



Catholic Answers

Salvation: Is Baptism Really Necessary?

For most of the 2,000-year history of Christianity, few tenets of the Faith were debated *less* than the linkage between baptism and salvation. Yet for all its apparent clarity in Sacred Scripture—and the unbroken tradition of not only the Catholic Church but also the early Protestant denominations—today we find some groups of Christians who deny the necessity of baptism for salvation. Clearly, the members of these groups find the argument against baptism to be compelling.

But is it really? And if not, why not? To go even further, if we believe that baptism is essential for salvation, can we explain why we do? Are there any exceptions? Oh, and what about baptism of infants?

Fortunately for Catholics, the Church has contemplated such questions for centuries. In this eBook focused on the sacrament of baptism, you will find the answers to these questions and more. Read on as Catholic Answers apologists and others explain the case for baptism as well as what baptism really is, what it accomplishes, and how it fits into the overall landscape of salvation.

What the Early Church Believed: The Necessity of Baptism

by the Catholic Answers Staff

Christians have always interpreted the Bible literally when it declares, “Baptism ... now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 3:21; cf. Acts 2:38, 22:16, Rom. 6:3–4, Col. 2:11–12).

Thus the early Church Fathers wrote in the Nicene Creed (A.D. 381), “We believe in one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.”

And the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “The Lord himself affirms that baptism is necessary for salvation [John 3:5]. ... Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament [Mark 16:16]” (CCC 1257).

The Christian belief that baptism is necessary for salvation is so unshakable that even the Protestant Martin Luther affirmed the necessity of baptism. He wrote, “Baptism is no human plaything but is instituted by God himself. Moreover, it is solemnly and strictly commanded that we must be baptized, or we shall not be saved” (*Large Catechism* 4:6).

Yet Christians have also always realized that the necessity of water baptism is a *normative* rather than an *absolute* necessity. There are exceptions to water baptism. For example, it is possible to be saved through “baptism of blood” (i.e.

martyrdom for Christ) or through “baptism of desire” (that is, an explicit or even implicit desire for baptism).

Thus the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “Those who die for the faith, those who are catechumens, and all those who, without knowing of the Church but acting under the inspiration of grace, seek God sincerely and strive to fulfill his will, are saved even if they have not been baptized” (CCC 1281). The salvation of unbaptized infants is also possible under this system (see CCC 1260–1, 1283).

As the following passages from the works of early Church Fathers illustrate, Christians have always believed in the normative necessity of water baptism, while also acknowledging the legitimacy of baptism by desire or blood.

Hermas

“‘I have heard, sir,’ said I [to the Shepherd], ‘from some teacher, that there is no other repentance except that which took place when we went down into the water and obtained the remission of our former sins.’ He said to me, ‘You have heard rightly, for so it is’” (*The Shepherd* 4:3:1–2 [A.D. 80]).

Justin Martyr

“As many as are persuaded and believe that what we [Christians] teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly ... 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 Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water. For Christ also said, ‘Except you be born again, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven’ [John 3:3]” (*First Apology* 61 [A.D. 151]).

Tertullian

“Happy is our sacrament of water, in that, by washing away the sins of our early blindness, we are set free and admitted into eternal life. ... [But] a viper of the [Gnostic] Cainite heresy, lately conversant in this quarter, has carried away a great number with her most venomous doctrine, making it her first aim to destroy baptism—which is quite in accordance with nature, for vipers and asps ... themselves generally do live in arid and waterless places. But we, little fishes after the example of our [Great] Fish, Jesus Christ, are born in water, nor have we safety in any other way than by permanently abiding in water. So that most monstrous creature, who had no right to teach even sound doctrine, knew full well how to kill the little fishes—by taking them away from the water!” (*Baptism* 1 [A.D. 203]).

“Without baptism, salvation is attainable by none” (ibid., 12).

"We have, indeed, a second [baptismal] font which is one with the former [water baptism]: namely, that of blood, of which the Lord says: 'I am to be baptized with a baptism' [Luke 12:50], when he had already been baptized. He had come through water and blood, as John wrote [1 John 5:6], so that he might be baptized with water and glorified with blood. ... This is the baptism which replaces that of the fountain, when it has not been received" (ibid., 16).

Hippolytus

"[P]erhaps someone will ask, 'What does it conduce unto piety to be baptized?' In the first place, that you may do what has seemed good to God; in the next place, being born again by water unto God so that you change your first birth, which was from concupiscence, and are able to attain salvation, which would otherwise be impossible. For thus the [prophet] has sworn to us: 'Amen, I say to you, unless you are born again with living water, into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.'" (*Homilies* 11:26 [A.D. 217]).

Origen

"It is not possible to receive forgiveness of sins without baptism" (*Exhortation to the Martyrs* 30 [A.D. 235]).

Cyprian of Carthage

"[T]he baptism of public witness and of blood cannot profit a heretic unto salvation, because there is no salvation outside the Church." (*Letters* 72[73]:21 [A.D. 253]).

"[Catechumens who suffer martyrdom] are not deprived of the sacrament of baptism. Rather, they are baptized with the most glorious and greatest baptism of blood, concerning which the Lord said that he had another baptism with which he himself was to be baptized [Luke 12:50]" (ibid., 72[73]:22).

Cyril of Jerusalem

"If any man does not receive baptism, he does not have salvation. The only exception is the martyrs, who even without water will receive the kingdom. ... For the Savior calls martyrdom a baptism, saying, 'Can you drink the cup which I drink and be baptized with the baptism with which I am to be baptized [Mark 10:38]?" (*Catechetical Lectures* 3:10 [A.D. 350]).

Gregory Nazianz

"[Besides the baptisms associated with Moses, John, and Jesus] I know also a fourth baptism, that by martyrdom and blood, by which also Christ himself was baptized. This one is far more august than the others, since it cannot be defiled by later sins" (*Oration on the Holy Lights* 39:17 [A.D. 381]).

Pope Siricius

“It would tend to the ruin of our souls if, from our refusal of the saving font of baptism to those who seek it, any of them should depart this life and lose the kingdom and eternal life” (*Letter to Himerius* 3 [A.D. 385]).

John Chrysostom

“Do not be surprised that I call martyrdom a baptism, for here too the Spirit comes in great haste and there is the taking away of sins and a wonderful and marvelous cleansing of the soul, and just as those being baptized are washed in water, so too those being martyred are washed in their own blood” (*Panegyric on St. Lucian* 2 [A.D. 387]).

Ambrose of Milan

“But I hear you lamenting because he [the Emperor Valentinian] had not received the sacraments of baptism. Tell me, what else could we have, except the will to it, the asking for it? He too had just now this desire, and after he came into Italy it was begun, and a short time ago he signified that he wished to be baptized by me. Did he, then, not have the grace which he desired? Did he not have what he eagerly sought? Certainly, because he sought it, he received it” (*Sympathy at the Death of Valentinian* [A.D. 392]).

