

Easter Vigil

<i>Reading 1</i>	Genesis 1:1-2:2
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 22:8-9, 17-18, 19-20, 23-24
<i>Reading 2</i>	Genesis 22:1-18
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 16:5, 8, 9-10, 11
<i>Reading 3</i>	Exodus 14:15—15:1
<i>Psalm</i>	Exodus 15:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 17-18
<i>Reading 4</i>	Isaiah 54:5-14
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 30:2, 4, 5-6, 11-12, 13
<i>Reading 5</i>	Isaiah 55:1-11
<i>Psalm</i>	Isaiah 12:2-3, 4, 5-6
<i>Reading 6</i>	Baruch 3:9-15, 32--4:4
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 11
<i>Reading 7</i>	Ezekiel 36:16-17A, 18-28
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 42:3, 5; 43:3, 4
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 6:3-11
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia

Today the Church celebrates Easter Sunday of the Resurrection of the Lord. And one of the things that happens at the Easter Vigil—which is in a sense, the feast of all feasts, the climax of the liturgical year—is that we have a long string of readings from the Old Testament. Multiple readings—you can do up to seven readings from the Old Testament. Then of course, the wonderful Gospel of the accounts of Jesus being raised from the dead on Easter Sunday.

And it's easy for the second reading in this case, the reading from the letters of the New Testament, to be overlooked. But we shouldn't do that, and we're not going to do that. I want to give you a short little video here on the reading from St. Paul for the Easter Vigil, which is from Romans 6:3-11. It's the beautiful, powerful account in the letter to the Romans of the relationship between Baptism (which many people will be receiving at the Easter Vigil for the first time, the Sacrament of Baptism)...the relationship between Baptism and the resurrection of Christ, between the Baptism of a Christian and the death and the resurrection of Jesus.

So this is from Romans 6:3-11. For my money, it's the most powerful and the most beautiful and theologically compelling description of Baptism and of the life of a Christian in the letters of Paul. I really love this text; it's really close to my heart. So let's just start in Romans 6:3, and we'll read through it and then we'll come back and unpack it and try to relate it to Baptism. Paul says this:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.¹

Beautiful, powerful passage here...so much to say about it. Let's just walk through it step by step. The first point is about Baptism. I love that St. Paul begins here by saying:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? (Romans 6:3)

And I can imagine some of the readers saying, "Well, no, I actually didn't realize that." Or at least, I know for a fact that today many people might be unaware that

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Baptism was principally about being immersed—that's what *baptizō* means—being plunged into the death of Christ.

Why do I say that a lot of people might be surprised by that language? Well, in our own day and time, the Sacrament of Baptism gets described in all kinds of ways. So, I've been to many baptisms. Sometimes Baptism is described as a sacrament that removes original sin. That, of course, is the case. In that case, it'll be like a sacrament of forgiveness, sacrament of cleansing.

In other cases, Baptism is described as the sacrament that incorporates us into the Body of Christ, and that, of course, is true as well. There the sacrament becomes one of communion, of joining us to Jesus and as members of His Mystical Body. Other times, I've heard the Sacrament of Baptism described as one in which the Holy Spirit comes down to dwell in the soul of the Baptized person. In that case, it's a sacrament of indwelling, and that is true as well. That the gift of the Holy Spirit—the indwelling power of the Trinity, in fact—coming to dwell in the soul of the baptized is one of the graces, one of the beautiful mysteries of the sacrament.

Very rarely, however, have I been to a Baptism where the Baptism was described as crucifixion, as a co-crucifixion with Christ, where the emphasis was put on the fact that your baby (often the infant Baptism) or this person is being baptized into the death of Jesus. But that's how Paul sees Baptism. He's highlighting the mystery of Baptism as what we might call the sacrament of crucifixion and resurrection.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death...

So pause there. When Paul's thinking of Baptism, he's obviously thinking of the imagery of what the Greek word connotes, which is immersion into water. But here Paul says that in Baptism, we're actually being buried with Christ. So it's not just the mystery of the cross, it's also the mystery of His tomb. That in a sense, just as Christ's body was buried in the tomb, so too we are buried in the waters of Baptism. We are immersed into the death of Jesus:

...so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:4)

So Paul thinks of Baptism, first and foremost, as a sacrament of crucifixion and resurrection, where we are (in a sense) being co-crucified with Christ and then co-resurrected with Christ. That's redundant to say co/with, but you get my point. I think one of the reasons this is often lost in contemporary Catholic catechesis on Baptism is in part just because of the way the rite works. Because in most contemporary contexts, we don't actually bury a person into the water. We don't practice immersion. It's not the customary form of Baptism in the Roman rite, in the Latin rite. Normally, we'll either have sprinkling in the form of infant Baptism or with pouring like with an adult Baptism, where the water will be poured over their head.

