

A Survey of Baptismal Regeneration

In this article, we come to a notion of regeneration that is seriously at variance with the divine revelation of the New Testament—the Roman Catholic doctrine of baptismal regeneration. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* refers to baptism as “the sacrament of regeneration” (§1213),¹ and this is the basis for employing the term *baptismal regeneration*. Though spoken of and adhered to for centuries, is baptismal regeneration, as believed and practiced by a variety of Catholics today, according to the revelation of the pure Word of God? In the first part of this article we will endeavor to present the current doctrine of baptismal regeneration, including its effects. We also will make some notations regarding its current practice. In the second part of the article we briefly will trace the development of this doctrine and practice, from the second half of the second century to the middle of the sixteenth, in certain Christian writings which has served as a justification for today’s belief and practice.

The Definition, Effects, and Practice

In a main article of the *Catechism* entitled “The Sacrament of Baptism,” the first section (§1213) gives an overall summary:

Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit (*vitae spiritualis ianua*), and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: “Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word.”

According to this, the baptized enter life in the Spirit and are reborn as sons of God by means of “the sacrament of regeneration.” The *Catechism*, under the heading “What Is This Sacrament Called?” goes on to say,

This sacrament is also called “*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.” (§1215)

According to this teaching, baptism is the direct cause and actual means by which one is born spiritually. The two scriptural references that are footnoted in this section are Titus 3:5 and John 3:5, with the latter important reference

also occurring in five other footnotes in the article on the sacrament of baptism.²

At this point it will also be instructive to compare §1228, which is in the section subtitled “Baptism in the Church,” with §1238, which is in the section subtitled “The mystagogy of the celebration.” We read in §1228:

Hence Baptism is a bath of water in which the “imperishable seed” of the Word of God produces its life-giving effect. St. Augustine says of Baptism: “The word is brought to the material element, and it becomes a sacrament.”

It must be noted that, although the Word of God is acknowledged here as having a life-giving effect, it is baptism as a bath of water *in which* this effect is produced. This virtue of the baptismal water is reiterated in §1238:

The *baptismal water* is consecrated by a prayer of epiclesis (either at this moment or at the Easter Vigil). The Church asks God that through his Son the power of the Holy Spirit may be sent upon the water, so that those who will be baptized in it may be “born of water and the Spirit.”

Here the focus is very much on the water itself as the sphere in which the pre-eminently important spiritual experience of regeneration takes place. Those baptized *in it* are reborn.

Two more defining portions should be noted. Under the subheading “Faith and Baptism,” the *Catechism* states that baptism “is the source of that new life in Christ from which the entire Christian life springs forth” (§1254). Under the heading “The Necessity of Baptism,” we have the following: “The Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation” (§1257). A little further along in the same section, we read:

The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude; this is why she takes care not to neglect the mission she has received from the Lord to see that all who can be baptized are “reborn of water and the Spirit.”

Baptism is presented here as the unique means of divine life and blessing. Thus, the Church will spare no means to baptize all who “can be.”

Some of the other believed effects of baptism in addition to regeneration have already been mentioned in the process of presenting the definition of baptismal regeneration. In the *Catechism*, under the section “The Grace of Baptism” we find an enumeration and explanation of these effects. In §1262 we see that “the two principal effects are purification from sins and new birth in the Holy Spirit.” In the following twelve subsections (§1263—§1274), the forgiveness of sins, original and personal, is listed, since in “those who have been reborn nothing remains that would impede their entry into the Kingdom of God” (§1263)—although it is acknowledged that “an inclination to sin” still remains (§1264). Another effect is to make the neophyte “‘a new creature,’ an adopted son of God, who has become ‘a partaker of the divine nature,’ member of Christ and co-heir with him, and a temple of the Holy Spirit” (§1265). Sanctifying grace, “the grace of *justification*,” is infused, which brings about faith, hope, love, the power to live through the Holy Spirit, and the ability to grow morally. “Thus the whole organism of the Christian’s supernatural life has its roots in Baptism” (§1266). The remaining effects that are listed are: incorporation into the church, the Body of Christ (§1267—1270)—“Reborn as sons of God, [the baptized] must profess before men the faith that they have received from God through the Church” (§1270); the sacramental bond of the unity of Christians—“Baptism therefore constitutes *the sacramental bond of unity* existing among all who through it are reborn” (§1271); and an indelible spiritual mark (§1272—1274), with baptism being “the seal of eternal life” (§1274). To be especially noted in the above is that the faith received in baptism from God comes “through the Church” (§1270).