Augustine of Hippo

“There are three ways in which sins are forgiven: in baptism, in prayer, and in the greater humility of penance; yet God does not forgive sins except to the baptized” (*Sermons to Catechumens on the Creed* 7:15 [A.D. 395]).

“I do not hesitate to put the Catholic catechumen, burning with divine love, before a baptized heretic. Even within the Catholic Church herself we put the good catechumen ahead of the wicked baptized person” (*On Baptism, Against the Donatists* 4:21:28 [A.D. 400]).

“That the place of baptism is sometimes supplied by suffering is supported by a substantial argument which the same blessed Cyprian draws from the circumstance of the thief, to whom, although not baptized, it was said, ‘Today you shall be with me in paradise’ [Luke 23:43]. Considering this over and over again, I find that not only suffering for the name of Christ can supply for that which is lacking by way of baptism, but even faith and conversion of heart [i.e., baptism of desire] if, perhaps, because of the circumstances of the time, recourse cannot be had to the celebration of the mystery of baptism” (ibid., 4:22:29).

“When we speak of within and without in relation to the Church, it is the position of the heart that we must consider, not that of the body. ... All who are within [the Church] in heart are saved in the unity of the ark [by baptism of desire]” (ibid., 5:28:39).

“[According to] apostolic tradition ... the churches of Christ hold inherently that without baptism and participation at the table of the Lord it is impossible for any man to attain either to the kingdom of God or to salvation and life eternal. This is the witness of Scripture, too” (*Forgiveness and the Just Deserts of Sin, and the Baptism of Infants* 1:24:34 [A.D. 412]).

“Those who, though they have not received the washing of regeneration, die for the confession of Christ—it avails them just as much for the forgiveness of their sins as if they had been washed in the sacred font of baptism. For he that said, ‘If anyone is not reborn of water and the Spirit, he will not enter the kingdom of heaven’ [John 3:5], made an exception for them in that other statement in which he says no less generally, ‘Whoever confesses me before men, I too will confess him before my Father, who is in heaven’ [Matt. 10:32]” (*The City of God* 13:7 [A.D. 419]).

Pope Leo I

“And because of the transgression of the first man, the whole stock of the human race was tainted; no one can be set free from the state of the old Adam save through Christ’s sacrament of baptism, in which there are no distinctions between the reborn, as the apostle [Paul] says, ‘For as many of you as were baptized in Christ did put on Christ; there is neither Jew nor Greek ... ’ [Gal. 3:27–28]” (*Letters* 15:10[11] [A.D. 445]).

Fulgentius of Ruspe

“From that time at which our Savior said, ‘If anyone is not reborn of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven’ [John 3:5], no one can, without the sacrament of baptism, except those who, in the Catholic Church, without baptism, pour out their blood for Christ, receive the kingdom of heaven and life eternal” (*The Rule of Faith* 43 [A.D. 524]).

Baptism Saves You

by Fr. Dwight Longenecker

Even though I was brought up in a devoutly Evangelical home, I wasn’t baptized until I was 21 years old. We attended an independent Bible church with an essentially Baptist theology, and the irony about this Baptist theology is that it actually de-emphasized baptism. What mattered was being “born again” or “saved,”

if we had responded to an altar call and “accepted Jesus into our hearts.” This personal experience was all that was necessary to assure us of eternal salvation. Baptism and communion—while they were not dispensed with altogether—remained unnecessary symbols of our inner faith.

As a college student, I became an Anglican, and before I could be confirmed, I submitted to baptism. Later I went to teach in a Christian school attached to a Baptist church, and even then the pastor seemed more concerned about the mode of baptism than baptism itself. He insisted that I be re-baptized by total immersion since he didn’t think my Anglican baptism, with water poured over my head, counted.

Travel the “Romans Road”

Moving ahead, I lived in England for 25 years—during which time I converted to Catholicism—and had little contact with Baptists. Now our family has moved to South Carolina, and recently two Fundamentalist Baptists came around to discuss theology with me. They proceeded to take me along the famous “Romans Road.” This is a simple Evangelical process that leads a person to salvation through the most basic Christian truths taken from St. Paul’s epistle to the Romans.

The first verse is Romans 3:23, “for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” After establishing that you are a sinner, St. Paul reminds you in Romans 6:23 that “the wages of sin is death.” The second part of that verse gives the promise that “the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Romans 5:8 tells us that “while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” Romans 10:13 says that “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,” and Romans 10:9 says that “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, you shall be saved.”

My visitors took me through the Romans Road and were a little nonplussed when I agreed with them on every point. I then asked them why they didn’t go any further along the road. They asked what I meant. “St. Paul goes on to say just how this salvation happens,” I replied. “He gives us an objective and solid way to know that we really have been made one with Christ. But first, we agree, don’t we, that salvation means we die with Christ so that we may have new life?”

They agreed.

“How does this happen?” I asked.

“You have to accept Jesus. Believe in him in your heart and confess with your lips.”

“Yes, we Catholics believe that is necessary, but there is more to it than that. In addition to believing and confessing with our lips, we need to be baptized. At the

beginning of Romans 6, St. Paul actually explains how we share in the death and new life of Christ: It is through baptism.”

The beginning of Romans 6 says, “Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” This idea that we are made one with Christ through baptism is reiterated by Paul in Colossians 2:12, and in Galatians 3:27, he likens baptism to “being clothed with Christ.”

Furthermore, the fuller idea of salvation being a union with Christ fits with much more of the New Testament, which speaks time and again of being in a profound union with the living Lord—rather than simply being saved or justified by a personal belief in Christ.

The sacrament of baptism takes the believer from the simple repentance, belief, and profession of faith into a more mysterious identification with Christ, in which he is the vine, and we are the branches—in which we die with him so that we might rise to new life. Baptism is not simply the addition of a meaningful symbol to the act of faith: It is an action which takes the believer’s whole body, soul, and spirit into a new relationship with God.

Born of Water and the Spirit

The passage in Romans 6 (backed up by Colossians 2) is not the only evidence from the New Testament that baptism is effective and therefore necessary for salvation. The apostles Peter and John confirm St. Paul’s teaching. In Acts 2, when St. Peter is preaching at Pentecost, his hearers ask what they must do to be saved, and he replies, “Repent and be baptized.” In 1 Peter 3, Noah’s ark is referred to as a type of baptism, and Peter writes, “In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 3:20-21).

The most famous New Testament evidence for the efficacy and necessity of baptism is in John’s Gospel. When Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus by night, Jesus says that a person cannot enter the kingdom of God without being born again. Nicodemus asks how a man might enter again into his mother’s womb, and Jesus corrects him, saying, “No one can enter the kingdom of heaven unless he is born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:3-5). From the earliest days of the Church this passage has been understood to refer to baptism, and this interpretation is virtually unanimous down through history.

