

BAPTISM IS FIRST: INFANT BAPTISM AND THE SACRAMENTAL INVERSION

JONATHAN MARTIN CIRAULO

“Instead of conceiving the institution of baptism
as a most fitting crowning of the inherent
symbolism of water, it could be said that
baptism is the very reason for which water
was created from the beginning.”



It's the same healthy water that flows in the stalks of wheat
for the Bread.

It's the same healthy water that flows in the vines for the
Wine. . . .

It's the same collected water, it's the same water, healthy,
purified, that flows around the world.

That returns, that reappears, having flowed around my
whole creation.

It's the same collected water that bursts forth, that springs
forth.

From the new fountain, from the young wellspring.

From the spring and resurgence of hope.¹

1. Charles Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, trans. David L. Schindler, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 101.

The seven sacraments of the Church are traditionally understood to be products of dominical institution. This distinguishes them from other rites and ceremonies. That is to say, they did not exist before the Incarnation, extending as they do Christ's life across history, constituting what is known as the "age of the Church," which is an age of the sacraments *sensu scripto*. There is, of course, one major exception to this rule: "While the other sacraments took their origin after sin and because of sin, we read that the sacrament of marriage was instituted by the Lord even before sin."² Marriage is thus often known as something of a natural sacrament, a sacrament elevated by Christ and the Church, but one that is coterminous in a way with human nature, established not by the Incarnate Christ during his ministry, but by God in forming Eve from the side of Adam, and then later perfected as a symbol of the union between Christ and the Church (Eph 5).

Baptism takes its start, as the tradition would have it, by Christ sanctifying water when he was baptized by John the Baptist, and then by his direct commission to "go therefore and baptize" (Mt 28:19).³ It is thus a strictly post-Christic sacrament. In this way, it is like the gift of Christ's flesh and blood in the Eucharist, and unlike matrimony. Yet, while this is certainly true when we are discussing the ecclesial rite of baptism, which is the established means of remitting the stain of original sin and incorporating new members into the Church, the tradition has long recognized a whole series of baptisms that existed before the ecclesial sacrament, as well as a general acceptance of the sacrality of water in general and thus its fittingness for use in baptism.

In reflecting on these primordial waters, on the waters that precede not only the Church but creation itself, as well as on those eschatological waters of the heavenly Jerusalem, we may be in a better position to ask once again about the suitability of infant baptism. Baptism before explicit faith, *opus operatum* before the possibility of a personal *opus operantis*, has come under serious suspicion, not only among certain Protestants but even among the greatest lights of recent Catholic theology. Here, after

2. Peter Lombard, *The Sentences: Book 4: On the Doctrine of Signs*, trans. Giulio Silano (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2010), XXVI.1 (157).

3. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [= ST] III, q. 38, a. 1; q. 66, aa. 2 and 5.

examining the suspicion that has been cast on infant baptism in recent theology, and mounting an initial defense of the practice, we will turn to see the role of baptism in light of cosmological and biblical reflections on the purpose of water. It is in view of these cosmic and eschatological waters that we can consider again the purpose of all baptism, which always precedes us, even for those—or rather especially for those—who are baptized unawares. Ultimately, infant baptism (and, indeed, every sacrament) is best understood when seen in light of the “sacramental inversion,” an idea to be developed here, whereby the ecclesial sacraments are understood to be related, more intrinsically than is often acknowledged, with the origins and the goal of creation itself.

1. INFANT BAPTISM IN QUESTION

That the validity or appropriateness of infant baptism is in question is not itself surprising; it is not explicitly in Scripture; some of the earliest Church fathers, such as Tertullian, expressed serious concerns about the practice; it lacks a clear ecumenical consensus; and in our increasingly post-Christian context it presumes a fidelity to lifelong Christian practice that is no longer to be expected.⁴ While there was almost an ecumenical consensus even at the time of the Reformation regarding the importance of infant baptism (Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican), with only the more radical Anabaptists being an exception,⁵ in

4. For a discussion of infant baptism in Scripture, see Oscar Cullmann, *Le baptême des enfants et la doctrine biblique du baptême* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1948). For the history of infant baptism in the early Church, see the studies by Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (London: SCM Press, 1960); and *The Origins of Infant Baptism: A Further Study in Reply to Kurt Aland* (London: SCM Press, 1963). For the claim that the baptism of infants will become increasingly rare, less out of theological necessity and more out of changing cultural and religious allegiances, see David Bentley Hart, “Baptism and Cosmic Allegiance: A Brief Observation,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 457–65.

5. For a summary of the theology and liturgical practices of initiation at the Reformation, see Maxwell Johnson, “Christian Initiation in the Protestant and Catholic Reforms of the Sixteenth Century,” in *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 309–73.

the twentieth century it seems that among many leading theologians, Catholics included, infant baptism has come under suspicion. Infant baptism is now often considered to be, if not entirely illegitimate and invalid, at least a historical accident that should no longer be the norm for Christian practice. Infant baptism, it is argued, emerged as something of an expediency to accommodate the rapidly growing Church, and thus belongs as one of those artifacts—some of which are best forgotten, while others are rightly missed—of an admittedly buried Christendom. Or, to state it in the more extreme words of Markus Barth, biblical scholar and son of Karl Barth, infant baptism is “a sort of disorderly conduct of the church.”⁶

While initially a debate that was predominantly intra-Protestant (with Emil Brunner and Karl and Markus Barth on one side, and Joachim Jeremias and Oscar Cullmann on the other), Catholics too began to question the prevalence of infant baptism due to a variety of theological, pastoral, and liturgical concerns.⁷ Very rarely have Catholics called for the abolition of the practice entirely, and considering it to be invalid would obviously compromise the indisputable (from a Catholic perspective) necessity of rejecting Donatism, and the various conceptual categories that arose in the wake of that controversy (validity and liceity, *opus operatum* and *opus operantis*, the sacramental character, etc.).⁸ While some of the Catholic reevaluation emerges from the rather hackneyed critiques of Augustine and original sin, the

6. Markus Barth, “Disorderly Conduct in the Church?” *Interpretation* 16, no. 2 (1962): 207–10. This text is a book review of Jeremias’s *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*.

