WHAT'S THE WATER FOR?

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The little boy stood by and watched as his infant sister was baptized during the Sunday Service. He was especially intent as he looked up at the splashing of the water over her head. After a moment, with a puzzled expression on his face, he asked in a voice which most of the congregation could hear, "What's the water for?"

What is the water for? Most people who have been baptized want to take their baptism seriously. But in an age when ablutions are passe and sacraments generally are suspect, I have the feeling that a growing number of Christians are puzzled by the water, too; puzzled perhaps more than they want to admit. Many today, I think, want to ask the child's simple question. What is baptism? And what does it mean for our life from day to day?

We can say, first of all, that baptism is the entrance into a new life of freedom. The Gospel of John thinks of it as a second birth(Jn. 3:3). According to that imagry, baptism is the concrete indication that we have entered into genuine life, that we have left all womb-like kinds of existence behind and commenced a life of freedom. This freedom, we venture to say and to believe, is established with the splashing of ordinary water.

Presumably God could have chosen something other than common water to give us a new life of freedom. Presumably, in a like manner, God could have chosen some other nation than ancient Israel to be his agent in bringing salvation to the

world. As the saying goes, "How odd of God to choose the Jews," – that insignificant, uncultured band of slaves living in bondange in mighty Egypt. Similarly, how odd of God to choose common water as the agent initiating our new life of freedom. Ordinary water; as Luther says, baptismal water is the same stuff that the cow drinks. How odd. But that is the way God has chosen to dispense his gifts. That is how we know them.

But baptism is not water alone. It is water and the Spirit, as John says(Jn. 3:5). Interestingly, the word for being "born again" which John uses can also be rendered "born from above," that is, born from the Spirit of God. Your baptismal freedom, then, is not solitary, as if you were the center of the circle. Rather there are two poles: you and God. Baptismal freedom is standing before God and with God.

It is like a child growing into the love of his parents. Without'that parental love, as the depth psychologists have taught us, the child grows into a largely fearful and hostile world, in which he is very much alone. Sure of the love of his parents, however, the child will develop a sense of his own worth as a person and a "basic trust," which allow him to venture forth into the world on his own. The parental love is like a net stretched under the child as he begins to walk the tightrope of independent existence.

Much the same is true of our baptismal freedom. We are free by being in the loving presence of God's Spirit. We are free through our adoption in baptism as sons of God. So St. Paul says, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship." (Ro. 8:14f.) That adoption by the Spirit of God £s our

freedom. With the net of the Spirit's loving presence beneath us, then, we are free to venture out on to the tightrope of life.

Now the psychologist, Erich Fromm, has written a book entitled Escape From Freedom. In it he takes Christians to task,,in particular Martin Luther, because Fromm thinks that Christians are inclined to return to the womb – of mother Church. And Fromm is not altogether wrong at this point.

People understandably have a tendency to look at the Church as that one institution in this uncertain world where things can be visibly sure and certain. That one place that is really safe from disruptive change'. Some Christians, accordingly, rest much of their religious commitment on an infallible Pope. Others invest their trust in a "paper pope," a Bible whose szery jot and tittle is said to be literally inspired. Still others rest their confidence in an unchanging ceremonious liturgy, a ritual in which every little motion must be performed in just the "right way."

But neither those people nor Erich Fromm have understood the meaning of baptism. Baptism is not an escape from freedom into a religious womb of safety and security. Baptism is entrance into freedom, a new birth. You are thrust out into a life in the Spirit. And life in the Spirit cannot be captured and tied to any visible human establishment. John says this explicitly: "The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (Jn. 3:8) So baptism is opposed to any totalitarian demands in the sphere of religion, whether these demands be papal, biblical, or liturgical.

In a like manner, baptism is opposed to non-religious

totalitarian demands. Baptism stands over agains the facist or the communist totalitarian state. If a person has been baptized, he can never rightly lose himself in the womb of the totalitarian state. He may live under such a political system, but he cannot rightly dissolve his identity in it, becoming a mere tool of the state.

The same holds true for our vast technological democratic society. If a person's self-regard is established only by the fact that he is a one-hundred per cent American who uses the right toothepaste and drives the right car, he may be close to the dream-man of Madison Avenue, but he has not understood his baptism. In fact, he has escaped from freedom into the womb of our mass society.

So in baptism we enter into a life which is distinct from all totalitarianism, ofthe religious^.or the secular variety. Likewise for the less dramatic pressures of our modern world: Led by the Spirit, we are free to venture out into daily life in relative independence. We do not have to give in to those constantly felt little pressures which force us to conform simply for the sake of conformity. Led by the Spirit, we have a clear perspective about keeping up with the Joneses, about the largely conformist "new morality," about demands for unquestioning political allegiance, and about those sometimes hidden pressures to follow the "party line" of our religious denomination. We are free in the daily routine of life just as we are free in relation to the overall totalitarian demands of religion and society.