However, many Evangelicals have a peculiar interpretation for this verse. They say that the “water” in the verse does not refer to baptism, but to the amniotic fluid of the mother’s womb. This is the “water” that breaks at the point of physical birth. Therefore they believe when Jesus refers to “water and the Spirit,” he is referring to physical birth and spiritual rebirth. This might be a possible interpretation as the previous verse was a discussion of a man entering again into his mother’s womb.

However, one must look at the whole passage in its context. It is universally agreed that John’s Gospel is the most “sacramental” in its approach. The passages of Jesus’ life and teachings are put together in such a way as to connect with, and support, the sacramental life of the early Church. In the verses that immediately follow Jesus’ words that one must be “born again of water and the Spirit,” Jesus talks about “men loving darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil” (verse 19) and that whoever “lives by the truth comes to the light” (verse 21). The references to light point to the other main symbol of the baptismal ceremony—the lighted candle. If there is any doubt, the very next story in John chapter 3 shows Jesus immediately going out with his disciples baptizing.

Is It Enough to Believe and Confess?

As soon as you begin to speak about the necessity of baptism, an Evangelical will pull out some favorite verses and favorite arguments. They will go back to Romans 10:9-10, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.” They will point out that this verse does not say that one must be baptized. The reply is that belief and profession of faith *are* necessary, but the whole witness of the New Testament shows us that baptism is necessary as well.

Evangelicals may also refer to the story of the Philippian jailer in Acts 16. The jailer cries out, “What must I do to be saved?” and Paul and Silas reply, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved—you and your household” (Acts 16:31). It seems there is no demand for baptism. However, actions speak louder than words because verse 33 says that “immediately they were baptized.” Baptism therefore seems to be the way one makes the faith commitment. This is just one example from the Acts of the Apostles where faith is accompanied by baptism, and it is assumed that both are necessary. Two other clear accounts are Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, and Peter’s immediate baptism of Cornelius and his household in Acts 10. The pattern in Acts is consistent: preaching, repentance of the hearers, belief in Christ, and immediate baptism. Why would this be the case if the apostles did not believe that baptism was both effective and necessary for salvation?

The Evangelical who does not want to accept the efficacy and necessity of baptism has a few more objections. What about people who do not have the opportunity to be baptized? He will bring up the good thief on the cross. The thief couldn't be baptized, but Jesus says, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). This is the perfect opportunity to explain two other aspects of Catholic belief.

Baptism of Blood, Baptism of Desire

First, you can explain that the Catholic Church does not believe that baptism is magic. Simply having water poured over one's head with the Trinitarian formula does not mean a person is instantly saved forever. Baptism incorporates the individual into the Body of Christ, and within the whole life of the Church an individual's baptism must be accompanied by faith. The developing faith of the individual is empowered by the grace of baptism, and nurtured by the whole Church, but if the Christian faith is rejected or never positively affirmed, the baptism is not "magically" effective.

For difficult cases such as the good thief, it should be explained that the Catholic Church has always taught that there is a "baptism of blood" and a "baptism of desire." The baptism of blood refers to those who were not baptized but were martyred for Christ. They are incorporated, through their own death, into the mystical body of Christ through a mystical sharing in his sacrificial death.

The baptism of desire refers to those individuals with faith in Christ who would be baptized if they had the opportunity and if they truly understood what baptism means. It applies to those who, due to extraordinary circumstances, do not have access to water for baptism. But the New Testament indicates that what we call "baptism of desire" is the case for the Old Testament saints. Noah and his family were "saved through water" in the flood, (2 Pet. 2:5) and the Hebrew children were baptized "into Moses in the cloud and the Red Sea" (1 Cor. 10:2). This suggests that baptism of desire may also extend to those who have pre-Christian faith or to non-Christians who have faith according to the level of their knowledge but have never heard the Christian gospel.

It may also apply to those who have faith in Christ but have not been baptized because they truly and sincerely (because of false teaching received in goodwill) do not believe that baptism is necessary. Even in these cases, however, it should be understood that the Church teaches that such individuals may be saved, not that they are saved.

Incorporate It

The most difficult thing for an Evangelical to accept in a conversation about the sacraments is that God actually uses physical means and liturgical ceremonies to

dispense his grace and administer salvation. The typical Evangelical is heavily conditioned to dismiss all physical components of religion as useless and distracting “man-made traditions.”

However, the theory doesn’t stand up in practice. It cannot do so because we have bodies that are in time and space which need a way to respond physically to spiritual realities. It is not very difficult to demonstrate that they believe physical actions and religious ceremonies can be useful for salvation—otherwise why have evangelistic rallies with emotional music and altar calls? Why encourage people to “put up their hand, get up out of their seat, and come forward?” It’s because they realize that we need physical actions, religious ceremonies, and rituals to help us accept the gift of salvation that is being offered, and they must accept that it is through these physical responses that salvation is accepted. Therefore, the physical responses are effective and necessary.

If they can see that God uses their preaching and their traditions and religious rituals to bring people to salvation, then it is not too much of a leap for them to see that the Catholic rituals are another physical and active way for individuals to accept the gift of salvation. Of course, the sacraments are more than a practical, man-made religious tool. The sacraments are not done by us for God, but by God for us. However, moving a non-Catholic to the point where he accepts that a sacrament is useful is the first step towards accepting that it is necessary, and that is just one step away from the acceptance that they are not just man-made, practical religious devices but divinely instituted initiatives that incorporate the soul into the mystical Body of Christ.

Is Baptism Really Necessary?

by Jimmy Akin

According to 1 Peter 3:21:

“Baptism . . . now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

In keeping with this language, the Nicene Creed states:

“I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.”

And the Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms:

“The Lord himself affirms that baptism is necessary for salvation [Jn 3:5]. . . . Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been

proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament [Mk 16:16]” (CCC 1257).

The necessity of baptism for salvation is broadly recognized among Christians, including non-Catholic ones. For example, Martin Luther wrote:

“Baptism is no human plaything but is instituted by God himself. Moreover, it is solemnly and strictly commanded that we must be baptized or we shall not be saved. We are not to regard it as an indifferent matter, then, like putting on a new red coat. It is of the greatest importance that we regard baptism as excellent, glorious, and exalted” (Large Catechism 4:6).

But God has not made baptism necessary in an absolute sense such that anyone who fails to receive it is lost. Down through history Christians have recognized that there are exceptions, and that it is possible to be saved through “baptism of blood” (martyrdom for Christ) or “baptism of desire” (a desire for baptism that has not yet been received).

Even those who do not understand the importance of baptism can be said to have an unconscious desire for it if they would be willing to do what God wants them to do for their salvation. Thus the Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

“Those who die for the faith, those who are catechumens, and all those who, without knowing of the Church but acting under the inspiration of grace, seek God sincerely and strive to fulfill his will, are saved even if they have not been baptized” (CCC 1281; the salvation of unbaptized infants is also possible; see CCC 1260–61, 1283).

