"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." -John 3:5

"[In] the birth by water and the Spirit, Jesus himself led the way in this birth, drawing down upon the water, by his own baptism, the Holy Spirit; so that in all things he became the firstborn of those who are spiritually born again, and gave the name of brethren to those who partook in a birth like to his own by water and the Spirit" -St. Gregory of Nyssa, Against Eunomius 2:8 ,A.D. 382

1. Sacraments of Christian Initiation

Of the seven sacraments, Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist are referred to as the "sacraments of Christian initiation" because it is by reception of these three sacraments that a person is fully received into communion with the Church and is made a partaker in the divine life of Christ.

"The sharing in the divine nature given to men through the grace of Christ bears a certain likeness to the origin, development, and nourishing of natural life…by means of these sacraments of Christian initiation, they thus receive in increasing measure the treasures of divine life and advance toward the perfection of charity" (CCC 1212).

Of the three sacraments of initiation, Baptism and Confirmation are unrepeatable and give the recipient an indelible mark. The third sacrament of initiation, Eucharist, will be looked at separately next time.

2. Baptism – Etymology

The word "baptize" means to plunge or immerse; the "plunge"[1] into the water symbolizes the catechumen's burial into Christ's death, from which he rises up with Him as a "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17).

Baptism was prefigured several places in the Old Testament. The Church Fathers saw it symbolized:

- In creation, where water was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit (Gen.1:2)
- In the Flood of Noah, where he and his family "were saved through water" (1 Pet. 3:20). "The waters of the great flood you made a sign of the waters of Baptism, that make an end of sin and a new beginning of goodness."[2]
- In the crossing of the Israelites through the Red Sea, where the people were set free from slavery and the Egyptians were washed away (Ex. 14).

[1] There are three valid means of baptizing in the Roman rite: immersion ("plunging"), aspersion (sprinkling) and affusion (pouring).
[2] Roman Missal, Easter Vigil 42: Blessing of Water

- In the crossing of the Jordan River by the Israelites, where the People of God entered into the Promised Land, an image of eternal life (Jos. 3).

- The cleansing of Naaman the Syrian in the River Jordan (2 Kings 5:14). “It was not for nothing that Naaman of old, when suffering from leprosy, was purified upon his being baptized, but [this served] as an indication to us. For as we are lepers in sin, we are made clean, by means of the sacred water and the invocation of the Lord, from our old transgressions, being spiritually regenerated as newborn babes (St. Irenaeus, Fragment 34, A.D. 190).

In all of these examples, the Church Fathers saw prefigurements of Holy Baptism, where sin is washed away and we are “born again” in Christ. In Baptism, we “put on the new man”, as St. Paul says (Col. 3:10).

3. The Baptism of Christ

In the New Testament, Christ is baptized by John the Baptist. Many have wondered why He chose to do this, since He had no sin to repent or be cleansed of; Christ Himself says that He submits to baptism to “fulfill all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15). There are several reasons why Jesus consented to a baptism that, as John the Baptist noted, He did not need:

- It is a manifestation of His self-emptying and identification with humanity, which stands in need of God’s grace and forgiveness (CCC 1224). Similarly, he was circumcised according to the precepts of the Mosaic Law, even though circumcision symbolized a cutting off of sin, which Jesus did not have.

- It inaugurates His messianic mission, wherein He is anointed by the Spirit for His ministry (Luke 4:16-20). See also: CCC 536

- In His baptism, Christ sacramentally sanctifies the waters for us, prefiguring the baptism He was to later inaugurate. As St. Ambrose of Milan teaches, "The Lord was baptized, not to be cleansed himself but to cleanse the waters, so that those waters, cleansed by the flesh of Christ which knew no sin, might have the power of baptism. Whoever comes, therefore, to the washing of Christ lays aside his sins" (Commentary on Luke 2:83, A.D. 389).

- His baptism reveals what occurs spiritually every time a Christian is baptized. When we come to the Holy Font, the heavens are opened, the Spirit descends, and the Father pronounces, “You are my beloved son.” St. Aphrahaat says, "From baptism we receive the Spirit of Christ. At that same moment in which the priests invoke the Spirit, heaven opens, and he descends and rests upon the waters, and those who are baptized are clothed in him” (Treatises 6:14:4, A.D. 340). See also: CCC 537

The baptism of Jesus begins His public ministry. Immediately after this, He goes into the wilderness to face the temptations of the devil.