7. For some of this history, especially as it is taken up by Catholics after the Second Vatican Council, see Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 81–101. Kavanagh argues for the distinctiveness of the Catholic conversation on this issue, and in particular how it was affected by the restoration of the Easter Vigil (including the process and rites of initiation) by Pope Pius XII in 1951. See also Kurt Stasiak, *Return to Grace: A Theology for Infant Baptism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996).

8. A representative collection of Catholic theologians writing on infant baptism is *Christsein ohne Entscheidung oder soll die Kirche Kinder taufen?*, ed. Walter Kasper (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1970). None of the authors in this text “simply advocates for the abolition of infant baptism” (see p. 7); but neither do they offer any *apologia* whatsoever for the practice, and many of them express a general uneasiness about it.

more sophisticated questions stem from the desire to see baptism and the act of faith more closely connected, which is an obvious *desideratum* and a real dilemma for the baptism of infants.⁹ There is also the liturgical difficulty that has been created, whereby, in the West, the three sacraments of initiation (baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist) have been disconnected both temporally and theologically, as well as received out of their traditional order.¹⁰ All this said, whereas infant baptism was long a marker of Catholic identity, and something of a proof of concept for key notions in sacramental theology, it has in recent decades come under fairly wide suspicion.

The most surprising Catholic skeptic is Hans Urs von Balthasar, who, though never denying the validity of infant baptism, repeatedly cast doubt about the practice and always considered it to be an exception rather than the rule. A major impetus for his arrival at this position, undoubtedly, was his ecumenical dialogue with Karl Barth. Barth, though a Reformed theologian, and thus one who should have been open to infant baptism, as Calvin himself was a major defender of the practice, was unrelentingly opposed to it. It is thus no surprise that Balthasar says in his book on Barth that “we ought not to work from the example of the unconscious infant as our standard, which is actually exceptional.”¹¹ This question of the baptism of infants was to be a consistent theme in the dialogue between Balthasar and Barth in their decades-long friendship.

9. See Walter Kasper, “Glaube und Taufe,” in *Christsein ohne Entscheidung*, 129–59. This is also basically Karl Rahner’s position, who never explicitly speaks against infant baptism, but says that “the baptism of children reaches its full meaning and purpose only in adults” See “Baptism and the Renewal of Baptism,” *Theological Investigations*, vol. 23: *Final Writings*, trans. J. Donceel and H. Riley (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 201.

10. This leads some to feel that one must decide between either “abandon[ing] infant baptism” or alternatively, “if we are to retain infant baptism, it seems only sensible that it must be followed by infant confirmation and communion.” See Ralph A. Keifer, “Christian Initiation: The State of the Question,” in *Made, Not Born: New Perspectives on Christian Initiation and the Catechumenate* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 141. See also Aidan Kavanagh, *Confirmation: Origins and Reform* (New York: Pueblo, 1988), 97–101.

11. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 366.

However, rather than remaining an opinion that Balthasar only expresses when in dialogue with Barth or other non-Catholics, which might partially exonerate him, Balthasar incorporates his opposition to infant baptism into his own positive theological proposals, for instance in the first volume of *The Glory of the Lord*, the opening volume of his major trilogy. There, in his discussion of the various ways in which the *Gestalt* of Christ is mediated to the Church, and thus in his section on the sacraments, Balthasar states the matter unequivocally:

It is clear that the baptism of infants is inadequate as a model for the sacramental event. To say that the entrance into God's kingdom occurs unconsciously—that is, in such a way that the subject involved neither perceives nor understands Christ's gesture—is a fact so conspicuously alien to Scripture (and to the baptismal practice of the Old Testament and of John) that it must without question be regarded as an exception. *The decision for infant-baptism was perhaps the most portentous [folgenschwerste] decision in the entire history of the Church* (and that, long before Constantine).¹²

Balthasar may certainly be correct that infant baptism is inadequate as a model for the workings of sacramental grace in general (if we are to still have a *de sacramentis in genere*). The sacrament that Balthasar proposes for such a role is, instead, reconciliation.¹³ However, his claim that grace must always be received consciously, which is an outworking of his personalism and his overall proposal for an “existential sacramental theology,”¹⁴ is at odds not only with much of the tradition, but also, arguably, with other central Balthasarian commitments. Certainly, for Balthasar, all grace is given in order to be subjectively appropriated, but the

12. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 563 (emphasis added); *Herrlichkeit: Eine theologische Ästhetik*, vol. 1: *Shau der Gestalt* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1961), 557.

13. Balthasar himself noted that in the sacrament of penance “the full form of the sacramental event is made evident, plausible, visible,” and thus reconciliation “could be taken as the model for a general doctrine of the sacraments” (Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, 564).

14. See Jonathan Martin Ciraulo, *The Eucharistic Form of God: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Sacramental Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), 40–44, 85–97, and 101–07.

emphasis for Balthasar is always on the objectivity of the gift that precedes any finite reception. The gift that is given ever remains unexhausted by human cooperation.

Charles Péguy, whom Balthasar honored as the crowning voice in his survey of “clerical” and “lay styles” in *The Glory of the Lord* vols. 2 and 3,¹⁵ knew well that grace sometimes works best when it takes one unconsciously (and, because it is grace, this is *per definitionem* never an act of violence but of healing). His *Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, which meditates throughout on the “child hope” and of childhood in general, ends with his paean to night and to sleep, which he takes to be the special property of children (“Night is for children”).¹⁶ Night conspires with God to ensure the surrender of humanity, to ensure that God can find man precisely not working, not operating or even cooperating: “Because between today and tomorrow, I, God, may have passed by.”¹⁷ God continues,

O Night, O my daughter Night, the most religious of all
my daughters...
You glorify me in Sleep even more than your Brother, Day,
glorifies me in Work.
Because in work man only glorifies me by his work.
Whereas in sleep it is I who glorify myself by man's
surrender...
O my dark-eyed daughter, of all my daughters you alone
are, and can call yourself my accomplice.
You are in league with me, because you and me, me
through you,

15. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 3: *Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 400–517. The first of those surveyed was Irenaeus, and Irenaeus and Péguy are fitting bookends, as Péguy is presented as something of an Irenaeus redivivus, given the ideas of recapitulation and the theology of history (Clio) that are handled so masterfully by Péguy.

16. Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, 128. Balthasar translated *The Portal* into German as *Das Tor zum Geheimnis der Hoffnung* (Lucerne: Josef Stocker, 1943). Bernanos also pushes Balthasar toward the connection between baptism and childhood, which Balthasar says makes Bernanos into “a disciple of Péguy.” In his book *Bernanos: An Ecclesial Existence* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), Balthasar explores childhood in Bernanos, tying his reflection to both Péguy and Thérèse of Lisieux, all in a section of the book on baptism (313–34). This did not seem to immediately cause Balthasar to radically reconsider his hesitancy with regard to infant baptism.

17. Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, 127.

Together we cause man to fall into the trap of my arms
And we take him a bit by surprise.¹⁸

As cited in the epigraph, this reflection on night is connected to his reflection on water earlier in the poem, as both for Péguy are images of the enveloping grace of God, which precedes the brief day of man's work, the small island in the midst of the waters of God's grace.

We could say that Balthasar's general hesitancy regarding infant baptism also stands uneasily with his theology of mission (whereby *being called* always comes before personal aspiration or even dispositions),¹⁹ his Mariology (whereby the feminine *Antwort* is a response to the prior *Wort* of divine initiative), his insistence on the universal salvific will of God, which is the basis, of course, for his proposal of a hope for the salvation of all, and his reflections on the smile of the mother, which precedes and then gives rise to the response of the child.²⁰ In each of these cases, to be sure, he provides a defense of the necessity of finite freedom, of human cooperation with the divine initiative (accepting one's mission; Mary's *fiat*; human cooperation in the work of salvation), but this is perfectly in line with infant baptism, whereby the antecedent nature of the graces given enables one, even if at some temporal distance, to accept and live out such a grace.

18. Ibid., 132 and 133.

19. For instance, note his experience in 1927, when on retreat with the Jesuits outside of Basel: "You have nothing to choose, you have been chosen; you do not need anything, you are needed; you do not need to make any plans, you are a pebble in a mosaic that already exists." Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Por qué me hice sacerdote," in *Por qué me hice sacerdote*, ed. Jorge Sans Vila and Ramón María Sans Vila (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1959), 14–15, trans. mine.

20. For one representative locus of his writings on the smile of the mother, see *Love Alone Is Credible* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 76: "After a mother has smiled at her child for many days and weeks, she finally receives her child's smile in response. She has awakened love in the heart of her child." Conor Sweeney uses Balthasar and this notion of the mother's smile for sacramental theology in a direct way in *Sacramental Presence after Heidegger: Onto-theology, Sacraments, and the Mother's Smile* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015). There are several major influences on Balthasar's theology of childhood, above all Rudolf Allers, Gustav Siewerth (*Metaphysik der Kindheit* [Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1957]), and Ferdinand Ulrich (see the recent translation *Man in the Beginning: Toward a Philosophical Anthropology of Childhood*, in *Three Short Works* [Washington, DC: Humanum Academic Press, 2024], 55–172).

Nevertheless, Balthasar held firm to his view that infant baptism was an exception, repeating it almost as a mantra throughout his career, from as early as 1941 to the last volume of the *Theo-logic* in 1987. Balthasar wrote a letter to Karl Barth in the summer of 1941 in which he says that “infant baptism is certainly a borderline case, and not the norm.”²¹ In 1961, the same year as *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, which we already cited, he says again that infant baptism is “what is most difficult to grasp of all the various decisions in the Church’s history.”²² Finally, the year before his death, in the final major volume of his trilogy, Balthasar once again calls infant baptism a “borderline situation.”²³

Yet, in a small book published just before his death, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, Balthasar writes what is undoubtedly his most positive evaluation of infant baptism. In this reflection on childhood, for the first time Balthasar does not feel the need to demote the practice or to note its marginal status, but instead says, rather startlingly given his previous statements:

The newborn child that is baptized is taken up at a fundamental level into the all-embracing and sheltering community of saints. . . . It would be unjust toward children to introduce them to Christian teaching and existence only as little pagans and catechumens, in order to leave it up to them to choose the Faith on their own responsibility at

21. “Kindertaufe ist gewiss Grenz- und nicht Normalfall.” Manfred Lochbrunner, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologen-kollegen: Sechs Beziehungs-schichten* (Würzburg: Echter, 2009), 281. This letter was sent during the same summer that Barth invited Balthasar to join his seminar on the sacramental theology of the Council of Trent. In addition to Lochbrunner, see D. Stephen Long, *Saving Karl Barth: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Preoccupation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 243–65.

22. Balthasar, “The Contemporary Experience of the Church,” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 2: *Spouse of the Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 16. To illustrate once more how much Balthasar and Barth were mutually influential, it is precisely this text that Barth will cite in *Church Dogmatics* IV.4 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 164. Barth writes a letter to Balthasar to thank him and to say that his text was being incorporated into the *Church Dogmatics*. See Lochbrunner, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologen-kollegen*, 346–47.