Both the necessity of baptism and the exceptional cases have been recognized all the way down through Church history.

For example, it’s easy to show passages from the Church Fathers which illustrate that Christians in the first ages recognized the ordinary necessity of water baptism as well as the legitimacy of baptism by desire or blood.

Infant Baptism

by the Catholic Answers Staff

Fundamentalists often criticize the Catholic Church’s practice of baptizing infants. According to them, baptism is for adults and older children, because it is to be administered only after one has undergone a “born again” experience—that is, after one has “accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior.” At the instant of acceptance, when he is “born again,” the adult becomes a Christian, and his

salvation is assured forever. Baptism follows, though it has no actual salvific value. In fact, one who dies before being baptized, but after “being saved,” goes to heaven anyway.

As Fundamentalists see it, baptism is not a sacrament, but an ordinance. It does not in any way convey the grace it symbolizes; rather, it is merely a public manifestation of the person’s conversion. Since only an adult or older child can be converted, baptism is inappropriate for infants or for children who have not yet reached the age of reason (generally considered to be age seven). Most Fundamentalists say that during the years before they reach the age of reason infants and young children are automatically saved. Only once a person reaches the age of reason does he need to “accept Jesus” in order to reach heaven.

Since the New Testament era, the Catholic Church has always understood baptism differently, teaching that it is a sacrament which accomplishes several things, the first of which is the remission of sin, both original sin and actual sin—only original sin in the case of infants and young children, since they are incapable of actual sin; and both original and actual sin in the case of older persons.

Peter explained what happens at baptism when he said, “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). But he did not restrict this teaching to adults. He added, “For the promise is to you *and to your children* and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him” (2:39, emphasis added). We also read: “Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16). These commands are universal, not restricted to adults. Further, these commands make clear the necessary connection between baptism and salvation, a connection explicitly stated in 1 Peter 3:21: “Baptism . . . now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

Christ Calls All to Baptism

Opposition to infant baptism is not a new phenomenon. In the Middle Ages, some groups developed that rejected infant baptism, e.g., the Waldenses and Catharists. Later, the Anabaptists (“re-baptizers”) echoed them, claiming that infants are incapable of being baptized validly. But the historic Christian Church has always held that Christ’s law applies to infants as well as adults, for Jesus said that no one can enter heaven unless he has been born again of water and the Holy Spirit (John 3:5). His words can be taken to apply to anyone capable of belonging to his kingdom. He asserted such even for children: “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 19:14).

Now, Fundamentalists say this event does not apply to young children or infants since it implies the children to which Christ was referring were able to approach him on their own. (Older translations have, "Suffer the little children to come unto me," which seems to suggest they could do so under their own power.) Fundamentalists conclude the passage refers only to children old enough to walk, and, presumably, capable of sinning. But the text in Luke 18:15 says, "Now they were bringing even *infants* to him" (Greek, *Prosepheron de auto kai ta brepha*). The Greek word *brepha* means "infants"—children who are quite unable to approach Christ on their own and who could not possibly make a conscious decision to "accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior." And that is precisely the problem. Fundamentalists refuse to permit the baptism of infants and young children, because they are not yet capable of making such a conscious act. But notice what Jesus said: "to such as these [referring to the infants and children who had been brought to him by their mothers] belongs the kingdom of heaven." The Lord did not require them to make a conscious decision. He says that they are precisely the kind of people who *can* come to him and receive the kingdom.

In Place of Circumcision

Furthermore, 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.

This comparison between who could receive baptism and circumcision is an appropriate one. In the Old Testament, if a man wanted to become a Jew, he had to believe in the God of Israel and be circumcised. In the New Testament, if one wants to become a Christian, one must believe in God and Jesus and be baptized. In the Old Testament, those born into Jewish households could be circumcised in anticipation of the Jewish faith in which they would be raised. Thus, in the New Testament, those born in Christian households can be baptized in anticipation of the Christian faith in which they will be raised. The pattern is the same.

Were Only Adults Baptized?

Fundamentalists are reluctant to admit that the Bible nowhere says baptism is to be restricted to adults, but when pressed, they will. They just conclude that is what it should be taken as meaning, even if the text does not explicitly support such a view. Naturally enough, the people whose baptisms we read about in Scripture are

adults, because they were converted as adults. This makes sense, because Christianity was just beginning—there were no “cradle Christians.”

Even in the books of the New Testament that were written later in the first century, during the time when children were raised in the first Christian homes, we never—not even once—find an example of a child raised in a Christian home who is baptized only upon making a “decision for Christ.” Rather, it is always assumed that the children of Christian homes are already Christians, that they have already been “baptized into Christ” (Rom. 6:3). If infant baptism were not the rule, then we should have references to the children of Christian parents joining the Church only after they had come to the age of reason, and there are no such records in the Bible.

Specific Biblical References?

But one might ask, does the Bible ever say that infants or young children can be baptized? The indications are clear. In the New Testament we read that Lydia was converted by Paul’s preaching and that “She was baptized, with her household” (Acts 16:15). The Philippian jailer whom Paul and Silas had converted to the faith was baptized that night along with his household. We are told that “the same hour of the night . . . he was baptized, with all his family” (Acts 16:33). And in his greetings to the Corinthians, Paul recalled that, “I did baptize also the household of Stephanas” (1 Cor. 1:16).

In all these cases, whole households or families were baptized. This means more than just the spouse; the children too were included. If the text of Acts referred simply to the Philippian jailer and his wife, then we would read that “he and his wife were baptized,” but we do not. Thus his children must have been baptized as well. The same applies to the other cases of household baptism in Scripture.

Granted, we do not know the exact age of the children; they may have been past the age of reason, rather than infants. Then again, they could have been babes in arms. More probably, there were both younger and older children. Certainly there were children younger than the age of reason in some of the households that were baptized. Furthermore, given the New Testament pattern of household baptism, if there were to be exceptions to this rule (such as infants), they would be explicit.

Catholics From the First

The present Catholic attitude accords perfectly with early Christian practices. Origen, for instance, wrote in the third century that “according to the usage of the Church, baptism is given even to infants” (*Holilies on Leviticus*, 8:3:11 [A.D. 244]). The Council of Carthage, in 253, condemned the opinion that baptism should be withheld from infants until the eighth day after birth. Later, Augustine taught, “The custom of Mother Church in baptizing infants is certainly not to be scorned . . . nor

is it to be believed that its tradition is anything except apostolic" (*Literal Interpretation of Genesis 10:23:39* [A.D. 408]).

No Cry of "Invention!"