In the light of such teaching concerning baptismal regeneration, together with its believed effects, it is not surprising that for centuries there has been the practice of infant baptism. The *Catechism* states (in the section entitled “Who Can Receive Baptism?”), “Every person not yet baptized and only such a person is able to be baptized” (§1246). This includes, of course, adults, but it is the practice of baptizing infants that most reveals the potential and grave dangers that the doctrine of baptismal regeneration entails. This practice of baptizing infants received its strongest support from Augustine whose teaching has had a direct impact on that of today. In his treatise “On the Just Deserts and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants,” written around A.D. 412, Augustine states (Bk. I, chap. 10): “For by this grace He engrafts into His body even baptized infants, who certainly have not yet become able to imitate any one....[He] gives the hidden grace of His Spirit, which He secretly infuses even into infants” (19). In a letter to Jerome (§166.21), around three years later (A.D. 415), Augustine writes further concerning this “practice”:

Likewise, whosoever says that those children who depart

out of this life without partaking of that sacrament shall be made alive in Christ, certainly contradicts the apostolic declaration, and condemns the universal Church, in which it is the practice to lose no time and run in haste to administer baptism to infant children, because it is believed, as an indubitable truth, that otherwise they cannot be made alive in Christ. (530)

Another noteworthy utterance by Augustine on this belief and practice is found in the treatise “On the Soul and Its Origin,” written around A.D. 419. He states (Bk. III, chap. 12), “If you wish to be a catholic, refrain from believing, or saying, or teaching that ‘infants which are forestalled by death before they are baptized may yet attain to forgiveness of their original sins’” (348). The article in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* on “Baptism” adds that, to “the objection that baptism requires faith, theologians reply that adults must have it, but infants receive habitual faith, which is infused into them in the sacrament of regeneration.” The next sentence is noteworthy: “As to actual faith, they believe on the faith of another.” An authoritative source is then quoted: “as St. Augustine (*De Verb. Apost.*, xiv, xviii) beautifully says: ‘He believes by another, who has sinned by another’” (24). Here, there is not much indication of an individual’s direct repentance and faith for regeneration.

All these excerpts are strong utterances indeed, and the current teaching and practice echo the same sentiments. “The practice of infant Baptism is an immemorial tradition of the Church,” according to the *Catechism* (§1252), adult baptism being commonly practiced “where the proclamation of the Gospel is still new” (§1247). Under the subheading “The Baptism of infants” (§1250), we read:

Born with a fallen human nature and tainted by original sin, children also have need of the new birth in Baptism to be freed from the power of darkness and brought into the realm of the freedom of the children of God, to which all men are called. The sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant Baptism. The Church and the parents would deny a child the priceless grace of becoming a child of God were they not to confer Baptism shortly after birth.

The definition, effects, and practice of baptismal regeneration today, especially as practiced by the Roman Catholic Church raise some serious questions and concerns when compared to the Scriptures. In addition to the general concern of tying spiritual regeneration and grace to a sacrament, there are concerns about the seeming efficaciousness of the baptismal water, the role of the church as the repository of faith and proper sphere for baptism, and an infant being considered reborn on the basis of another’s faith. Now we must make a brief survey of where such an understanding and practice came from, through the centuries of

Christian literature. How is the current position justified historically? Where does it seem to begin? Where is it finally and firmly established?