23. Balthasar, *Theo-logic: Theological Logical Theory*, vol. 3: *The Spirit of Truth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 335.

a point in time difficult to determine. For one thing, to attain to the very maturity in question they need the grace of baptism.²⁴

Without any announcement, without fanfare, Balthasar changes his perspective from infant baptism as marginal and exceptional to it being necessary and a matter of justice to children. Perhaps spying a solution to his original dilemma, namely, the disparity between the gift given and the supposed lack of faith in the recipient, Balthasar says, “Nor ought we to forget that from his very origin the child possesses something like an incontrovertible faith-instinct.”²⁵ To baptize a child then is ultimately to hand it over to divine protection: “The Church has the competency to hand over a man to God and thus entrust him also to God’s fatherly care.”²⁶

Looking back over his career, and his repeated denunciations of infant baptism, in light of this final statement, we can perhaps see that Balthasar was always open to a possible justification of the practice, even if he never developed one himself. For example, in his 1941 letter to Barth, when he calls it a “borderline case,” he then says rather cryptically: “But there is still something to be learned from this border. Here this will perhaps tie in with the next and final question: grace as ‘being,’ *agere sequitur esse* [action follows being] etc. I am curious (*gespannt*)!”²⁷ Does not the action (*agere*) of a receptive faith not follow upon the grace of being (*esse*) that has preceded it? Even in *The Glory of the Lord* vol. 1, after severely downgrading the necessity or even value of infant baptism, Balthasar admits that it is theoretically defensible:

The sole theological justification could be found in the fact “that Christ died for us while we were still sinners” (Rom 5:8) without obtaining our prior consent, something which is all the more true of the mystery of predestination

24. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 41.

25. *Ibid.*, 42.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Lochbrunner, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologen-kollegen*, 281.

“before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4). If we were to justify successfully the incorporation of an infant into the visible Church on the grounds of this universal cosmic perspective (*allgemein-kosmischen Standpunkt*), we would also by the same token have to bring to light the universal cosmic character (*allweltlichen Charakter*) of the Church and its responsibility towards all humanity; the reception of the sacraments before the age of reason would then have to be seen in the light of this responsibility.²⁸

Balthasar himself never explicitly develops this “universal cosmic perspective” on baptism. In what follows here, then, this is precisely what we shall attempt to provide, however summarily. The ecclesiological aspects, which Balthasar rightly notes would be attendant upon such a position, will not be explored in detail. But if the baptismal waters are those same waters that precede creation itself, then these waters need to be considered as the waters of the Church, the *ecclesia ab Abel*, that Church that appears “old,” for, as the Shepherd of Hermas reports, “she was created the first of all things. For this reason she is old; and for her sake the world was established.”²⁹

2. THE WATERS THAT PRECEDE CREATION

The primordial sacrality of water is not something found firstly in Jewish or Christian revelation. It belongs, rather, to that deposit of natural symbolism that is shared by humanity as a whole.³⁰ There is thus a common set of metaphors that frequently attend water:

28. Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, 563–64; *Herrlichkeit*, 558.

29. Shepherd of Hermas, “Vision 2.4.1,” in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2, trans. Kirsopp Lake (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), 25. The universal cosmic character of the Church is perhaps best, and most influentially, expressed in Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

30. Of course, one should be wary of the temptation toward the perennialism or traditionalism of the likes of René Guénon, which strips religions, including Christianity, of their particularities and reduces them to their supposed share of the one perennial tradition. See Jean Borella, *Christ the Original Mystery: Esotericism and the Mystical Way* (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2018); and *The Crisis of Religious Symbolism* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2016).

The waters symbolize the universal sum of virtualities; they are *fons et origo*, “spring and origin,” the reservoir of all the possibilities of existence; they precede every form and *support* every creation. . . . In whatever religious complex we find them, the waters invariably retain their function; they disintegrate, abolish forms, “wash away sins”; they are at once purifying and regenerating. Their destiny is to precede the Creation and reabsorb it.³¹

One thinks immediately, of course, of Thales of Miletus, who believed that the principle of all things is water. Aristotle speculates on the biological origin of such an idea: “[Thales conceived of] the notion perhaps from seeing that the nutriment of all things is moist.”³² The modern search for life on other planets will corroborate this fact, as the first question regarding any possibly habitable planet has always been the presence of water. The primordial nature of water is ubiquitous throughout human cultures, whether Hindu, Chinese, or Muslim, and of course ritual ablutions are an almost universal feature of religious life.³³ But if indeed hydrophilia is an anthropological constant, with recurrent themes of creation, cleansing, and death, it will be a given that similar themes are also to be found in Scripture and the Christian tradition, however elevated and specified in light of revelation.

The Scriptures as a whole are framed by water. Water precedes creation in Genesis: “When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, ‘Let there be light’” (Gn 1:1–3a).³⁴ Creation then proceeds as a separation of the waters, from the waters above (the firmament) to the waters below (the sea). The second creation narrative begins with a paucity of life due to the absence

31. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1987), 130–31 (emphasis original).

32. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.983 b20–28, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 1556.

33. For some key references to the cross-cultural symbolism and ritual use of water, see “water” in Jean Chevalier and Alain Cheerbrant, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 1081–89.

34. Tanakh translation. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Scripture are taken from the Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (RSVCE).

of water (“for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth” [Gn 2:5]). It is only when the water comes up from the earth that man can be formed from the dust of the ground. These waters from Genesis are often read as *prima materia*, as water lacks its own form, taking instead the form of other forms, as Augustine and Aquinas both say.³⁵ As Paul Claudel exclaims regarding water: “The every element! The prime matter! It is the mother, of which I speak, that I need!”³⁶ It thus is the basis, the origin of all that is, as it lends itself to the shape of all things.

In addition to being the waters of origin, they are also the waters of consummation: “And he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water without price from the fountain of the water of life.’ . . . Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb” (Rv 21:6, 22:1).³⁷ Although it is true that aqueous symbolism most certainly involves death and destruction, Scripture is framed first of all by the primordial waters from which all things are formed and by the eschatological waters in which all are brought into union in the city of God.

It is not possible to fully discuss the various ways in which Scripture portrays the life of Israel and the Church as “between” the waters: the unformed waters of creation and the eschatological

35. “So then the first thing to be made was basic material, unsorted and unformed, out of which all the things would be made which have been sorted out and formed; I think the Greeks call it *chaos*.” Augustine, *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees* 1.9, in *On Genesis*, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2006), 45. The “basic material” for creation is water because of its “mobile plasticity and the way it itself turns into any living, growing body.” See Augustine, *Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis* 14, in *On Genesis*, 121; *ST I*, q. 66, a. 1.