None of the Fathers or councils of the Church was claiming that the practice was contrary to Scripture or tradition. They agreed that the practice of baptizing infants was the customary and appropriate practice since the days of the early Church; the only uncertainty seemed to be when—exactly—an infant should be baptized.

Further evidence that infant baptism was the accepted practice in the early Church is the fact that if infant baptism had been opposed to the religious practices of the first believers, why do we have no record of early Christian writers condemning it?

But Fundamentalists try to ignore the historical writings from the early Church which clearly indicate the legitimacy of infant baptism. They attempt to sidestep appeals to history by saying baptism requires faith and, since children are incapable of having faith, they cannot be baptized. It is true that Christ prescribed instruction and actual faith for adult converts (Matt. 28:19–20), but his general law on the necessity of baptism (John 3:5) puts no restriction on the subjects of baptism. Although infants are included in the law he establishes, requirements of that law that are impossible to meet because of their age are not applicable to them. The same was true of circumcision; faith in the Lord was necessary for an adult convert to receive it, but it was not necessary for the children of believers.

Furthermore, the Bible never says, "Faith in Christ is necessary for salvation except for infants"; it simply says, "Faith in Christ is necessary for salvation." Yet Fundamentalists must admit there is an exception for infants unless they wish to condemn instantaneously all infants to hell. Therefore, the Fundamentalist himself makes an exception for infants regarding the necessity of faith for salvation.

It becomes apparent, then, that the Fundamentalist position on infant baptism is not really a consequence of the Bible's strictures, but of the demands of Fundamentalism's idea of salvation. In reality, the Bible indicates that infants are to be baptized, that they too are meant to inherit the kingdom of heaven. Further, the witness of the earliest Christian practices and writings must once and for all silence those who criticize the Catholic Church's teaching on infant baptism. The Catholic Church is merely continuing the tradition established by the first Christians, who heeded the words of Christ: "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:16).

Let the Children Come to Me

by Matthew A.C. Newsome

Prior to April 2007, many Catholics had probably never heard of the International Theological Commission (ITC), a group of thirty theologians from around the world chosen by Pope Benedict XVI as a kind of advisory committee. But the ITC's document published with papal approval on April 19, 2007, got a lot of attention—as well it should have. Its subject is a tender one: "The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized." To Catholic parents who have lost a child to miscarriage, stillbirth, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), or some other tragedy prior to baptism, such hope is a healing balm for a wounded heart.

Interest in this document is understandable, and at the time of its release, most people learned of it through the news media. While many articles written since the document's publication summarize its contents accurately, many do not. A Google news search reveals headlines such as, "Pope Changes Church Teaching on Limbo," and "The Church Abandons Limbo." Such headlines can easily give the impression that 1) Limbo was a defined doctrine of the Church, and 2) the Pope has the authority to change—even to reverse—defined doctrine. A May 4 *Washington Post* article by Alan Cooperman included the statement "limbo is a 'problematic' concept that Catholics are free to reject."

Beyond the headlines you encounter even larger problems. An April 21 Associated Press article by Nicole Winfield quotes Fr. Richard McBrien (professor of theology at Notre Dame and noted dissenter) as saying, "If there's no limbo, and we're not going to revert to St. Augustine's teaching that unbaptized infants go to hell, we're left with only one option, namely, that everyone is born in the state of grace . . . Baptism does not exist to wipe away the 'stain' of original sin, but to initiate one into the Church." On the other end of the spectrum, Kenneth Wolfe, columnist for *The Remnant*, was quoted in Cooperman's article as saying, "The Vatican is suggesting that salvation is possible without baptism. That is heresy."

These characterizations notwithstanding, the ITC makes no rulings (and does not have the authority to do so). "The Hope of Salvation" in fact reiterates and builds upon the Catholic tradition. It neither categorically rejects Limbo nor denies the necessity of baptism. Rather, it offers reasons to hope that God may provide a way of salvation to those little ones whose lives ended before baptism was possible.

Augustine: No Middle Ground

Debate regarding the fate of infants who die before baptism dates back to the late fourth century and the famous conflict between Pelagius and St. Augustine.

Pelagius asserted that man is capable of living a perfect moral life by virtue of his natural reason and will alone and is not wounded by original sin.

In opposition to Pelagius, St. Augustine successfully defended the reality of original sin using Scripture and the Tradition of the Church. The Apostolic practice of infant baptism was evidence of the Church's belief that even these youngest ones stood in need of a Savior. Without original sin, baptism could only affect the forgiveness of our personal sins. Says Augustine, infant baptism makes no sense without original sin. In his teaching against the Pelagian heresy, Augustine affirmed the necessity of this ancient practice. If an infant died unbaptized, he died in a state of sin, and was therefore destined to eternal damnation. He denied the existence, "between damnation and the kingdom of heaven [of] some middle place of rest and happiness . . . For this is what the heresy of Pelagius promised them" (*On the Soul and its Origin* 1.9).

Augustine's position is not quite as harsh as it seems. In *Contra Julianum* 5.11, he writes, "Who can doubt that non-baptized infants, having only original sin and no burden of personal sins, will suffer the lightest condemnation of all? I cannot define the amount and kind of their punishment, but I dare not say it were better for them never to have existed than to exist there" (qtd. in John Randolph Willis, *The Teachings of the Church Fathers*, 245).

Aquinas: Privation, Not Punishment

Later theologians developed Augustine's thoughts, defining damnation as essentially the deprivation of the Beatific Vision, which does not necessarily involve any positive punishment. Distinctions were made between the pain of sense, describing the torments suffered by condemned sinners, and the pain of loss, which is sorrow over being absent from God's presence.

By the thirteenth century, the dominant view was that unbaptized infants would suffer only the pain of loss. In 1201, Pope Innocent III expressed this opinion in a letter to the archbishop of Arles. Actual sin, the Holy Father asserted, is punished by the eternal torment of hell; original sin, however, is punished by the loss of the vision of God.

This line of thinking was explored thoroughly by St. Thomas Aquinas. The Angelic Doctor consigned infants who died without baptism to the outermost borders of hell, which he called the "limbo of children." They died without the grace of God, and would spend eternity without it, but they were not worthy of punishment. St. Thomas insisted that these little ones would know no pain or remorse. He explained this opinion in various ways. In his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, he stated that no one regrets the lack of something which he

is totally unequipped to have (*// Sent.* , d.33, q.2, a.2). Ten years later (in *De Malo*, q.5, a.3), he suggested that infants would not be distraught over their loss because they simply would have no knowledge of what they were missing.

Eventually limbo ceased to be spoken of as a “border region” of hell. Hell came to be understood as a place of punishment. Limbo was not. And since it has never been a defined dogma of the Church, various theologians have understood limbo in different ways. Most views, however, included the idea that unbaptized infants died in a state of sin, entering neither heaven nor hell but limbo, which is a state of damnation not involving pain of sense or grief of exile. Indeed, these theologians said a measure of natural happiness is possible, with some suggesting that the denizens of limbo enjoy a perfect state of natural happiness.

