

The Early Church Fathers on Baptism

The early church, and thus the Catholic Church view baptism differently than most modern-day Protestants. As a result, the way it is administered differs significantly. Baptism is something more than a symbolic ritual. Something more than a sign of one's personal commitment to Christ. It is a sacrament established by Jesus Christ: "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Its purpose is to bestow grace on the recipient: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). From the earliest days it was administered even to whole families, from infants to adults. Age is no barrier to the benefits of God's grace. It is true that the Bible records full immersion baptisms. But nowhere in Scripture is it mandated. As time went on, circumstances changed. And so did the way baptism was administered. For instance, in colder climates sprinkling or pouring became the norm. If the proper form and matter were maintained the baptisms were considered valid. The proper form being: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And the proper matter being water.

The Didache

After the foregoing instructions, baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living [running] water. If you have no living water, then baptize in other water, and if you are not able in cold, then in warm. If you have neither, pour water three times on the head, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Before baptism, let the one baptizing and the one to be baptized fast, as also any others who are able. Command the one who is to be baptized to fast beforehand for one or two days (*Didache* 7:1 [ca. A.D. 70]).

Justin Martyr

Then they are brought by us where there is water and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. For, in the name of God, the Father... and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit [Matt. 28:19], they then receive the washing with water. For Christ also said, "Unless you are born again, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (*First Apology* 61 [A.D. 151]).

Irenaeus

He [Jesus] came to save all through himself – all, I say, who through him are reborn in God; infants, and children, and youths, and old men. Therefore he passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, sanctifying infants; a child for children, sanctifying those who are of that age . . . [so that] he might be the perfect teacher in all things, perfect not only in respect to the setting forth of truth, perfect also in respect to relative age (*Against Heresies* 2:22:4 [A.D. 189]).

Tertullian

[N]o one can attain salvation without baptism, especially in view of the declaration of the Lord, who says, "Unless a man shall be born of water, he shall not have life" (*On Baptism* 12:1 [A.D. 203]).

Hippolytus

Where there is no scarcity of water the stream shall flow through the baptismal font or pour into it from above; but if water is scarce, whether on a constant condition or on occasion, then use whatever water is available. Let them remove their clothing. 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 (*The Apostolic Tradition* 21:16 [A.D.215]).

Origen

The Church received from the apostles the tradition of giving baptism even to infants. The apostles, to whom were committed the secrets of divine sacraments, knew there is in everyone innate strains of [original] sin, which must be washed away through water and the Spirit (*Commentaries on Romans* 5:9 [A.D. 248]).

Cornelius I

As [the heretic Novatian] seemed about to die, he received baptism in the bed where he lay, by pouring. . . . (*Letter to Fabius of Antioch* 6:43 [A.D. 251]).

Cyprian of Carthage

As to what pertains to the case of infants: You [Fidus] said that they ought not to be baptized within the second or third day after their birth, that the old law of circumcision must be taken into consideration, and that you did not think that one should be baptized and sanctified within the eighth day after his birth. In our council it seemed to us far otherwise. No one agreed to the course which you thought should be taken. Rather, we all judge that the mercy and grace of God ought to be denied to no man born" (Letters 64:2 [A.D. 253]).

In the saving sacraments, when necessity compels and when God bestows his pardon, divine benefits are bestowed fully upon believers, nor ought anyone be disturbed because the sick are poured upon or sprinkled when they receive the Lord's grace" (*Letter to a Certain Magnus* 69 (76):12 [A.D. 254]).

Gregory Nazianzen

Have you an infant child? Do not let sin get any opportunity, but let him be sanctified from his childhood; from his very tenderest age let him be consecrated by the Spirit (*Oration 40 On Baptism* 17 [A.D. 381]).

John Chrysostom

Thus those who are yet Catechumens, because they make this their object, (how they may defer baptism to the last,) give themselves no concern about leading an upright life: and those who have been baptized (φωτισθεντες), whether it be because they received it as children, or whether it be that having received it in sickness, and afterwards recovered glory of God), so it is, that neither do these make an earnest business of it (*Homily 23 on Acts* 10 [A.D. 400]).

Ambrose of Milan

The Church was redeemed at the price of Christ's blood. Jew or Greek, it makes no difference; but if he has believed, he must circumcise himself from his sins [in baptism (Col. 2:11-12)] so that he can be saved . . . for no one ascends into the kingdom of heaven except through the sacrament of baptism.... "Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (*On Abraham* 2:11:79-84 [A.D. 387]).

Apostolic Constitutions

Do you also baptize your infants, and bring them up in the nurture and admonition of God. For says He: "Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not" (6:15 [A.D. 400]).

Augustine

It is this one Spirit who makes it possible for an infant to be regenerated . . . when that infant is brought to baptism; and it is through this one Spirit that the infant so presented is reborn. For it is not written, "Unless a man be born again by the will of his parents" or "by the faith of those presenting him or ministering to him," but, "Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit." The water, therefore, manifesting exteriorly the sacrament of grace, and the Spirit effecting interiorly the benefit of grace, both regenerate in one Christ that man who was generated in Adam (Letters 98:2 [A.D. 408]).

Baptism does not consist in the merits of those by whom it is administered, nor in the merits of those to whom it is administered, but by its own sanctity and truth, on account of Him by whom it has been instituted (*Against Cresonius* 4:16 [A.D. 409]).

Jerome

One thing I will say and so end my discourse, that you ought either to give us a new creed, so that, after baptizing children into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you may baptize them into the kingdom of heaven; or, if you have one baptism both for infants and for persons of mature age, it follows that infants also should be baptized for the remission of sins after the likeness of the transgression of Adam (*Against the Pelagians* 3:19 [A.D. 415]).