A Survey of the Development in Christian Writings

In this brief survey of the development of the doctrine and practice of baptismal regeneration, we will concern ourselves with noting the connection of baptism with regeneration and grace. Concerned with the development within the Western Christian tradition, we will also point out any dependence upon John 3:5 as a supporting text. Infant baptism, faith, and the role of the church in the rite will also be observed. Although there may be a case for references to baptismal regeneration in *The Shepherd of Hermas* and *The Epistle of Barnabas* (both probably of the early second century), it is not a completely clear case. The first manifest examples in Christian literature are in the writings of Justin Martyr. In his “First Apology of Justin” (chap. 61, written around A.D. 155), Justin describes the current practice involving new disciples of the faith. With prayer and fasting these “are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated” (183). They receive “the washing with water” in the name of the Trinity. “For Christ also said, ‘Except ye be born again, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven’” (183). In his “Dialogue with Trypho” (chap. 14, written around A.D. 156) Justin, referring to the “laver of repentance,” writes, “We have believed, and testify that that very baptism which he [Isaiah] announced is alone able to purify those who have repented; and this is the water of life” (201). So in Justin there are the beginnings of the identification of the act of baptism with regeneration and life.

The next major writer to consider is Irenaeus. In one of the fragments (#34) of his lost writings, he declares (in the late second century):

For as we are lepers in sin, we are made clean, by means of the sacred water and the invocation of the Lord, from our old transgressions; being spiritually regenerated as new-born babes, even as the Lord has declared: “Except a man be born again through water and the Spirit, he shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. (574)

Irenaeus surely followed Justin’s lead. In his “On the Apostolic Preaching” (chap. 7), which was written in the same time period, Irenaeus mentions “the baptism of our regeneration” which grants us regeneration, and which will eventually issue in our “incorruptibility” (44). Tertullian, the first of the great theologians who wrote in Latin, was probably the first to devote an entire treatise to the matter of baptism. “On Baptism” (written around A.D. 193) begins: “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!” (669). In chapter 12 of the same work Tertullian defends the necessity of baptism for salvation, echoing, “‘without baptism, salvation is attainable by none’ (chiefly on the ground of that declaration of the Lord, who says, ‘Unless one be born of water, he hath not life’).” Any doubt concerning this is termed “audacious” (674-75). Then too, in the fourth chapter Tertullian introduces, or perhaps reiterates, the concept whereby the waters of baptism acquire a special quality. The “Spirit of God, who hovered over (the waters) from the beginning, would continue to linger over the waters of the baptized” (670). A little further along, he continues: “Thus the nature of the waters, sanctified by the Holy One, itself conceived withal the power of sanctifying” (670). Still later in the same chapter he asserts that, after an invocation, the waters “attain the sacramental power of sanctification; for the Spirit immediately supervenes from the heavens, and rests over the waters, sanctifying them from Himself; and being thus sanctified, they imbibe at the same time the power of sanctifying” (671). Tertullian, therefore, follows Justin and Irenaeus in connecting baptism with regeneration,³ but he also particularly attributes to the consecrated baptismal waters a kind of sanctifying virtue.

Writing in the mid third century, Cyprian followed along the same lines of interpretation and application as his predecessors. In Epistle 1 (section 4), to Donatus, Cyprian testifies of his own conversion experience. He then describes how “by the help of the water of new birth, the stain of former years had been washed away”; a light from above had been infused into his reconciled heart, after the fact that, “by the agency of the Spirit breathed from heaven, a second birth had restored [him] to a new man” (276). In the first section of Epistle 71, to Stephen (the Roman bishop), Cyprian begins by dealing with the issue of those baptized outside the Catholic Church. He strongly advocates that they receive “the baptism of the Church. For then finally can they be fully sanctified, and be the sons of God, if they be born of each sacrament; since it is written, ‘Except a man be born again of water, and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God’” (378). Finally, Epistle 58 to Fidus contains an early and strong statement in favor of the baptism of infants—the grace given to the baptized being equal, regardless of age. Since “nobody is hindered from baptism and from grace,” he writes, “how much rather ought we to shrink from hindering an infant, who, being lately born, has not sinned” (section 5). And immediately thereafter in the sixth section, he concludes: “No one ought to be hindered from baptism and from the grace of God” (354). Thus, Cyprian also links baptism with new birth and God’s grace, as well as emphasizing the church as the proper, effectual sphere for the reception of baptism. Given such virtues of baptism, he offers strong assent to infant baptism.