36. Paul Claudel, *Cinq grandes odes: suivies d'un processionnel pour saluer le siècle nouveau* (Paris: Nouvelle Revue Française, 1913), 48. For more on Claudel's love of water, see Jennifer Newsome Martin, ““These Desiring Waters”: The Hydrophilia of Claudel, Bachelard, and Chrétien,” in *Finitude's Wounded Praise: Responses to Jean-Louis Chrétien*, ed. Philip J. P. Gonzales and Joseph M. McMeans (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2023), 93–120; and Thomas Pfau, “Une parole totalement intelligible: Paul Claudel's Cosmic Poetics,” *The New Ressourcement* 1, no. 4 (Winter 2024).

37. For a trinitarian reading of Revelation 22:1, with a detailed exploration of the association between Spirit and the water from the throne, see Brant Pitre, “Jesus, John the Theologian, and the Jewish Roots of the Filioque,” in *The New Ressourcement* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2024): 21–45.

waters from the throne of God; the waters above and the waters below; the flood of Noah and the bow in the cloud as a sign of the covenant; the waters between which the Israelites escaped Egypt (“the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left,” [Ex 14:22]); the baptism of John and the baptism of Christ; and the first birth from the mother’s womb and the birth from water and the Spirit. This panoply of waters was often noted by the Fathers, leading some, like John of Damascus, to enumerate no fewer than eight principal baptisms: the flood, the sea and cloud of the Exodus, the ablutions of the Law, the baptism of John, the baptism of the Lord, the baptism of repentance, the baptism of blood, and the final eschatological cleansing.³⁸ And, of course, any number of aqueous events in the life of Christ could be added: the miracle at Cana, the woman at the well, walking on the water, the healing at the pool of Silo’am, the washing of the disciples’ feet, and the water that comes forth from the side of Jesus on the Cross.³⁹

One can say, then, that it is water that is first, water which is then taken up into the various baptisms and particularly the baptismal rite that incorporates new members into the Church. This would be to confirm the words of St. Paul: “But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual” (1 Cor 15:46). Water is, in this view, a fitting and suitable tool, one that lends itself rather easily to spiritual purposes. It is laden with significance in itself as a created reality, which explains its universal religious usage, the significance of which is readily incorporated into the theological framework of Christian faith. Water then takes precedence, but a precedence that is confined to providing the material and the symbolism for a spiritual effect. One can see this material precedence in the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch: “And as they went along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?’” (Acts 8:36).⁴⁰ In addition to the symbolic valences that are eminently suitable for baptism (cleansing, death),

38. John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith*, §82, trans. Norman Russell (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2022), 240–41.

39. All of which are in the gospel of John. See Larry Paul Jones, *The Symbol of Water in the Gospel of John* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

40. We could also add the baptism of John: “John also was baptizing at Ae’non near Sa’lim, because there was much water there” (Jn 3:23).

water is seen to be the chosen instrument for such a sacrament precisely because of its ubiquity: “because by being so universal and abundant, it is a matter suitable to our need of this sacrament: for it can easily be obtained everywhere.”⁴¹

In order better to justify infant baptism, Balthasar knew it was necessary to maintain just such a “universal cosmic perspective,” the beginnings of which can be intimated in this conception of the primordial waters that are elevated by baptism. This perspective allows us to see the prevalence of the sacred waters, which precede us and toward which we are ever moving. It is not only the one who has consciously made a profession of faith who is a suitable candidate for the waters of baptism, but all who inhabit this space “between” the various waters that frame human life and history as a whole. The waters do not only stand in front of us, as a mature decision that can and should be made, but always come before us, precede us, and shape us. Water is, in a real sense, an image of being itself, and being precedes our action: *agere sequitur esse*. Nevertheless, arguably there is a further step that might still be taken, one that is not in direct conflict with such a perspective, although it ultimately is its inversion. It is the same inversion that happens when one transitions from seeing the Church as an institution that culminates a prior history to seeing it as that for which the world was created in the first place. Instead of conceiving the institution of baptism as a most fitting crowning of the inherent symbolism of water, it could be said that baptism is the very reason for which water was created from the beginning.

3. THE SACRAMENTAL INVERSION

Tertullian’s *De baptismo* exemplifies everything we have thus far discussed, and it also opens us to an inversion of the usual sequence. His treatise begins with a proposal to investigate “the significance of the liquid element,” which quickly becomes a great encomium to water.⁴² “You are bound, my friend, to have in reverence first the antiquity of the waters, that they are an

41. *ST III*, q. 66, a. 3 co.

42. Tertullian, *Tertullian’s Homily on Baptism*, ed. Ernest Evans (London: SPCK, 1964), 3.7.

ancient thing, and then the honour done them, that they are the resting place of the Spirit of God, more pleasing to him at that time [referring to Genesis 1] than the other elements.”⁴³ Tertullian then rehearses the great aqueous moments of creation and salvation history, leading him to catch himself as his praise for water almost exceeds its proper bounds: “I fear I should seem to have composed a panegyric on water in preference to the doctrine of baptism.”⁴⁴ As becomes clear, however, his praise for water is itself a praise of baptism, not only because the waters of creation are the same genus as the waters of baptism, but also because in light of what is true of water in general, we should not be surprised to learn that, in baptism, water “knows how to animate.”⁴⁵

Tertullian sees water as not only fitting, but as especially created to be the dwelling place of the Spirit. For the Spirit was borne on the waters from the beginning (Gn 1:2), just as he will dwell upon the baptismal waters.⁴⁶ He envisages water as inherently *capax spiritus*, as having a certain disponibility to being acted upon as a pure medium of the spirit, because of its “subtlety” and its ability to be penetrated and inhered: “all waters, when God is invoked, acquire the sacred significance of conveying sanctity: for at once the Spirit comes down from heaven and stays upon the waters, sanctifying them from within himself, and when thus sanctified they absorb the power of sanctifying.”⁴⁷ But this availability for spirit, although designed to be taken up by the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning and as it is in baptism, also means that water is also uniquely suited to being taken up by malignant spirits, which is how Tertullian evaluates the morphologically similar ablution rites of the pagans. We could speculate that Thales’s claim regarding water as the originating principle might (if indeed both sayings truly are attributable to Thales) be

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid., 3.9.

