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*Fr. Joseph and the Parish Liturgy Committee have asked me to give a series of reflections on Christian Baptism in the hope of highlighting the meaning and importance of Baptism in the life of Christians and the Christian community. The Easter Season is a prime opportunity to do this. Here is the first of four reflections.*

Bishop Daniels

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### **Baptism: Immersion into the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus**

#### **a) The Paschal Mystery as Gift**

This sacrament is called *Baptism*, after the central rite by which it is carried out: to baptize . . . means to “plunge” or “immerse”; the “plunge” into the water symbolizes the catechumen’s burial into Christ’s death, from which he/she rises up by resurrection with him, as “a new creature” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, no.1214*).

Baptism is God’s most beautiful and magnificent gift . . . We call it gift, grace, anointing, enlightenment, garment of immortality, bath of rebirth, seal and most precious gift. It is called *gift* because it is conferred on those who bring nothing of their own . . . (*St. Gregory of Nazianzus*).

During almost every parish visit, I hear stories of how families have lost loved ones in tragic accidents at sea. While these stories inspire respect for the power and danger of the seas, they are also a stark reminder that water can be a symbol of death. However, at the same time we are well aware that water is a sign of life – nothing lives or grows without water. This paradox is what makes water the perfect sign to be used in Christian Baptism.



#### **b) Baptism in Early Church -- Immersion**



In the early days of the Church, Baptism was always celebrated with adults and happened like this: On the night before Easter, candidates for Baptism were led to the church where the Christian community was gathered, with each member of the community wearing a white garment and holding a lighted candle. At the entrance to the Church there was a Baptismal Pool into which the candidate was led by the priest. The Baptismal Pool was about three feet deep. The priest then

placed his hand on the shoulder of the candidate and plunged her/him under the water saying, "I Baptize you in the name of the Father". He then raised the candidate from the water. A second time the priest plunged the candidate under the water saying, "I Baptize you in the name of the Son", holding her/him under a little longer before raising the candidate up. A third time the priest plunged the candidate under the water – this time holding her/him under until the person struggled – while saying, "I Baptize you in the name of the Holy Spirit". By the time the candidate was raised from the water the third time, she/he had experienced the fear of death and the liberation of life. Once out of the Baptismal Pool the candidates were dressed in a white garment and given a lighted candle, becoming one with the Christian Community. The newly Baptized members were then led to the front of the Church and were anointed by the Bishop (Confirmation) and received the Eucharist for the first time with the Christian community.



**c) Imitating Jesus in Death and Resurrection**

In writing to the Church in Rome, Saint Paul says: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (*Rm 6:3-4*). Saint Paul insists that it is necessary to follow Jesus in death in order to follow him into new life. Of course, this cannot happen literally, but it can happen Sacramentally. In the Sacrament of Baptism, we die and rise with Jesus through the sign of water. While the ritual is symbolic, the effects are very real.

**Our great Christian hope is knowing that the death and resurrection of Jesus was not only a victory in the life of Jesus, but that his victory has been shared with us in Baptism.** Through Baptism we become one with Jesus and share in the promise of new life now and in eternal life yet to come. "Baptism indeed is the seal of eternal life (*St. Irenaeus*). The faithful Christian who has "kept the seal" until the end, remaining faithful to the demands of her/his Baptism, will be able to depart this life "marked with the sign of faith," with her/his baptismal faith, in expectation of the blessed vision of God --- the consummation of faith --- and in the hope of resurrection" (*CCC, no. 1274*).

**Next week: The Effects of Baptism in Our Life**