Well over a century after Cyprian, Ambrose of Milan, another Latin writer, followed in this same path. In *On the Mysteries* (chap. 4), written around A.D. 387, he speaks of “the three witnesses in baptism”—the water, the blood, and the Spirit—all being one, the “Sacrament of Baptism” needing all three. He affirms that there is not “the Sacrament of Regeneration without water: ‘For except a man be born again of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God’” (319). Furthermore, unless one is baptized in the name of the Trinity, “he cannot receive remission of sins nor gain the gift of spiritual grace” (319) (cf. “On the Holy Spirit,” Bk. III, chap. 10). Earlier, in “Concerning Repentance” (Bk. II, chap. 2, around A.D. 384), he had written that, being dead in sin, we “are through the Sacrament of Baptism born again to God, and created anew” (346). And in “On Abraham” (2.11.84, written around A.D. 387), after quoting John 3:5, Ambrose declares: “No one is excepted: not the infant, not the one prevented by some necessity” (169). Like his predecessors, Ambrose links the water of baptism with regeneration and spiritual grace, and, like Cyprian, sanctions the practice of infant baptism.

The writer through whom most of these crucial points regarding baptismal regeneration receive strong and definitive support is Augustine. The references in his works to John 3:5 are too numerous to list here,⁴ as well as his defense of infant baptism. First, he links regeneration and baptism. In “On the Psalms” (135.11), written around A.D. 392, he speaks of two generations: the first is that “by which we are made the faithful, and are born again by baptism” (626); the second is that by which we will rise from the dead and live with the angels forever. The same thought can be seen in a passage from “The City of God” (Book XX, chap. 6), written in A.D. 425, in which he speaks of “two regenerations,” the one being “according to faith, and which takes place in the present life by means of baptism” (426), with the other being at the “final judgment.” In a passage from the “Enchiridion” (chap. 42), written after A.D. 420, Augustine also connects baptism with spiritual grace, as Cyprian and Ambrose before him. In “the great sacrament of baptism,” all “attain to this grace”; and “rising from the font regenerate, as He arose alive from the grave, [they] should begin a new life in the Spirit” (252). Although particularly concerned with the matter of infant baptism due to the Pelagian controversy, much of what Augustine writes applies to all, not only infants. This treatise provided him with the opportunity to make some striking statements. In Book II, chapter 43 he plainly states, “The sacrament of baptism is undoubtedly the sacrament of regeneration.” After alluding to John 3:3, Augustine asserts: “Even an infant, therefore, must be imbued with the sacrament of regeneration, lest without it his would be an unhappy exit out of this life” (62). In chapter 45 of the same work, he refers to “that life of the Spirit, in the

newness of which they who are baptized are through God’s grace born again” (62). In Book I, chapter 28 of this work, Augustine also laid great emphasis on the efficacy of the baptismal act. Though speaking of baptized versus unbaptized infants, his words apply generally. The “rule of the Church...joins baptized infants to the number of the faithful” (25). And this is “by virtue of the excellence and administration of so great a sacrament,” even if—and this is noteworthy—“by their own heart and mouth they do not literally perform what appertains to the action of faith and confession” (25). He goes on to state that “they who have lacked the sacrament must be classed amongst those who do not believe on the Son, and therefore, if they shall depart this life without this grace,” they will encounter “the wrath of God” as those who do “not have life” (25). After quoting John 3:5, Augustine asks, “Does not truth proclaim without ambiguity, that unbaptized infants not only cannot enter into the kingdom of God, but cannot have everlasting life, except in the body of Christ, in order that they may be incorporated into which they are washed in the sacrament of baptism?” (71)—the sacrament being the key to these desired effects.