45. Ibid., 3.8–9. “Ne mirum sit in baptismo si aquae animare noverunt” (translation slightly modified).

46. Ibid., 4.9: “Dei spiritum qui ab initio super aquas vectabatur super aquas intinctorem moraturum.”

47. Ibid., 4.11.

related to his other claim that “all things are full of gods.”⁴⁸ The fact that water is “unformed,” which makes it that image of *prima materia* from which all things are shaped, means that it cries out for indwelling by the Spirit, which is achieved most perfectly in the waters of baptism.⁴⁹

Tertullian, like John of Damascus later, freely sees the events of the Old Testament (flood, crossing the Red Sea) as kinds of baptism. But these are all types, figures, that are fully manifest in the sacrament of baptism.⁵⁰ The sacred history of water is only understood aright when seen in the full light of Christ. Christ, Tertullian says remarkably, is never without water: *numquam sine aqua Christus*.⁵¹ Christ is never without water because his humanity is the fulfillment of the Spirit hovering over the primordial waters: he is conceived by the power of the Spirit, always led by the Spirit, and his body, particularly after the resurrection, is entirely pneumatic, entirely shaped by the Spirit. For Tertullian, Christ’s sanctification of the waters means that all the sacred waters of the past point toward and find their fulfillment in him. Thus, Tertullian does not read the sequence of 1 Corinthians 15:46 (“But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual”) as an indication that the physical has precedence over things spiritual, as if the New Adam is dependent upon, or is a type for, the first Adam. Instead, it is precisely the reverse: “the general rule [is] that carnal things always come first as examples (*in figura*) of things spiritual.”⁵² This

48. Aristotle, *On the Soul* 1.411a7, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 1, 655.

49. The waters thus also have to be exorcised, and the Spirit must cast out the presence of demons who also inhabit the waters. The stilling of the waters and Christ walking on the waters could be read in precisely this way. Note also one of the prayers in the Byzantine tradition: “[Christ] who alone was pure and undefiled becoming man purifies our purification in the Jordan, sanctifying me and the waters and crushing the heads of the dragons in the water.” As translated in Appendix F of Nicholas Denysenko, *The Blessing of Waters and Epiphany: The Eastern Liturgical Tradition* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 209.

50. Tertullian, *Homily on Baptism*, 9.18–19: “Quae figura manifestior in baptismi sacramento.”

51. *Ibid.*, 9.20–21.

52. *Ibid.*, 5.15.

was stated earlier in 1 Corinthians, when Paul notes how the Israelites were baptized (ἐβαπτίσαντο) in the cloud and the sea, and then “drank from the spiritual (πνευματικῆς) rock which followed them, and the rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:5). These prior waters, then, are types (τύποι, *in figura* [1 Cor 10:6]). The physical does indeed come first, but only as types that are impressions of the fullness of Christ. Christ is not a type for Adam, but rather Adam “was a type (τύπος, *forma*) of the one who was to come” (Rom 5:14).

What Paul speaks of here is what we may call the “sacramental inversion,” whereby our ordinary conception of how grace builds upon nature is reversed, giving grace the priority in the *ordo essendi*, even if it is only manifest second in the *ordo inveniendi*. As Tertullian and many of the Church Fathers suggest, all prior baptisms, all other ablution rites, are at best so many figures for the reality of ecclesial baptism: “The Apostle proclaims many kinds of baptism, but *one baptism*. . . . The figure itself was of benefit to us, since it is an indication of the truth.”⁵³ As just noted, this is also evident throughout the writings of Paul, but such an inversion stems ultimately from Christ himself, who interprets not only the Mosaic covenant, but also nature itself, in light of himself.

“Bread” can be spoken of in many ways, and Jesus provided the ordinary sustenance of the barley loaves in the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, which leads eventually to a discussion of another kind of bread: “Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat’” (Jn 6:31). But if ordinary bread is then relativized in light of the manna from the desert, Jesus completes the sacramental inversion by stating that all bread, no matter its terrestrial or celestial origin, is merely a type of himself: “I am the living bread which came down from heaven” (Jn 6:51a). He spoke similarly earlier, with the Samaritan woman at the well, whereby the water at the bottom of the well, the water that sustains biological life, is seen to be only a shadow and image of true water: “Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water

53. Ambrose, *The Sacraments* 2.1, in *Saint Ambrose: Theological and Dogmatic Works*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 279–80.

that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:13–14).

This inversion of perspective is to see that the matter for the various sacraments only comes fully to light when they are in-formed by God. It is not the case that sacraments elevate realities that are otherwise natural symbols, which would then imbue them with an efficaciousness that sufficiently corresponds to their natural symbolism (water as cleansing, bread as nourishing). Rather, the sacramental inversion would reveal that the natural symbolism was created precisely for the purpose of being the matter for the operation of God. It is not then that the Church follows and crowns the world, but that the world was made in order to be the Church (as in the Shepherd of Hermas’s vision). We see this same logic play out elsewhere. For instance: does Scripture describe the union between Christ and the Church as the union of Bridegroom and Bride simply because this is an apt metaphor drawn from the natural world, or is it rather that the union between man and woman is a foreshadowing and type of the *Totus Christus*? Paul seems to suggest the latter: “This is a great mystery (*mysterion/sacramentum*), and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church” (Eph 5:32).⁵⁴ We could perhaps speak similarly of the priesthood and the liturgy, as the cosmos is not merely *capax liturgiae*, but created precisely to glorify God.⁵⁵

To return to our theme of the waters of baptism, John of Damascus again seems to suggest precisely such an inversion: “Then God commanded the first water to bring forth living soul, *because* (ἐπειδὴ) he intended to renew humanity through water and the Holy Spirit that in the beginning moved over the