But when Paul is describing Baptism, he's thinking here, for example, about the Baptism of St. John the Baptist, where people would immerse themselves in the water of the Jordan and then come up out of the water—so that the symbolism of death and resurrection is much more apparent.

And if you permit me for a moment to just share an anecdote from my own personal experience on this...the first of our children, when she was baptized, she was baptized by immersion. She was just an infant, but she was immersed. And I'll never forget, when the priest placed her into the font under the water, and then pulled her out of the water—first of all, the water was very cold. It was late October, and it was quite cold, so I felt bad about that. But when she came out of that icy cold water, the first thing she did was take a very deep breath, catch her breath. And I couldn't help but think of like the Holy Spirit coming into her at that very moment where she breathes in, so it was a kind of convergence of the symbolism and the mystery of the rite.

But I remember when I saw that happen, and we had this passage read for her baptismal liturgy. We read the text from Romans 6, which is one of the texts you can read for the Baptismal liturgy. Seeing her go down into the water and then come up out, it was visible—the imagery of death and resurrection, the imagery of

immersion and then coming up out of the waters into new light. And that, I think, is what Paul is getting at here. He's saying:

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

So I just throw that out there just as a commentary, especially any those of you who might be doing baptismal catechesis or baptismal preparation—maybe you want to try this and maybe you won't—you might want to say, "Okay, now we're about to crucify your baby"...which is what's going to happen mystically. "But the good news is we're going to raise him up through the power of the Holy Spirit as well." It's a crucifixion and a resurrection.

But the crucifixion is so important for Paul here as he goes on to say:

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

What does that mean? Well, for Paul, he's very clear. The only way for us to partake of the power of the resurrection—the only way for us to triumph over the sin of Adam and the death that Adam brought into the world—is through the cross of Jesus Christ. It's through the cross and the resurrection. So the reason Baptism is so powerful and the reason it's efficacious—the reason it has the power to save—is precisely because it's the only way for us to participate sacramentally and mystically, but really and truly, in the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. That's what happens. Paul said:

...if we have been united with him in a death like his...

That's what happens in Baptism...

...we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

In fact, he goes on to say that what happens in Baptism is:

We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. (Romans 6:5-6)

Pause there. So why is it important for a parent to have their child crucified with Christ in the waters of Baptism? Why is it important for an adult to have water poured over them and be crucified with Christ in Baptism? It's because it's only through the cross that sin:

...might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.

So this is one of the effects that I mentioned earlier. The Church teaches that original sin is removed through the grace of Baptism. Well, original sin is a kind of bondage to sin. It's describing sin—as Paul will say elsewhere—that sin reigned, that death reigned. It has a power over humanity. Well, Baptism breaks the bonds of that power of sin and death, precisely because Baptism has the power of the cross of Christ. It's that simple.

And even more, the reason you want to put your child to death in the waters of the baptismal font is because, as Paul says:

...he who has died is freed from sin.

I don't know if you've ever thought about this, but if there's any silver lining to death, it's that once you die, you can't sin anymore. A person who has died is freed from sin. So what Paul is saying here is that just as a person who has died is free from sin, so when we die with Christ in the waters of Baptism, we are freed from the power of sin and the dominion of death over us. And he says:

But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. (Romans 6:8-10)

Alright, so here notice, Paul once again, he doesn't just tie it to the crucifixion. He's also tying Baptism to the resurrection. So in a sense then, when we come out of the waters of Baptism, we participate already...we taste (so to speak) the glory of the resurrection. It's a pledge of the fact that our bodies will one day share the same glory, the same power, the same life that He has in His risen body.

So beautiful, powerful passage. And then he concludes with an ethical implication. So notice, everything I've said so far, we might call this more Christological and sacramental. So Paul's talking about the Christological meaning of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. He's drawing out the implications for the Sacrament of Baptism, for the mystery of Baptism. But he doesn't stop there. He also ends with a moral implication, an ethical implication. He says:

So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

So once a person comes out of the waters of the baptismal font, if they really and truly have died to sin, died to the old creation, died to the old world...then they ought to live as if that is the case. That's what Paul presumes—that once a person is baptized, they're going to live a new life. And they're going to, as he puts it, be:

...alive to God in Christ Jesus.

And there you get the imagery of the Mystical Body. For Paul, everyone who is baptized is in Christ. They're all members of His Mystical Body. And the implication of that is that we have to live as Christ lived. We have to not just imitate Jesus, but participate in the mystery of His life, His death, and ultimately, our hope is to participate in the mystery of His resurrection.