Trust in the Mercy of God

Although limbo has long been the prevailing theory, some theologians have imagined ways in which God may provide for the salvation of unbaptized infants. St. Gregory of Nyssa, in the fourth century, called the fate of these souls “something much greater than the human mind can grasp” and found solace in the fact that “the One who has done everything well, with wisdom, is able to bring good out of evil” (qtd. in HS 12).

In the sixteenth century, Cardinal Cajetan remarked in his commentary on the *Summa Theologica* (III:68:11), “that children still within the womb of their mother are able to be saved . . . through the sacrament of baptism that is received, not in reality, but in the desire of the parents.” In our own times, Cardinal Ratzinger echoed Cajetan in a 1985 interview with Vittorio Messori. “One should not hesitate to give up the idea of ‘limbo’ if need be,” the future pontiff advised. “[A]nd it is worth noting that the very theologians who proposed ‘limbo’ also said that parents could spare the child limbo by desiring its baptism and through prayer” (*The Ratzinger Report* 147-8).

None of these positions has been officially proclaimed by the Magisterium. Catholics are free to have varying opinions on this matter. Our present *Catechism* makes no mention of limbo at all, but has this to say regarding infants who die without baptism:

The Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus’ tenderness toward children which caused him to say: “Let the children come to me, do not hinder them,” allows us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without baptism. (CCC 1261)

The *Ordo Exsequiarum* (*Order of Christian Funerals*) contains a special rite for children who die before baptism, during which the child's soul is entrusted "to the abundant mercy of God, that our beloved child may find a home in his kingdom." Option D of the opening prayer begins, "God of all consolation, searcher of mind and heart, the faith of these parents ... is known to you. Comfort them with the knowledge that the child for whom they grieve is entrusted now to your loving care." In the Prayer of Commendation B, the priest says, "We pray that you give [the child] happiness for ever."

Lex orandi, lex credendi: As we pray, so we believe.

ITC: Reasons for a Prayerful Hope

The default position of the Church then, as expressed in her liturgy, is that of hope. "Hope of Salvation" begins with a reference to 1 Peter 3:15: "Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you ...". This, in essence, is the purpose of the ITC document.

It is worth noting at this point that "Hope of Salvation" is not a Magisterial document. It does not require the assent of the faithful, as would a proclamation from a pope or an ecumenical council. It simply expresses the opinion of a respected group of theologians. The fact that now-Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI has given it his approval and has decided to publish it publicly gives some weight to the conclusions drawn by the commission. But those conclusions are not dogmatic.

In an interview published by *InsidetheVatican.com* on April 27, 2007, Sr. Sara Butler, one of the authors of the document, said,

The commission is trying to say what the *Catechism* ... has already said: that we have a right to hope that God will find a way to offer the grace of Christ to infants who have no opportunity for making a personal choice with regard to their salvation. It's trying to provide a theological rationale for what has already been proposed in several magisterial documents since the Council.

The first part of "Hope of Salvation" gives a history of Catholic teaching on this subject, and examines the key principles involved, namely: God's will to save all people; the universal sinfulness of human beings; and the necessity of faith for salvation, along with baptism and the Eucharist (HS 9). After thoroughly examining the issues, the ITC suggests three means by which unbaptized infants who die may be united to Christ (this is not intended to be exhaustive):

1. "Broadly, we may discern in those infants who themselves suffer and die a saving conformity to Christ in his own death and a companionship with him" (HS 85).

2. "Some of the infants who suffer and die do so as victims of violence. In their case we may readily refer to the example of the Holy Innocents and discern an analogy in the case of these infants to the baptism of blood which brings salvation . . . Moreover, they are in solidarity with the Christ, who said: 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Matt. 25:40)" (HS 86).
3. "It is also possible that God simply acts to give the gift of salvation to unbaptized infants by analogy with the gift of salvation given sacramentally to baptized infants" (HS 87). "God's power is not restricted to the sacraments" (HS 82).

These are some possible ways, proposed by the ITC, in which we may imagine God offering salvation to these little children. There are others. The commission mentions the possibility of baptism of desire (*in votum*), with the *votum* offered either by the infant's parents or the Church. "The Church has never ruled out such a solution," we are reminded (HS 94).

No Certainties

But while offering these possibilities to us, the commission is careful not to overstep the bounds of Divine Revelation. "It must be clearly acknowledged that the Church does not have sure knowledge about the salvation of unbaptized infants who die ... [T]he destiny of the generality of infants who die without baptism has not been revealed to us, and the Church teaches and judges only with regard to what has been revealed" (HS 79).

There are some things that have most assuredly been revealed, and these articles of faith must be considered. Original sin is one of them. When contemplating the fate of unbaptized infants who die, one "cannot ignore the tragic consequences of original sin. Original sin implies a state of separation from Christ, and that excludes the possibility of the vision of God for those who die in that state" (HS 3).

"Hope of Salvation" in many places affirms the reality of original sin and the necessity of baptism. "Sacramental baptism is necessary because it is the ordinary means through which a person shares the beneficial effects of Jesus' death and resurrection" (HS 10). The key phrase is "ordinary means." In cases of urgency or necessity, God often provides extraordinary means to accomplish his will. Though water baptism is the ordinary means by which God transmits sanctifying grace, the Church teaches that there are other ways. The realities of baptism of blood and baptism of desire are affirmed by the *Catechism* (CCC 1258). Citing *Gaudium et Spes*, the *Catechism* also explains that "Every man who is ignorant of the Gospel of Christ and of his Church, but seeks the truth and does the will of God in accordance with his understanding of it, can be saved" (CCC 1260). It is in this same context that

the *Catechism* offers us the “hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without baptism” (CCC 1261).

None of this, however, can be understood to imply that baptism is not necessary, for the *Catechism* states, “The Church does not know of any means other than baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude ... God has bound salvation to the sacrament of baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacrament” (CCC 1257).

The necessity of baptism is echoed by the ITC. “What has been revealed to us is that the ordinary way of salvation is by the sacrament of baptism. None of the above considerations should be taken as qualifying the necessity of baptism or justifying delay in administering the sacrament” (HS 103). Sr. Butler, in the above-cited interview, puts it bluntly. “If somebody like Fr. Richard McBrien supposes that the ITC document rejects the doctrine of original sin, this is of course a mistake.” Elsewhere in the interview, she comments, “[W]e dare to hope that these infants will be saved by some extra-sacramental gift of Christ . . . We are very clear that the ordinary means of salvation is baptism, and that infants should be baptized; Catholic parents have a serious obligation.”

