

Baptism has roots in church's earliest days

The SACRAMENTS

EDITORS' NOTE — The following article is the second installment of an eight-part series that will focus on the Catholic Church's seven sacraments.

This article explores the historical development and meaning of baptism.

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During the brief period of time Jesus spent on earth following his resurrection, he is written to have left these words with his disciples:

"Full authority has been given to me both in heaven and on earth; go therefore, and make disciples of all the nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you. And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world!"

Obviously, Jesus' command left a lasting impression on his followers, for the administration of the sacrament of baptism — the dipping of a person under holy waters — has been one of the universal features marking the variety of Christian communities founded since the faith began spreading in the first century.

Indeed, along with the celebration of the Eucharist, Protestant and Catholic theologians have often agreed that baptism is the only other sacrament that Jesus seems to have explicitly instituted.

The sacrament's character was developed from the age-old idea, common to many religions, that cleansing a person with water rendered them spiritually as well as physically clean.

Dr. Joseph Martos, author of *Doors to the Sacred — A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church*, notes that converts to Judaism in the time of Christ were often initiated by circumcision, baptism and sacrifice. A convert's baptism signified that he had "symbolically joined the Israelites who had passed through the Red Sea" when escaping Egypt, Martos wrote.

More familiar examples of baptism for many Catholics are the New Testament stories surrounding St. John the Baptist, who heralded Christ's arrival by calling men and women to be baptized in the Jordan River.

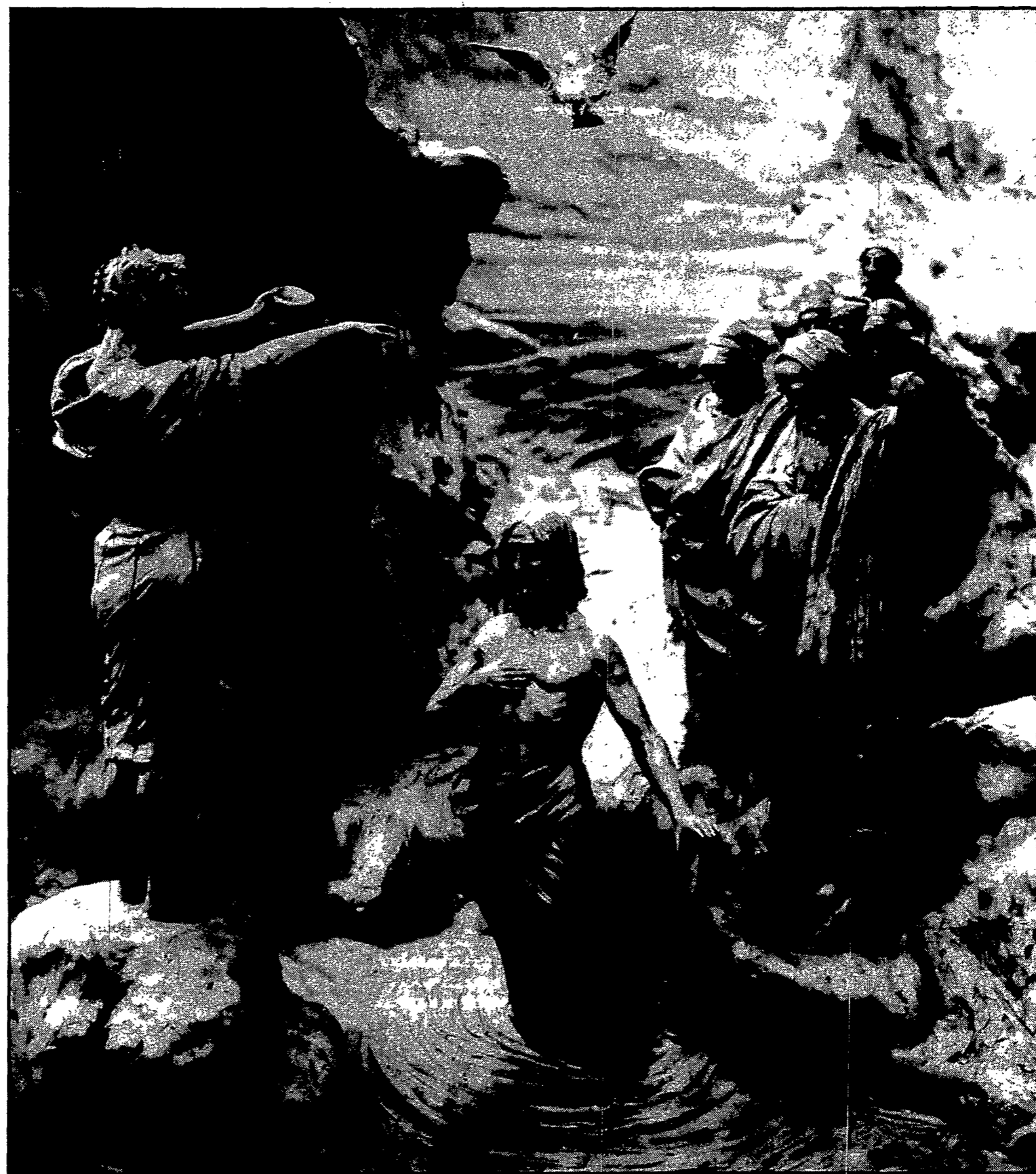
Beginning with the story of Pentecost, the Acts of the Apostles contains a number of accounts of adults and whole families undergoing baptism, although the writers make no specific mention of infant baptism. In the early church, people wanting to be baptized Christians underwent a period of preparation before receiving the sacrament.