And that's why even though Paul doesn't use the term Christian, it's such an apt description of believers in Jesus and followers of Jesus. We are to take the very name of Christ—title, *Christos*, anointed—and we are to be like little Christs, little anointed ones...those who belong to, who follow and who emulate and imitate and participate in the one Anointed One, the one *Christos*, the one Messiah.

Now you might be thinking, “Wow, Dr. Pitre. That’s all really fascinating. I haven’t heard that before” or “That’s kind of a fresh angle on the Sacrament of Baptism...I have not really thought about it as the sacrament of crucifixion—the sacrament of crucifixion and resurrection.” And maybe you haven’t heard about it. Maybe you have. Maybe this is old news.

But if it’s fresh or new to you, I just want to point out here that I’m just really getting this from the *Catechism*. This is just the teaching of the Church. There’s so many different aspects to the mystery of Baptism. You can’t cover every single one of them in catechesis, but this is a crucial one I think we would do well to highlight. And not just me...but the Church gives us this text from St. Paul at the Easter Vigil to describe this mystery. And if you listen to what the *Catechism* says about this, it’s really a beautiful presentation of everything I’ve been talking about. In paragraph 1002 and 1003, listen to the words of the Church:

Christ will raise us up “on the last day”; but it is also true that, in a certain way, we have already risen with Christ. For, by virtue of the Holy Spirit, Christian life is already now on earth a participation in the death and Resurrection of Christ:

And then here, it doesn’t quote Romans 6, but it quotes a similar passage in Colossians 2:

“...you were buried with him in Baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.... If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.”

Colossians 2:12 and 3:1. And actually, that is the second reading for the Easter Sunday Mass. So Romans 6 is for the Easter Vigil, Colossians 2 and 3 is for the Easter Sunday Mass. Now the *Catechism* keeps going:

United with Christ by Baptism, believers already truly participate in the heavenly life of the risen Christ, but this life remains “hidden with Christ in God.”

That's very important. It's not visible. You can't see it. When the baby comes up out of the waters of the font, or a person comes up out of the waters of Baptism, they don't look any different. There's no visible change to their appearance. It's a hidden mystery, but their life is now hidden with Christ in God. They've been exalted with Christ into the heavenly places.

The Father has already “raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

That's Ephesians 2:6, also Paul.

Nourished with his body in the Eucharist, we already belong to the Body of Christ. When we rise on the last day we “also will appear with him in glory.”²

So notice, the *Catechism* is very clear about the inextricable bond between the Sacrament of Baptism and the resurrection on the last day. And if you have any doubts about this, one last point—this connection, this is beautiful and powerful. In paragraph 1010 of the *Catechism*, it says this about the relationship between Baptism and death, so we're talking about the sacrament of crucifixion. What's the relationship between Baptism and death? Listen to these words:

Because of Christ, Christian death has a positive meaning: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

That's St. Paul in Philippians 1:21.

“The saying is sure: if we have died with him, we will also live with him.”

2 Timothy 2:11.

² CCC 1002-1003

What is essentially new about Christian death is this: through Baptism, the Christian has already “died with Christ” sacramentally, in order to live a new life; and if we die in Christ’s grace, physical death completes this “dying with Christ” and so completes our incorporation into him in his redeeming act.³

I love that passage in the *Catechism*, because I like to ask my students, “What is it that completes Baptism?” And some will say, “Oh, well, it’s the anointing at the end of the rite.” Or others will say, “Oh, it’s Confirmation. Confirmation is the completion of Baptism.”

And there’s obviously some truth to the idea that Confirmation completes Baptism as one of the Rites of Initiation. But I do think that it’s fascinating that according to the *Catechism*, it’s not just those sacramental acts—like the sacramental act of Confirmation—that completes Baptism. According to the *Catechism*, your Baptism is really only complete, totally complete, when you die. Because in so far as Baptism unites you with the death and resurrection of Christ, then as the *Catechism* says:

...physical death completes this “dying with Christ” and so completes our incorporation into him in his redeeming act. (CCC 1010)

So the effects of your Baptism, the fruits of it, the graces received—all of them aren’t just for you to live a life of grace in this world. But at the end of the day, they’re all pointing to that final hour as well, when you are really united with Christ crucified in your own death, which will then (God-willing) then be the prelude to your bodily resurrection. So a very powerful text on this Easter Vigil as we welcome the newly baptized into the Church but also call to mind the mystery of our own Baptism, which as Paul says:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

³ CCC 1010

So let us consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Him.