The conclusions of the ITC are nothing new. The *Catechism* tells us that it is reasonable to hope that God provides a way of salvation for infants who die without being baptized. It is a hope rooted in Christ, who instructed that we must be like children to enter the kingdom of God and said, “Let the children come to me” (Mark 10:14-15). “Hope of Salvation” simply provides possible theological reasons for this hope. The ITC readily admits that “these are reasons for prayerful hope, rather than grounds for sure knowledge” (HS 102).

What we do know for certain is this: God has a plan. God is perfectly just and perfectly merciful. God is love. We can rest assured that whatever plan God has established for infants who die without baptism, it is more just, more merciful, and more loving than whatever we may imagine, not less.

An Excerpt from “The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized”:

“The idea of limbo, which the Church has used for many centuries to designate the destiny of infants who die without baptism, has no clear foundation in revelation even though it has long been used in traditional theological teaching. Moreover, the notion that infants who die without baptism are deprived of the beatific vision, which has for so long been regarded as the common doctrine of the Church, gives rise to numerous pastoral problems, so much so that many pastors of souls have asked for a deeper reflection on the ways of salvation.

“The necessary reconsideration of the theological issues cannot ignore the tragic consequences of original sin. Original sin implies a state of separation from Christ, and that excludes the possibility of the vision of God for those who die in that state...

“However, with regard to the salvation of those who die without baptism, the word of God says little or nothing. It is therefore necessary to interpret the reticence of Scripture on this issue in the light of texts concerning the universal plan of salvation and the ways of salvation. In short, the problem both for theology and for pastoral care is how to safeguard and reconcile two sets of biblical affirmations: those concerning God’s universal salvific will (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4) and those regarding the necessity of baptism as the way of being freed from sin and conformed to Christ (cf. Mark 16:16; Matt. 28:18-19).

“... [W]hile knowing that the normal way to achieve salvation in Christ is by Baptism *in re*, the Church hopes that there may be other ways to achieve the same end. Because, by his Incarnation, the Son of God ‘in a certain way united himself’ with every human being, and because Christ died for all and all are in fact ‘called to one and the same destiny, which is divine,’ the Church believes that ‘the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.’

Read the complete document at www.vatican.va.

The Good Thief and Salvation by Faith Alone

by Douglas M. Beaumont

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

With these words, St. Dismas, one of the two thieves crucified with Jesus, was saved by Our Lord who promised, “Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:42-43).

Unfortunately, some Christians cite this beautiful story as evidence against the Catholic theology of salvation, claiming that salvation is by *faith alone* and anything in addition is contrary to the gospel. (This is the Reformation doctrine of *sola fide*). After all, they point out, the thief on the cross was never baptized, never received the Eucharist, never did any good works—yet he was saved!

But there are several problems with proof-texting St. Dismas in this manner.

First, a rather large assumption is being made concerning the thief’s sacramental record. How do we *know* he wasn’t baptized? The Bible doesn’t say he was—but it

doesn't say he wasn't. We certainly would not want to argue a positive case from silence, but neither should those who assume the thief was not baptized. For example, the Bible doesn't report the apostles' baptisms either!

It is also noteworthy that the good thief seems to have been catechized to some level. He knew Jesus had done nothing wrong, that Jesus was Lord, and that Jesus was going to his kingdom after he died (something Jesus made clear only to his disciples—see Matthew 13:10-11). It is possible, then, that the thief on the cross was a fallen-away disciple (cf. Matt. 27:44) who repented on the cross. If so, it's likely that he would have been baptized.

The second and much bigger problem is that even if the good thief had never been baptized, the analogy between his life and most other people's is insufficient to support *sola fide*. One issue is that the thief lived and died under the Old Covenant. The sacraments, such as Christian baptism and the Eucharist, are part of the New Covenant, which was not fully in place until Jesus died (Heb. 9:15-18, Acts 19:1-6).

Another problem with the analogy is that the good thief's situation was unlike virtually any person's in history. What God does for someone in an extremely unusual context should not reassure anyone outside those same conditions. Further, treating this "edge case" as a general principle actually proves too much. Would any Christian agree that the gospel can be boiled down to asking to be remembered in Jesus' kingdom? Moreover, if the good thief is a standard-setting example, why not others? Jesus forgave the sins of many people in a wide variety of circumstances that few consider normative today. In Mark 2:5, for instance, Jesus forgives a man based on his *friends'* faith! What does that do for "salvation by faith alone"?

A third reason why this story doesn't support *sola fide* is that the good thief on the cross actually seems to have exhibited all the faith and works that he could, given his situation. The fact that his physical limitations made it impossible for him to do anything more than speak was certainly not lost on God! Amidst all the assumptions made about this short story, one that seems safe is that had any sacrament been made available to the good thief for salvation, he would have received it. This hardly supports the theology behind *sola fide*, which eschews the need for good works under any circumstances.

In conclusion, it is important to understand that the Church makes many normative statements that are easily criticized when made into absolutes, and the sacraments fall prey to these illicit attacks all the time. The Church actually teaches that although we are bound to God's sacraments, God is not. The Church baptizes

because that is how God revealed that New Covenant believers enter into salvation (e.g., Mark 16:16; John 3:5; Acts 2:38, 22:16; 1 Pet. 3:21), but this does not mean God cannot save without baptism (see CCC 1257-1258). The same might be said of the Eucharist (cf. John 6:53-54). God looks on the heart, not just the body, and a person who unwillingly cannot participate in the sacraments is not judged for that.

There are unusual and extreme situations when normative salvific requirements cannot be met, and yet salvation remains possible. God knows this, and the Church teaches it. But unusual circumstances do not disprove normative expectations. By his grace, God can save through—genuine—faith alone, of course, but it is a mistake to make an exceptional act into a theological rule—especially one that directly contradicts Scripture.

Questions about Baptism and Salvation

Answered by the Catholic Answers Staff

Q: Can Someone Lose Their Salvation After Baptism?

A: We face the loss of our salvation if we commit a mortal sin. In order to be culpable for a mortal sin the person must know that a certain choice is a grave matter and then freely choose to commit it. Of course, another way to place one's salvation in jeopardy is to simply reject the faith.

Q: Does Scripture Support Baptism by Desire?

A: The conversion of Cornelius's household appears to be a case of baptism of desire in Scripture. In this case we *know* that Cornelius and his household had not yet been water baptized because after the experience Peter orders that they do go on to be water baptized (Acts 10:47-48).

While still in their pre-baptized condition, they hear the gospel from Peter (Acts 10:34-43), and as they respond to it, the Holy Spirit descends upon them and enables them to speak in tongues (Acts 10:44-46). This proves to Peter that they are acceptable to God and do not have to become Jews in order to become Christians.