4. The Rite of Baptism in the Church

Baptism is often called the door to the other sacraments and is the first sacrament a Catholic receives. It is associated with the virtue of faith (Acts 16:31-33) and is called the sacrament of faith. Besides washing away all sin it is also the reception of a Christian into fellowship with the Church. In the loosest sense, a Christian can be identified as anyone who has been baptized. **The matter of baptism is water.** This is the teaching of the Scriptures (John 3:5, Acts 8:36, 10:47, Eph. 5:26, Heb. 10:22) and the constant teaching of Tradition, as formulated in the Didache, chapter 7:

"But concerning baptism, thus shall ye baptize. Having first recited all these things, baptize {in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit} in living [running] water. But if thou hast not living water, then baptize in other water; and if thou art not able in cold, then in warm. But if thou hast neither, then pour water on the head thrice in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

The form of baptism is the words, *"N., I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"* (Matt.28:19). A baptism done with any other form is invalid. Note: Baptism can only be received once.

For a valid baptism, the water must come in contact with the body. This is can be done in three ways: Immersion, Aspersion (sprinkling), or Affusion (pouring-on). The Apostolic method is a three-fold immersion, as is taught by Tertullian, St. Basil, St. Jerome, and many other early writers. This threefold immersion is a symbol of the Three Persons of the Trinity, as well as the three days of Christ in the grave.

5. Spiritual Effects of Baptism

It is through the sacrament of baptism that the initial grace of justification (sanctifying grace) is given to us. The Council of Trent taught that justification was "the translation from that state in which man is born of the first Adam, to the state of grace and of the adoption of the sons of God through the second Adam, Jesus Christ our Savior. This translation however cannot, since the promulgation of the Gospel, be effected except through the laver of regeneration or its desire, as it is written: Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." (Council of Trent, Session VI "Decree Concerning Justification", Chaper IV)

Baptism effects the remission of all sin, original and actual. This is found in the Scriptures:

"Be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of your sins; and you shall receive the Holy Ghost (Acts 2:38). The prophecy of Ezekiel (36:25) has also been understood of baptism: "I will pour upon you clean water, and you shall be cleansed from all your uncleanness." The Catechism teaches that "in those who have been reborn nothing remains that would impede their entry into the Kingdom of God, neither Adam's sin, nor personal sin, nor the consequences of sin, the gravest of which is separation from God" (CCC 1263).

Baptism also remits all of the temporal punishments due to sin. The Council of Florence (1439-1445) taught that "no satisfaction is to be enjoined upon the baptized for past sins; and if they die before any sin, they will immediately attain to the kingdom of heaven and to the vision of God." The evils remaining after baptism (concupiscence, suffering and death) for the baptized person no longer have the character of punishment, but are a means of testing him. In the Resurrection these evils will be removed.

Baptism also gives man a right to those special graces which are necessary for attaining the end for which the sacrament was instituted and for enabling him to fulfill the baptismal promises as well as infuses within him the supernatural virtues of faith, hope and charity.

Baptism incorporates one into the Church, the Body of Christ, and gives him a spiritual bond with all of the other baptized, whether they be on earth, in heaven, or in a state of purification.

Finally, baptism confers a special character, an indelible mark, as was covered in the class on sacramental theology.

6. Necessity of Baptism

CCC 1257: "The Lord Himself affirms that baptism is necessary for salvation. He also commands His disciples to proclaim the Gospel to all nations and to baptize them…The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude…" The necessity of water baptism applies to (1) those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed, and (2) those who have the possibility of asking for it. Outside of this, the Church knows of only two other means, both extensions of baptism, wherein people can receive the grace of justification:

> **Baptism of Blood**: The Church has always held the firm conviction that those who suffer death for the sake of the faith without having received baptism are baptized by their death for and with Christ. This baptism of blood brings about the grace of the sacrament without the outward sign. This teaching comes from Christ, who said, "Everyone therefore who confesses Me before men, I will also confess Him before My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 10:32). This is also the teaching of the Fathers (St. Cyrpian: "the glorious and most sublime blood-Baptism").
>
> **Baptism of Desire**: For catechumens who die before their baptism, their explicit desire to receive it, together with their repentance for their sins, and charity, assures them the salvation that they were not able to receive through the sacrament. This is based in the power of love. According to Scripture, perfect love possesses justifying power: "Many sins are forgiven her because she has loved much" (Luke 7:47), "He that loves Me shall be loved by My Father" (John 14:21), "This day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).