Martos notes that immersing a new Christian in water was generally seen as a sign that they were forgiven of their sins, and were "dying" to their old life. St. Paul, for example, insisted that those who were baptized, participated, in a real sense, in Christ's own death and resurrection.

"Paul's theology of baptism was Christianity's first great attempt to articulate the experience of dying to the past and beginning afresh, filled with an energy and freedom that he and others had not known before," Martos wrote.

During the first few centuries of the church, when it had to operate under the constant threat of persecution and harassment, Christian communities developed a long process to test the sincerity of those who sought to be baptized. As more and more Gentiles joined the Jews who initially made up the Christian communities, the church found it necessary to give lengthier instruction in the foundations of the faith.

Candidates for admission into the church first found a sponsor willing to help them through a period of moral formation,



A wax sculpture by Italian artist D. Mastroianni depicts the baptism of Jesus.

File photo

which often lasted two to three years. Some Christians-in-training were worried they would not be saved if they were killed by Roman persecutors before they were baptized. Fortunately, the church eventually concluded that such people were "baptized by blood" — in other words, saved by their willingness to give up their own life rather than renounce Christ.

When a candidate finally was ready to be baptized, he or she began receiving a series of weekly "exorcisms," which consisted of being prayed over; blessed and signed with the cross on various parts of the body; and being anointed with oil.

Father R. Richard Brickler, pastor of St. Boniface Parish in Rochester, noted that oil symbolized "spiritual health and strength," as he baptized an infant girl and her older half-sister at his church on Sunday, July 7. Some scholars have also noted that the practice of anointing with oil flows from the fact that the name "Christ" itself means "the Anointed One."

In the days before their baptism, early candidates for admission to the church fasted and prayed, and were questioned persistently about their moral life. On the evening before Easter, the candidate kept vigil through the night and greeted the local bishop in the morning, along with a number of deacons and deaconesses.

The joyful company would then proceed to a nearby pool or cistern of water, which was blessed. After the candidates were

anointed and exorcised one last time, they were immersed one by one naked in the water, aided by either a deacon or deaconess who asked the young Christian if he or she believed in the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. After the candidates answered "yes" to each question, the newly baptized candidate left the pool dressed in white garments, symbolizing their being "clothed" in Christ.

The bishop present would lay his hands on each of the candidates, anointing the heads with oil a final time, and praying that they would be filled with the Holy Spirit. Interestingly, this process was the origin of the sacrament of confirmation, which was later split off from the Western church's baptismal ceremony for various reasons. The sacrament of confirmation will be explored in next week's *Catholic Courier*.

Many of the aforementioned practices have parallels in today's Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, which, like the earliest adult baptisms, includes confirmation and many times baptism and the reception of a candidate's first Eucharist.

However, most Catholics have witnessed the more common practice of infant baptism, a practice that began spreading in the second and third century. Infant baptism developed as church theologians came to see each child as lacking the original state of grace in which Adam and Eve dwelt before the Fall, an inherited deformity known as *original sin*.

Early Christians, like Cyprian of Antioch, contended that St. Paul defined original sin when he wrote, in his letter to the Romans, that through Adam's sin, all humanity was touched by his hell-bent error.

A proponent of Cyprian's opinion, St. Augustine concluded, therefore, that unbaptized infants went to hell because they lacked the "seal of Christ" needed to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. As his view eventually prevailed — and as membership in the Christian church became the norm, rather than the exception, in the Roman Empire — infant baptism was widely accepted and developed as the form of baptism experienced today by many Catholics.

Belief in the necessity of baptism for salvation was so strong that it led such missionaries as St. Francis Xavier to reportedly perform 10,000 baptisms in one day in 16th-century India.

As scholars in this century discovered the early church's original intent of baptism, with its emphasis on adult instruction beforehand, the church came to the belief that the unbaptized do not necessarily go to hell, only that the unbaptized are not members of the Catholic Church. The Second Vatican Council called upon the church to once again see baptism as one of three sacraments of "initiation" — the other two being confirmation and the Eucharist.

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NEXT WEEK: Confirmation.