself the entire hierarchical order of the Church, whether one is a layperson or a member of the clergy. In other words, the relationship between the laity and the clergy is not an addition brought in subsequent to a generic baptism, but is already entailed in and given by each person's baptism, which makes us members of the Eucharistic Body of Christ. The dignity that it bestows is not neutral, nor does it affect us merely as individuals. Rather, it fits us for life in Christ and the Church. To this end baptism gives us "a new capacity to judge," which is crucial for correctly understanding what is meant by the "sense of the faithful."

In "Baptism is First: Infant Baptism and the Sacramental Inversion," **Jonathan Martin Ciraulo** addresses the long disputed question of infant baptism. The question has both practical and theoretical implications for theology. It shapes how we understand the workings of grace and whether personal, conscious consent is necessary for grace to be efficacious. Ciraulo walks the reader through a history of the controversy, and then focuses on the question of infant baptism in the theology of Balthasar. For much of his life, Balthasar had acknowledged the validity of infant baptism, but expressed concerns with viewing it as normative. Towards the end of his life, however, Balthasar seemingly reverses his teaching, writing in *Unless You Become Like This Child* that it would be unjust to a child raised in the faith to be denied the grace of baptism. Ciraulo understands this later position as more consistent with Balthasar's theology taken as a whole. He demonstrates this first by exploring the treatment of water in Sacred Scripture, which understands this ubiquitous element as something that is both present within creation, while also mysteriously preceding it and being indicative of its eschatological perfection. In such a way, Ciraulo develops a theology of creation and of the sacraments (with which Balthasar would be in agreement) in which the sacraments are seen as the very reason

for which the cosmos was created. This “sacramental inversion” turns our instinctive perspective on its head: rather than being an addition within time to creation, the sacraments are rather the perfection of creation intended by God from all eternity. Given this perspective, baptism’s justification is not that a person “chooses” to relate to God, but that baptism constitutes the perfection of the order into which a person is necessarily created.

While water rituals had long been a part of Jewish theology, Christ gives water salvific power through the institution of the sacrament of baptism. Through the waters of baptism, the person becomes a “new creation”—a member of the Body of Christ. In “The Theological Meaning of Water in the Old Testament,” **Joseph C. Atkinson** considers how the use of water in the Old Testament foreshadows and prepares for the sacrament of baptism. Atkinson explores the symbolic meanings of water from Genesis to the prophets, revealing water as a “polyvalent creature” with a rich and archetypal symbolic structure. Just as the symbolic structure of the Passover illuminates our understanding of the Eucharist, so too do the Old Testament uses of water, in particular the *mikveh*, shed light on the mystery of Baptism. Yet, while Baptism is foreshadowed in the Old Testament, it is also radically new: in Christ, we come to know that God himself is the Living Water, a truth that would have puzzled and astonished first-century Jews.

“A Conversation on Baptism” records an interview between *Communio* and Bishop **Erick Varden** of Trondheim, Norway. The conversation delves into many aspects of baptism both universal and particular. It considers, for instance, the signs of hope as well as areas for pastoral outreach in current baptismal trends, as well as the theological meaning of becoming part of the Body of Christ through baptism. Bishop Varden’s perspective on baptism is refreshingly relational, rather than programmatic: in baptism, a person receives grace and a calling, which means that God is truly at work in that person’s life as a reality, not an ideal. Baptism is thus always a cause for hope in the power of God, which is infinitely greater than any human weakness or demographic trend. Baptism is not just a one-time event of our infancy, but a mission, an entering into a reality that calls one to conversion, to “expansion” into the “dimensions” of God, throughout one’s entire existence. The

baptized person must continually ask himself, as John Paul II asked the French people, “What have you done with your baptism? What has become of it?”