54. We could also add, “The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body” (1 Cor 6:13).

55. See Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), esp. 14–16. One also thinks of the rather startling claim by Paul Claudel, which is perhaps more suited to contemplation than speculation: “Besides I do not believe there were no carnivorous animals in the Earthly Paradise, and that lions fed on fruit and vegetables. Their perfection lying in eating sheep, and the sheep’s perfection in being eaten, they did not fail one another. And who knows if this law that creatures cannot live without devouring one another be not a dim parable of the Sacrifice and the Communion?” See *Ways and Crossways* (Providence, RI: Cluny, 2020), 75.

waters.”⁵⁶ The biological utility of water is a consequence of the baptism to be revealed by Christ, which finds its consummation in the eschatological waters that flow from the throne in the New Jerusalem. Such an inversion seems to be implied in liturgical texts as well, such as the current blessing of waters at the Easter Vigil in the Roman Rite: “O God, who by invisible power accomplish a wondrous effect through sacramental signs and who in many ways have prepared water, your creation, to show forth the grace of Baptism.” Water is not chosen for baptism as if it were simply the best medium out of several other possibilities, but has instead been especially prepared precisely so as to incorporate members into the mystical Body of Christ.

Because our language for God is drawn from human experience, and is thus analogically predicated of God (e.g., “Father,” “Son”), it is indeed partly true that God is in the image of man. Without a reversal of this perspective, however, Feuerbach’s reduction of theology to anthropology would follow as a matter of course. Ultimately, of course, it is man who is made in the image of God, which is the condition for the possibility of our analogical predication in the first place. For instance, while biological fathers are first in human experience, and provide the metaphor for describing God as “Father,” ultimately it must be said that fatherhood is true firstly of God and only derivatively of human fathers.⁵⁷ The created order has its proper form, but this is preliminary, preparatory. It is never fully formed, it does not arrive at its intended shape, until God becomes all in all: “we know that the whole creation has been groaning with labor pains together until now” (Rom 8:22). Balthasar certainly agrees,

The revelation of the triune God in Christ is not simply, to be sure, the prolongation or the intensification of the revelation in the creation; but, in their essence, they are so far from contradicting one another that, considered from the standpoint of God’s ultimate plan, the revelation in the creation is seen to have occurred for the sake of the revelation in Christ, serving as the preparation that made it possible.⁵⁸

56. John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith*, §23, p. 119.

57. See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §239.

58. Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, 421.

The springs of life, the waters without which biological life would be unthinkable, were made not only to sustain this rudimentary life ("Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again," Jn 4:13) but to serve as the waters of eternal life.

4. INFANT BAPTISM RECONSIDERED

Such is a sketch for what Balthasar might have meant by a "universal-cosmic" perspective on baptism. It may not be immediately apparent how such a view, even with this "sacramental inversion," would shed any light on the question of infant baptism. In fact, if Tertullian is a proponent of such an inversion, he clearly did not think that it corresponded to the necessity or even advisability of infant baptism. Tertullian, of course, is both one of the very first explicit witnesses to the practice of infant baptism, but also simultaneously its first critic. While his writing is not a wholesale denunciation of the practice (and not what later tradition would call a denial of its validity), Tertullian, like Balthasar and many others who want to see an explicit correspondence between baptism and a conscious act of faith, says, "let them be made Christians when they have become competent to know Christ."⁵⁹ Before making a defense of infant baptism from the framework we have established here, we need to attend briefly to the real demerits of Tertullian's critique.

Tertullian proffers several reasons to delay baptism. First, he suggests that both the infants and their sponsors will be subjected to needless peril should the baptizand fall away from the faith and into the habits of sin. This seems to follow particularly from a difficulty in accounting for post-baptismal sins, which would lead in the centuries following Tertullian to the practice of delaying baptism until death.⁶⁰ Even without the development of the theology and the practice of reconciliation, this argument is rather tenuous, given that no one, no matter one's age, is ever given the assurance of perduring in the faith. Related to this is Tertullian's rather surprising claim, which is incongruous with

59. Tertullian, *Homily on Baptism* 18.39.

60. As Evans suggests. See "Notes and Commentary," in Tertullian, *Homily on Baptism*, 104–5.

his praise of baptism earlier in the text, that baptism is a burden that is not to be foisted upon others heedlessly: "All who understand what a burden baptism is will have more fear of obtaining it than of its postponement."⁶¹ To this one only need to respond to Tertullian with his own words from the beginning of *De baptismo*: "But we, being little fishes, as Jesus Christ is our great Fish, begin our life in the water, and only while we abide in the water are we safe and sound."⁶² Is the water a burden to the fish?⁶³

More importantly, as this will again be used in almost all later rejections of the baptism of infants, Tertullian says, "Let them first learn how to ask for salvation, so that you may be seen to have given to one that asketh."⁶⁴ In other words, baptism should follow and not precede faith and desire. One must first know how to ask before one can receive. This, however, gives precedence not to divine condescension and the gift of grace, but to human initiative. Christ, in contrast, teaches us plainly, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (Jn 15:16). It is also not clear that we ever, even as mature adults, know how to ask for what we need, as it is the Spirit who precedes us who knows how to ask: "for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:26). Or, as Claudel will write, "My God, have mercy on these desiring waters! My God, you see that I am not only spirit, but water! Have mercy on these waters in me that die of thirst! And the spirit is desiring, but the water is what it

61. Tertullian, *Homily on Baptism* 18.39–41. The word for burden here is *pondus*, which could indeed be translated as "importance," although we follow Evans here in preferring burden, given the context of the passage, particularly the emphasis on fear. See Evans, "Notes and Commentary," 105–6.

62. Tertullian, *Homily on Baptism* 1.5. Tertullian uses the Greek for fish in reference to Jesus here (ἰχθῦς), playing of course both on baptism and on the well-known acronym.

63. We can allow Gregory Nazianzus to respond to Tertullian on this point: "Do you have a small child? Let evil not seize this time, let him be sanctified from babyhood, let him be consecrated by the Spirit from when his nails grow. Have you been afraid of the seal because of the weakness of nature? You are a mother of small soul and weak faith. . . . Give your child the Trinity, the great and beautiful safeguard." *Oration 40: On Baptism*, 17, in *Festal Orations* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008), 112.