More positively, in baptism we enter into a life which is not only free <u>from</u> totalitarian demands and free <u>from</u> daily pressures to conform,'but also free <u>for</u> the sake of our needy neighbors. "Love is of God," says the First Epistle of John, "and he:.who loves is born of God and knows God." (I Jn. 4:7) Earlier, the same writer puts the question which pinpoints

the positive side of our baptismal freedom: ''But if any one has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" (I Jn. 3:17) Born 6anew.': by water and the Spirit, we are free for the sake of our needy brothers throughout the world.

We can also say that baptism is the entrance into an abiding grace. Baptism is first and foremost not of our own doing. That is symbolized nicely by the practice of infant baptism.

We were baptized, then, not because we made, one or another outstanding achievements, whether it be a fine religious faith or a success in school or business. No, we were baptized as a gift. Long before we had any discernible religious feelings, or any academic or business inclinations, we were given the gift of a new life of freedom. In baptism God embraces us with his care long before we fully know what that means.

And that Divine care, or that Divine grace, as we also can say, abides. • It is like the atmosphere. It is always there. It abides with us no matter where we go or what we do. When we are working hard or sleeping, God is there. When we are rejoicing or mourning, God is there. As the Psalmist asks, "Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me."(Ps. 139:7-10) Or as Paulremarks tersely, "God is faithful."(I Cor. 10:13)

How else do we live through the various crises that life thrusts upon us? How else are we able to go on walking on our own two feet after we unexcusably fail a friend or a member of our family? How else are we able to keep from crumbling permanently to the ground when death takes a loved one?

The Psalmist, again, speaks forthrightly: "The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down." (Ps. 145:14) So in our new life of freedom, we are not alone. We live in the atmosphere of an abiding grace.

But we, of course, are personally involved in our baptism. Hence, in addition to everything else, we will want to say that baptism is entrance into faith. Faith belongs to the heart of baptism. Without faith the new freedom is unrealised and the abiding grace is unknown.

This is true, I think, for infant baptism too. And of course this sounds like a contradiction. For, how can an infant have faith? It seems to me, at this point, that it is rather idle to speculate about a little baby having faith. I think it is much better to say, simply, that an infant's baptism is not complete until he does grow into personal knowledge of the Spirit of God.

In a somewhat similar sense, everyone's baptism is incomplete. For, each day, we breathe the gracious atmosphere of God anew. Each day, with varying intensity, we come to faith anew, ^he water entails a continually renewed personal involvement with the Spirit, that is, faith.

Now faith is not automatic. Few people will say that it is. We have to work at faith, much as we have to invest energy to keep breathing. Indeed at one point Paul even likens the life of faith to the life of an athlete. "So run that you may obtain [the prize]," he says. And then he adds, "every athlete exercises self-control in all things."(I Cor. 9:24f.) We do not know, of course, whether the ancient olympians, whom Paul has in mind, could run a mile in less than four minutes. But I suspect that then, as now, good runners disciplined themselves to develop their breathing. So it is with the life of faith, particularly with regard to communal worship.

Communal worship is where we develop our breathing, as it

were, where we attend directly to God's gracious presence, so that when we are apart we will be able to breathe the same presence of God naturally, even without being conscious of it. Which is to say, then, that baptism is an entrance into faith specifically in the sense of being an entrance into a regular discipline of worship. Quite rightly in our order of baptism the parents are exhorted to bring the child "to the services of God's House."

But faith is not just a regular discipline. That can be deadening. Paul himself says that the faithful should be "aglow with the Spirit."(Ro. 14:11) He means, I think, that faith is full of vitality. John expresses the point explicitly: "the Spirit gives life. "(Jn. 6:63) We might say, therefore, that baptismal faith is as much like a man leaving the stuffy air of the city and breathing in the fresh air of the ocean, as it is like the runner breathing hard during the course of his race. We know, as a matter of fact, that the worship services of both ancient Israel and early Christianity were full of life. "Sing unto the Lord a new song," the Psalmist calls, "...praise his name in the dance, ...sing praise to him with the timbrel and harp." (Ps. 149:If.) This is echoed by the letter to the Ephesians: "Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing, and making melody to the Lord with all your heart."(Eph. 5:18f.)

To breathe in the fresh salt air after a stuffy week in the city'. That can really pick you up.. Likewise, baptismal faith is invigorating. It is no accident, perhaps, that when the Psalmist thinks of the abiding presence of God's Spirit he also thinks of the sea. "If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me." Ibis is the same motif which appears in the Genesis creation narrative, – the Spirit of God

hovering over the primeval waters(Gen. 1:2).

Baptismal faith, accordingly, is drawing deep invigorating breaths of the Divine Spirit who comes from the Infinite Depths of God himself. In a certain sense, that is the very water which was splashed on our heads in baptism: the water with the exhilarating, life-giving freshness of God's creative Spirit. With the water, we breathe deeply. We enter into the exhilarating discipline of faith.

Baptism, then, is the entranceway: into a new life of freedom, into an abiding grace, into an exhilerating discipline of faith. Baptism, indeed, is the saga of life itself. You are born. You are surrounded everywhere by the atmosphere. You breathe deeply. That's what the water is for.

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