This question posed by Pope John Paul II to the French people is in a way taken up by **Michelina Tenace**, whose essay, “Baptism and the Mystical Life in Nicholas Cabasilas’s *The Life in Christ*,” examines the transformation a person undergoes through the sacraments of initiation, by which one is made to live in Christ. The key manifestation or expression of the life in Christ is that of mystical experience. Cabasilas’s great contribution to a theology of mysticism is his emphasis, first, that mystical experience is available to all baptized Christians in all walks of life, and not merely the spiritually “elite” who radically renounce the world; and second, that this mystical experience—which is necessarily intensely personal—does not happen apart from the life of the Church, but precisely within the liturgical and sacramental context. Tenace particularly considers the sacraments of initiation in turn: baptism as bringing one into life *in* Christ, “and not merely a life *with* Christ”; confirmation, as empowering and fulfilling the life of baptism; and Eucharist, as nourishment throughout this life. Cabasilas’s emphasis on the mystical life is strikingly characterized by a “spiritual sobriety” regarding the importance of the psychological experience of consolation or spiritual ecstasy. This insight flows from the truth of the Incarnation: “there is no longer any distance between the divine world and the human world.” It likewise is a consequence of a “spiritual optimism” regarding our participation in God’s life begun cosmically by the Incarnation and personally and ecclesially by the event of baptism. Through baptism and all the sacraments of initiation, a person enters into a new reality through union with Christ. These sacraments are best understood, then, not simply as events that occur at isolated points in the life of a Christian, but as gifts that fulfill and perfect the person ever more deeply. They do so because of what they themselves are: the very presence of Christ himself, not simply in the sense of Christ being *with* us, but as entering into the depths of our being and transforming our substance into his. In this way, if

baptism is made possible by the Resurrection, then the life in Christ is made possible by the Transfiguration.

Why is it that so many Catholics do not believe in the Real Presence? The problem is far deeper and more subtle than a simple failure of catechesis, easily reversed by a change in pedagogical practices or resources. In "Creation as a 'Monstrance of God's Real Presence': A Metaphysical Reflection on the Modern Cult of Potency and the Eucharist," **Michael Dominic Taylor** argues that the loss of belief in the Real Presence is but a symptom of the usurpation of the traditional metaphysical view by a modern one. In the classical view, actuality is understood to have primacy over potency, God's transcendence of his creation is mysteriously the way in which he is infinitely close to it, and all created realities are venerated as inherently symbolic. In the modern view, in contrast, the technological impulse inverts the actuality-potency dyad. Reality is no longer a mysterious and fecund gift most properly known through contemplation, but a formless and therefore infinitely maleable *datum* to be legitimately manipulated according to one's abilities and choice. By drawing upon the metaphysics of Aristotle, Przywara and Schindler; the theology of Balthasar, Ratzinger, and Caldecott; and the poetry of Péguy and Hopkins, Taylor defends a cosmological view in which all creatures reveal God by their being and exist as harmoniously and hierarchically ordered towards the worship of God in the liturgy. It is only in light of such a symbolic and sacramental metaphysics that the significance of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist can be recovered. As Taylor expresses it, "a necessary precondition for perceiving the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist is the ability to see the 'hidden presence' of God in Creation."

What is the meaning of Scripture, and how does one understand this meaning? Traditionally, the doctrine of the fourfold sense of Scripture provided the essential context for understanding God's word rightly. In this doctrine, the literal sense and the spiritual senses interpenetrate one another, and each sheds light on the others. In "The Senses of Scripture and the Church's Life: Reading 2 Timothy with Henri De Lubac," **William M. Wright IV** examines and clarifies the meaning of each sense of Scripture and its place in the traditional method of reading the Bible. Through the insights of de Lubac and an exegesis of the second

letter of Paul to Timothy, Wright defends the use of the fourfold sense of Scripture, clarifying the terminology of this doctrine for those who wish to rediscover it today. If Sacred Scripture is the revelation of God, which is perfectly given in the person of Christ, then the meaning of Scripture only becomes truly accessible within the life of the Body of Christ, the Church. And because it is God's disclosure of himself to those whom he has called into communion with him, this word becomes genuine Christian *paideia*: formation, and *transformation*, for those who read it as members of Christ's Body.

It is with sadness, but most of all with gratitude and hope in the resurrection, that *Communio* publishes "Toward a New Philosophy of Being (With a Gloss on Balthasar)" by the late **Roger B. Duncan**. A long-time friend of the journal, who for many years hosted one of the longest-running *Communio* Study Circles, Duncan passed away on the eve of Pentecost (May 18, 2024) after a brief illness. He considered this article an encapsulation of his most important work and hoped that it would be published in *Communio*. Although unfinished at the time of the author's death, it was brought to completion through the work of his friends and collaborators. The essay begins with an analysis of a passage from Balthasar, in which the Swiss theologian takes up the call of John Paul II for a new philosophy of being. Duncan then offers his own reflections aimed at advancing this new philosophy of being, proposing a participatory ontology in which the substance and act of existence are simultaneously given by the Trinitarian God in an act of creative love. An important implication of this understanding of being, which requires relationality to a transcendent Source to account for it, is the need for philosophy to find its completion in theology: the world exists as a communion of love, sustained in being through an act of love, by a Creator who is himself infinitely perfect love. Duncan calls us to a pursuit of metaphysics that is rooted in wonder at the gift of existence. □

—The Editors