The controversy against the Donatists afforded Augustine an opportunity to make more statements regarding baptismal regeneration, especially concerning the question of rebaptism. Although Augustine acknowledged the validity of baptism outside of the Catholic Church and such by potentially unworthy ministers, in accordance with the accepted position of the church at that time (the true minister of the sacraments really being Christ), nonetheless, he indicated that by “simple admission into the Church, they might, merely in virtue of the bond of unity, be admitted to a share in pardon” (“On Baptism, Against the Donatists,” Book II, chap. 13, written around A.D. 400) (434). To Augustine, a return to the church entailed great benefits and, in fact, could finally unlock the true benefits of the sacrament to the baptized schismatic or heretic. In Book VI, chapter 9 of the same work, while speaking concerning baptism, he clearly states, “For when men come to the peace of the Catholic Church, then what was in them before they joined it, but did not profit them, begins at once to profit them” (484). As Cyprian before him, Augustine does accord a special role to the sphere of the church with regard to the full efficacy of the sacraments. In fact, Augustine (Book IV, chap. 21) does not hesitate to rank “the Catholic catechumen, who is burning with love for God, before the baptized heretic” (460). Moreover, although the sacrament of baptism “received outside the Church” should not be depreciated, nevertheless “it is of no avail for salvation unless he who has baptism indeed in full perfection be incorporated into the Church” (460). Then, immediately following, chapter 22 contains another rather striking statement regarding the efficacy of the baptismal rite: “I find that not only martyrdom for the sake of Christ may supply

what was wanting of baptism [i.e., if not available], but also faith and conversion of heart, *if recourse may not be had to the celebration of the mystery of baptism for want of time*" (460, italics mine). Repentance and faith are thus subordinated to the more desirable baptismal rite, preferably carried out within the Catholic Church. And finally, in his treatise "On Marriage and Concupiscence," written around A.D. 419, Augustine indicates some quite profound effects of baptismal regeneration, making lofty claims on its behalf. In Book 1, chapter 38, he affirms that by means of "the same regeneration, which is now effected through the sacred laver" and which "purges and heals all man's evil to the very end," the "very same flesh, through which the carnal mind was formed, shall become spiritual" (278-79). Furthermore,

by this laver of regeneration and word of sanctification all the evils of regenerate men of whatever kind are cleansed and healed,—not the sins only which are all now remitted in baptism, but those also which after baptism are committed by human ignorance and frailty. (279)

Augustine has given the doctrine and practice of baptismal regeneration its strongest underpinnings. Two more witnesses, in the early history of the church, demonstrate that such an interpretation and application had reached a point of seeming unassailability. Writing around the middle of the fifth century, Pope Leo I gives testimony in his Letter 15, to Turribius. He firstly declares (section 10) that the taint of sin and the liability to die remain with a person "until the sacrament of Regeneration comes to succor him, whereby through the Holy Spirit we are re-born the sons of promise...in the power of baptism" (23). In section 11 he continues by asserting that "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 re-born" (23)—including distinctions of *age*. In Letter 108 (section 2), to Theodore, Leo I links "the grace of baptism" with "eternal life" and "the second birth" (80). Fulgentius of Ruspe, writing around A.D. 526, gives three significant pieces of evidence in his "Rule of Faith." In section 43, after quoting John 3:5, he writes, "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." Fulgentius goes on to say that a heretical or schismatic one who receives the sacrament of baptism outside the Catholic Church does receive "the whole Sacrament; but salvation, which is the strength of the Sacrament, he will not have, if he has had that Sacrament outside the Catholic Church" (297). Such a one should therefore return to the church, not to receive the Sacrament again, which "no one dare repeat," but "so that he may receive eternal life in Catholic society, for the obtaining of which no one is suited who, even with the Sacrament of Baptism, remains estranged from the Catholic Church" (297). Here baptism is linked with eternal life, and the Catholic Church is the proper and unique