It is important to understand that these conditions are not exceptions to the necessity of baptism. The Council of Trent taught that it is "not possible" to attain the grace of justification without baptism. The above conditions are not "other ways" to attain justification without baptism;

rather, they are ways in which the effects of baptism are conferred on the soul without the physical performance of the ritual. Baptism by Blood / Desire are true baptisms, without which nobody can enter the Kingdom of God (John 3:5).

7. Who can Baptize?

The ordinary minister of baptism is a bishop, priest or deacon, although in case of necessity, any person can baptize. The 1439 Decretum pro Armenis phrases it this way: “The minister of this sacrament is the priest whose official function it is to baptize. In case of necessity, however, not merely the priest or the deacon, but also a layman, even a woman, yea even a pagan or a heretic can baptize, provided he adheres to the form of the Church, and has the intention of doing what the Church does.” The reason for this wide application of baptism is God’s will to save all men and the necessity of Baptism for salvation.

8. Baptism of Infants

Following Apostolic Tradition, the Church has always adhered to the practice of baptizing infants. This practice is condemned by many Protestant sects who argue that faith is necessary for a valid baptism, and that since infants cannot exercise faith, they cannot therefore receive baptism. On the contrary, the Church teaches that the command to baptize is universal, and that Christ places no restrictions on persons based on how much or little faith they are able to exercise. The reasons the Church baptizes infants are many:

- The nature of the sacrament: baptism confers grace ex opere operato, that is, objectively and without regard to the recipient. Unless they actively will to nullify the sacrament, the recipient receives its graces. Since a child cannot do this, they receive the fruits of the sacrament. (Pope Innocent III said, “Original sin, which is contracted without consent, is by the power of the Sacrament, remitted without consent.”)

- Furthermore, in the Scriptures, St. Paul notes that baptism has replaced circumcision (Col. 2:11–12). In that passage, he refers to baptism as "the circumcision of Christ" and "the circumcision made without hands." Of course, usually only infants were circumcised under the Old Law; circumcision of adults was rare, since there were few converts to Judaism. If Paul meant to exclude infants, he would not have chosen circumcision as a parallel for baptism.

- The New Testament gives several instances of entire families being baptized without omitting the children (Acts 16:15, 33; 1 Cor. 1:16)

- The ancient Church always upheld the baptism of infants. Consider the following quotes: "Baptize first the children, and if they can speak for themselves let them do so. Otherwise, let their parents or other relatives speak for them" (St. Hippolytus, The Apostolic Tradition 21:16 [A.D. 215]). "Do you have an infant child? Allow sin no opportunity; rather, let the infant be sanctified from childhood. From his most tender age let him be consecrated by the Spirit. Do you fear the seal [of baptism] because of the weakness of nature? Oh, what a pusillanimous mother and of how little faith!" (St.

Gregory Nazianzen, Oration on Holy Baptism 40:7 [A.D. 388]). "The custom of Mother Church in baptizing infants is certainly not to be scorned, nor is it to be regarded in any way as superfluous, nor is it to be believed that its tradition is anything except apostolic" (St. Augustine, The Literal Interpretation of Genesis 10:23:39 [A.D. 408]). Nowhere in Catholic Tradition do we find any other teaching.

However, the fact that the Catholic Church affirms the practice of infant baptism does not mean that infant baptism alone is sufficient for spiritual formation or that it alone ensures salvation. On the contrary, baptizing an infant only places a greater responsibility upon parents to raise the child in the Faith, which they vow in the baptismal promises during the rite of baptism. Infant baptism is the beginning of Christian formation; it is not a substitute for Christian formation.

9. The Sacrament of Confirmation

Because of their interrelation, Baptism and Confirmation are presented together, though in the Christian life this may not be the order in which these sacraments are received. With Eucharist and Baptism, Confirmation completes the Sacraments of Initiation.

The Sacrament of Confirmation is associated with the giving of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son to give life and power to the Church; it is through the reception of the Spirit that we are empowered to live the graces imparted at baptism. The plentitude of the Spirit was poured out on Christ, and through Him to the Church.