64. Tertullian, *Homily on Baptism*, 18.39.

desires.”⁶⁵ This Spirit, the *Creator Spiritus*, is the one who hovered over the waters before creation had any form, and it is this same Spirit that sanctifies the waters of baptism for those, of whatever stature, who are immersed in them. As *Pastoralis actio*, the 1980 document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on infant baptism, explains, “baptism is a manifestation of the Father’s prevenient love.”⁶⁶

Even at an anthropological level, it is clear that there is no violence done per se to a child by inducting it into the patterns of life and religious commitments of the society into which it is born. It is only a society sick with the delusions of autonomy that would reflexively think otherwise (or that such a cultural vacuum would be possible in the first place). Nevertheless, baptism is more than an initiatory rite into one particular religious group. In light of what we have outlined above, this second birth by water and the Spirit is actually the true birth in relation to which biological birth appears to be a distant echo and shadow. Baptism is then not an imposition or alteration of nature, but its fulfillment. And the so-called burdens imposed by such an initiation are not different from those already implied by biological birth as a creature of God: “Those who claim that the sacrament of Baptism compromises a child’s freedom forget that every individual, baptized or not, is, as a creature, bound by indefeasible duties to God, duties which Baptism ratifies and ennobles through the adoption as a child of God.”⁶⁷ Baptism is not a heteronomous imposition that creates unrealistic obligations on unsuspecting and unwilling children, consigning them to a life of either apostasy or misery; if it were, it would surely need to be abolished, and not just for children. Instead, baptism as an initiation into the Kingdom of God (“Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven,” Mt 19:14) is what makes people free to seek fulfillment according to the nature they are created with in the first place,

65. Claudel, *Cinq grandes odes*, 65.

66. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Pastoralis actio* (October 20, 1980), §9, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19801020_pastoralis_actio_en.html.

67. *Pastoralis actio*, §22.

not only by freeing them from sin but also by making them children of God and brothers and sisters to Christ: “creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Rom 8:21).⁶⁸

Ultimately, however, regardless of the pastoral or ecumenical concerns that are also rightly brought into the conversation, the theological denial of infant baptism also often carries with it an overwrought and dubious distinction between the capacities of reception inherent to the child and to the adult. Even the traditional defenses of infant baptism seemingly accept the notion that the deficit or lack of cooperation on the part of the child must be supplied in kind elsewhere, for instance by the godparents or parents. Important as that is to ensure that the child will be raised in the faith, and as true as it is as a reminder about the union of the mystical body, this should not be understood as if there is a definite threshold of subjective faith that adequately corresponds to the gift of grace in baptism. If there were, then we would be tempted to understand the baptism of adults, which would necessarily be the norm for all baptism, as the moment when a mature and saving Christian faith exteriorizes and solemnizes itself in an ecclesial rite. This is, of course, the rather coherent view of the Anabaptists, a view that is as coherent as it is at odds with nearly universal sacramental theology and practice. Instead, it must ever be stated with some insistence that while human cooperation is the goal and purpose of all grace, it is not itself the cause of grace. The grace of baptism is indeed intended to be received fruitfully, but no soil, whether rocky, thorny, or even good, is able to supply for itself a seed if the seed is not first given to it by a sower (Mt 13:3–9). The *opus operatum*, the gift of new life in the Spirit, always precedes any *opus operantis*, subjective ratification and acceptance of such a gift, and this is true at any age. As the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith expresses it, “Baptism is not just a sign of faith but also a cause of faith.”⁶⁹

68. We have not dealt with the question of the necessity of baptism for salvation here. See the recent work of Anthony R. Lusvardi, SJ, *Baptism of Desire and Christian Salvation* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2024).

69. *Pastoralis actio*, §18.

The waters precede creation in general and the creation of man in particular. Water is the condition of the possibility of biological life as it also is for the spiritual life. While it is possible to consider one's life as enframed by the waters of the womb and the dissolving waters that will return the body to dust upon death, the sacramental inversion speaks of a different aqueous enframing. The waters of the womb are only a prefiguration and shadow of the true waters of birth, the new life given in baptism; and the dissolving waters of the tomb are only penultimate, anticipating as they do that "river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb" (Rv 22:1). The waters over which the Spirit brooded before creation, that unformed *prima materia* from which all things spring, is ever moving toward those eschatological waters, when matter becomes entirely permeable to the informing of the Spirit. The saving work of God enfolds history in general, and thus each human life in particular. Whenever a spark of conscious faith arises, it is only catching up, only belatedly becoming aware of the fact that such a faith is derivative of a gift already given. *Agere sequitur esse*. Perhaps nowhere is this seen more evidently than in the baptism of those without the mature use of reason (not only infants, but all those who are *non sui compos*), as such a baptism is a manifestation of "God's initiative and the gratuitous character of the love with which He surrounds our lives."⁷⁰

Just as Adam awakens to consciousness after being formed from the waters, all the baptized, no matter their age, are given the possibility for true consciousness, true enlightenment (φωτισμός)⁷¹ by the sanctified waters that have preceded them. One indeed must act, must cooperate in the work of salvation, must choose a life of virtue and spurn vice, but before these actions, before these choices, is the fact of being acted upon, being formed, and thus being chosen "before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless" (Eph 1:4). The breath of life that God breathes into Adam (Gn 2:7), while also the animating principle of biological life, is a prefiguration of that Spirit that God will pour out on all flesh (Jl 2:28, Acts 2:17),

70. *Pastoralis actio*, §26. See also the *Code of Canon Law*, 852, §2.

71. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61.

which is inseparable from the waters of that same Spirit: “Water continues the spirit, and supports and feeds it, / and between all of your creatures and you is a liquid bond.”⁷² □

JONATHAN MARTIN CIRAULO is associate professor of systematic theology at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC.

72. Claudel, *Cinq grandes odes*, 58–59.