sphere for the realization of this. Also, in section 70 of the same work, Fulgentius shows that the practice of infant baptism has certainly continued when he writes, "Hold most firmly and never doubt in the least that not only men having the use of reason but even infants who...pass from this world without the Sacrament of holy Baptism...are to be punished in the everlasting torment of eternal fire" (298). A final noteworthy passage in section 80 of the "Rule" highlights the facilitating realm for the proper effects of baptism, saying, "Hold most firmly and never doubt in the least that no person baptized outside the Catholic Church can become a participant of eternal life if, before the end of this life, he has not returned and been incorporated in the Catholic Church" (298).

More than seven centuries later, Thomas Aquinas confirms what the earlier writers had established concerning the doctrine and practice of baptismal regeneration with its various facets. In the first part of the *Summa*, Aquinas articulates his position, confirming Augustine and others, that the sacraments of the "New Law" contain grace, and their "invisible mission is for the creature's sanctification" (P(1)-Q(43)-A(6)-O(4); Contr.).⁵ Then, in the third part of the *Summa*, he clearly states that just as the sin of Adam reaches others by carnal generation, "so, too, the merit of Christ reaches others only by spiritual regeneration, which takes place in baptism; wherein we are incorporated with Christ" (P(3)-Q(19)-A(4)-RO(3)). Later in the third part, in the major section on baptism, Aquinas deals with the question of whether children should be baptized. As they have contracted original sin from Adam, so they can "receive grace through Christ" (P(3)-Q(68)-A(9)-Ans.). Then, after quoting John 3:5, Aquinas writes that "consequently it became necessary to baptize children" (P(3)-Q(68)-A(9)-Ans.). Appealing to the authority of Augustine's "On the Just Deserts and Forgiveness of Sins," he compares the "spiritual regeneration effected by Baptism" to carnal birth, in that as the infant in the womb receives nourishment, not independently, but through the mother; so infants, "before the use of reason," receive salvation not by their own act but "by the act of the Church," as it were, being in her womb. It is by the words of the infant's "sponsors" that the infant professes faith (P(3)-Q(68)-A(9)-RO(1)). So, Aquinas concludes, just

as a child, when he is being baptized, believes not by himself but by others, so is he examined not by himself but through others, and these in answer confess the Church's faith in the child's stead, who is aggregated to this faith by the sacrament of faith [i.e., baptism]. (P(3)-Q(68)-A(9)-Ans.;RO(1); RO(3))

And in the following section, answering the question of whether children receive grace and virtue in baptism, Aquinas gives his clearest and most striking statement on baptismal regeneration in children:

As Augustine says (*Serm. 176*): “Mother Church lends other feet to the little children that they may come; another heart that they may believe; another tongue that they may confess.” So that children believe, not by their own act, but by the faith of the Church, which is applied to them: by the power of which faith, grace and virtues are bestowed on them. (P(3)-Q(69)-A(6)-RO(3))

In the third part of the *Summa*, again appealing to Augustine’s authority, Aquinas points out that “Baptism is above all a spiritual regeneration,” with a man being “reborn spiritually but once” by means of baptism (P(3)-Q(80)-A(10)-RO(1)). And in the previous paragraph Aquinas noted another effect when he stated that in the sacrament of baptism a man is conformed to Christ’s death “by receiving His character within him” (P(3)-Q(80)-A(10)-RO(1)). Finally, in the supplement to the third part of the *Summa*, compiled posthumously from Aquinas’ other writings, there are two more statements worth mentioning. Baptism “blots out all sins both actual and original” (P(4)-Q(2)-A(6)-O(3)). And, again, baptism is a “spiritual generation” (P(4)-Q(2)-A(6)-RO(3)).