From that time on the apostles, in fulfillment of Christ's will, imparted to the newly baptized by the laying on of hands the gift of the Spirit that completes the grace of Baptism. For this reason in the Letter to the Hebrews the doctrine concerning Baptism and the laying on of hands is listed among the first elements of Christian instruction. The imposition of hands is rightly recognized by the Catholic tradition as the origin of the sacrament of Confirmation, which in a certain way perpetuates the grace of Pentecost in the Church. -CCC 1288

In addition to the laying on of hands, sacred oil (chrism) was very early on added to the rite in order to better highlight the name "Christian," which means "anointed." In the East this sacrament is called Chrismation, while in the West Confirmation, to demonstrate that it both confirms and strengthens baptismal grace.

The matter of Confirmation is the laying on of hands and the anointing with Sacred Chrism (perfumed oil consecrated by the bishop) on the forehead of the person. **The form of Confirmation are the words spoken by the minister at the time of anointing: *"N., be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit."*** Note: the act of anointing counts as for the laying on of hands. Also, Confirmation can only be received once.

10. Effects of Confirmation

Confirmation grants to us an outpouring of the Holy Spirit in a special way. From this fact, Confirmation brings an increase and deepening of baptismal grace:

- It roots us more deeply in the Divine Sonship.
- It unites us more firmly to Christ.
- It increases the Gifts of the Holy Spirit in us.
- It renders our bond with the Church more perfect.
- It gives us a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the Faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ, to confess the name of Christ boldly, and never to be ashamed of the cross.
- Like Baptism, it confers an indelible spiritual mark, the "character," or sign that a person is marked with the Holy Spirit by Jesus Christ.
- It perfects the common priesthood of the faithful.

11. Who Can Receive Confirmation?

Any baptized person who has not already been confirmed can receive Confirmation. Though Baptism and Eucharist are still certainly valid without Confirmation, Christian initiation would remain incomplete. For centuries, the Latin custom has indicated an "age of discretion" at which children ought to receive Confirmation; but in danger of death, children should be confirmed even if they have not attained the age of reason.

St. Thomas Aquinas, following Tradition, draws a parallel between Confirmation completing spiritual birth and the completion of natural development: "Confirmation is to baptism what growth is to generation. Now it is clear that a man cannot advance to a perfect age unless he has first been born; in like manner, unless he has first been baptized he cannot receive the Sacrament of Confirmation" (STh III:72:6).

One must be in a state of grace to receive Confirmation and should have first made a sacramental confession. Intense prayer should prepare one to receive the strength and graces of the Holy Spirit with docility and readiness to act.

12. The Minister of the Sacrament

In the West, the ordinary minister of the sacrament of Confirmation is the bishop. This has been the practice since the earliest days of the Church. The main reason that this sacrament is reserved to the bishop is that as Confirmation exemplifies the fullness of Christian life, it is proper that it be administered by those who have the fullness of priestly power: the bishops, the successors of the Apostles.

By an indult (permission) of the Apostolic See in 1947, power was granted to parish priests to administer the sacrament within certain parameters and always under the authority of their bishop.

13. Biblical References to the Sacrament of Confirmation

Act 8:14-17: after the Samaritan converts had been baptized by Philip the deacon, the Apostles "sent unto them Peter and John, who, when they were come, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost…"

Acts 19:1-6: St. Paul "came to Ephesus, and found certain disciples; and he said to them: Have you received the Holy Ghost since ye believed…Having heard these things, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had imposed his hands on them, the Holy Ghost came upon them…"

1 John 2:20, 27: "Let the unction [chrisma], which you have received from him, abide in you." Hebrews 6:1-4: "leaving the word of the beginning of Christ, let us go on to things more perfect, not laying again the foundation . . . of the doctrine of baptisms, and imposition of hands…"

2 Cor. 1:20, 21: "He that confirmeth us with you in Christ, and hath anointed us, is God, who also hath sealed us, and given us the pledge of the Spirit in our hearts…"

For Further Reading:

Catcehism of the Catholic Church § 1210-1321
The Sanctifier, by Archbishop Luis Martinez
Matt. 3:13-17, John 3:1-24; Rom. 6:3–4; Col. 2:12–13
Titus 3:5; 1 Pet. 3:20-21
Didache (c. 80 AD); Tertullian, Baptism (c. AD 203)
St. Gregory of Nazianzen, Oration on Holy Baptism (c. AD 388)
St. Ambrose of Milan, Commentary on Luke (AD 389)
St. Thomas Aquinas, ST III:72:6
Council of Trent, Session VI "Decree Concerning Justification", Chapter IV
Pope Paul VI, Divinae Consortium Naturae, 1971