Since the reception of the Holy Spirit is one of the blessings of salvation and is associated with baptism, it appears that they were placed in a state of grace by their response to the gospel and filled with the Holy Spirit even though they did not yet have water baptism. They thus would seem to be saved by baptism of desire, God allowing them to share in the blessings of salvation that are normally associated with baptism (Acts 2:38) even before the reception of the sacrament

itself. Peter is quick to insist, however, that they go on to receive the sacrament that their desire for Christ has already initiated.

Another possible example of baptism by desire is the thief on the cross. In his case we do not know that he was not baptized (by this time thousands of people in the area had been), and he likely died in the transitional period in history before baptism was mandatory for salvation.

Q: Why does the Church recognize Protestant baptism if Protestantism has no valid priesthood?

A: Since baptism is necessary for salvation and God wills the salvation of all, the Church recognizes all validly administered baptisms, even if Protestant.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states:

The ordinary ministers of baptism are the bishop and priest and, in the Latin Church, also the deacon. In case of necessity, anyone, even a non-baptized person, with the required intention, can baptize by using the Trinitarian baptismal formula. The intention required is to will to do what the Church does when she baptizes. The Church finds the reason for this possibility in the universal saving will of God and the necessity of baptism for salvation. (CCC 1256)

When considering the validity of non-Catholic baptism, the *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* instructs:

Baptism by immersion, or by pouring, together with the Trinitarian formula is, of itself, valid. Therefore, if the rituals, liturgical books, or established customs of a church or ecclesial community prescribe either of these ways of baptism, the sacrament is to be considered valid unless there are serious reasons for doubting that the minister has observed the regulations of his/her own community or church. (DE 95.a)

Q: Was my daughter's baptism valid, and is she in heaven now? (She lived only 20 hours. One of the nurses told me she baptized her, but I don't know if the nurse was Catholic or not).

A: The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states,

In case of necessity, anyone, even a non-baptized person, with the required intention, can baptize, by using the trinitarian baptismal formula. The intention required is to will to do what the Church does when she baptizes. The Church finds the reason for this possibility in the universal saving will of God and the necessity of baptism for salvation. (CCC 1256)

If the nurse used the correct form and matter and had the intent to administer Christian baptism, then the sacrament was valid. But even if your daughter died without baptism, there is reason to trust in God's mercy and hope for her salvation. The *Catechism* explains,

As regards children who have died without baptism, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus' tenderness toward children which caused him to say: "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them," allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without baptism. All the more urgent is the Church's call not to prevent little children coming to Christ through the gift of holy baptism. (CCC 1261)

Q: If we are already saved in Baptism, why do we still need to make a conscious decision to trust Christ for salvation?

A: From Scripture we know that the baptismal rite instituted by Christ is a sacramental rite. It is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace, a grace that sanctifies the soul and makes it pleasing to God (1 Pet. 3:21; 2 Pet. 1:4). We also read in John 3:5 and Mark 16:16 where Christ says "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God," and "he who believes and is baptized will be saved."

Then we read Acts 19:1-6 and 22:16; Romans 6:3-4, 11; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 12:13; and Galatians 3:26-27, where Paul says baptism frees us from sin, makes us children of God, gives us new life, and incorporates us into the Body of Christ. In Titus 3:5, Paul again refers to baptism as the "washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit," for it signifies and actually brings about the birth of water and the Spirit without which no one "can enter the kingdom of God" (CCC 1215). In Colossians 2:11-12, Paul declares that baptism is "the circumcision of Christ," and he also writes, "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead."

Catholics do not believe in the Protestant doctrine of "once saved, always saved." Not only was this teaching never taught in the early Church, there is also no biblical basis for it.

Every Catholic is called upon by the Church to make a "conscious decision to trust Christ for salvation." But trusting Christ for salvation is not a one-time event (e.g., praying the "sinner's prayer"). It is a lifelong commitment. In fact, the Church teaches that "reborn as sons of God, [the baptized] must profess before men the

faith they have received from God through the Church and participate in the apostolic and missionary activity of the people of God” (CCC 1270).

Q: How does baptism save us?

A: Jesus spoke of baptism as a second birth (or regeneration), saying, “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). And St. Paul tells us that this new birth through baptism is salvific, stating that God “saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). And again in 1 Peter 3:21: “Baptism ... now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

Christ instituted this washing of regeneration (re-birth) through the waters of baptism as an instrument of salvation. God also used water as the instrumental cause of salvation for the eight people aboard Noah’s ark (1 Peter 3:20-21).

St. Thomas Aquinas explains:

It was fitting that through the visible things themselves the remedies of salvation be applied to men.

Regarding the spiritual generation which takes place in baptism, one must consider that the generation of a living thing is a kind of change from non-living to life. But man in his origin was deprived of spiritual life by original sin and still every single sin whatever which is added draws him away from life. Baptism, therefore, which is spiritual generation, had to have the power to take away both original sin and all the actual, committed sins.

Now, because the sensible sign of a sacrament must be harmonious with the representation of its spiritual effect, and since washing away filth in bodily things is done more easily and more commonly by water, baptism is, therefore, suitably conferred in water made holy by the Word of God” (*Saint Thomas Aquinas—On the Truth of the Catholic Faith Summa Contra Gentiles Book Four: Salvation p. 250*).

Q: What makes the sacrament of baptism different from the other sacraments in that an ordained priest does not have to administer it?

A: The ordinary ministers of baptism (in other words, the people ordinarily expected to perform baptism) are priests and deacons. Because baptism is ordinarily necessary for salvation (John 3:5; CCC 1257), in life-and-death situations in which a priest or deacon is not available, anyone—including Catholics, non-Catholics, non-Christians, and non-theists—may baptize so long as they do so in the correct manner and with the correct intention to baptize.

Q: If the baptizing minister doesn't intend to administer a sacrament that confers grace, is the baptism valid?

A: The validity of the sacrament does depend on the right intention of the minister. But the right intention necessary to administer the sacrament of baptism is not dependent upon a complete or accurate understanding of the effects of baptism. It entails only the will to do what Christ willed and what the Church does.

Many Protestants view baptism as a symbol rather than a life-giving sacrament, but as long as there is the intention to do what Christ willed—and as long as the baptism is done in the name of the Holy Trinity—the baptism will accomplish what Christ intended, however imperfectly that may be understood or believed by the participants.

Q: Can a stillborn child be baptized?

A: If a newborn is in danger of death, the child should be baptized immediately. If no priest is readily available, any layperson can baptize using water and the Trinitarian formula.

If the unfortunate should occur, and the child dies before receiving baptism, there are other Rites of the Church that would apply. The Book of Blessings contains an *Order for Blessing of Parents After a Miscarriage*. The *Order of Christian Funerals* contains prayers that can be said in the presence of the deceased's body that can be adapted for infants and also contains prayers explicitly for deceased children that can be used immediately following a death.

As regards children who have died without baptism, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved and Jesus' tenderness toward children which caused him to say: "Let them come to me, do not hinder them" allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without baptism (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1261).