Almost 275 years after the death of Thomas Aquinas, the interpretation and application of baptismal regeneration was codified by the Council of Trent. In the Fifth Session (June 1546), in the “Decree concerning Original Sin” (section 3), the Council conclusively affirms that the “merit of Jesus Christ is applied, both to adults and to infants, by the sacrament of baptism rightly administered in the form of the church.” In the following section, infant baptism is further confirmed, being referred to as “the laver of regeneration for the obtaining life everlasting” (1). In the fifth section, “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is conferred in baptism” is mentioned; and “in those who are born again, there is nothing that God hates...so that there is nothing whatever to retard their entrance into heaven” (2), though the Council acknowledges that concupiscence remains. Next, in the Sixth Session (January 1547), in the “Decree on Justification” (chapter 4) the Council defines justification as a “translation...to the state of grace, and of the adoption of the sons of God”; and this translation “cannot be effected, without the laver of regeneration” (2). Chapter 7 is also significant in that it describes “the sacrament of baptism, which is the sacrament of faith” as the “instrumental cause” of justification. Faith is needed, but in the case of a catechumen, previous to the sacrament of baptism, the needed faith must be begged for from the church; the result of such a procedure will be “being born again” (3). Finally, in the Seventh Session of the Council of Trent (March 1547), a “Decree on the Sacraments” was made; in the subsection “On Baptism,” four of the Canons should be mentioned here. In Canon 2, anyone who says that “true and natural water is not of necessity” (2), making John 3:5 (quoted) into some sort of metaphor,

is anathematized. In Canon 3, anyone saying that “in the Roman church, which is the mother and mistress of all churches, there is not the true doctrine concerning the sacrament of baptism” is anathematized (2). The same judgment is given in Canon 5 for anyone asserting that baptism is “free” (2), that is, not necessary for salvation. Lastly, in Canon 13 anyone saying that little children, because they have no “actual faith,” are not,

after having received baptism, to be reckoned amongst the faithful; and that, for this cause, they are to be rebaptized when they have attained to years of discretion; or, that it is better that the baptism of such be omitted, than that, while not believing by their own act, they should be baptized in the faith alone of the Church; let him be anathema. (3)

Having completed our historical survey, we can make some observations. The doctrine and practice of baptismal regeneration in the Western tradition is first clearly discerned in the writings of Justin Martyr in the latter part of the second century. Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Ambrose follow, confirming the basic tenets. Augustine makes perhaps the strongest and most dogmatic statements at the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth centuries. Leo I and Fulgentius testify that these tenets were being firmly adhered to, even well into the sixth century. Thomas Aquinas clearly confirmed them in the latter part of the thirteenth century. With the Council of Trent there is the collection and codification of the various strands of belief and practice related to baptismal regeneration. With this Council, the development is more or less complete. Baptism is linked to regeneration and grace; the church is the proper realm for the transaction of the rite and for the ensuring of its intended and profound effects; and baptized infants, as well as adults, relying on the faith of the same church are henceforth numbered among the faithful. Modern catechisms have duly incorporated these decrees.

In this article we have endeavored to accurately, though briefly, survey and present the current Roman Catholic belief and practice concerning baptismal regeneration, concisely tracing the historical development and ascertaining the origins of the teaching. We have further observed the oft reiterated and potentially dangerous position that a person’s faith is dependent upon that of another, and ultimately upon that of the church, with direct and personal repentance and belief not being stressed. As a result of this sacramental, outward, and institutional view, the routine baptism of infants has come to be insisted upon and performed. Such notions and practices are in striking contrast to the New Testament revelation and indeed contradict the proper exposition of John 3:5 and Titus 3:5.

by Paul Onica

Notes

¹Numerical references to the *Catechism* refer to consecutively numbered sections. Numerical references to other works refer to page numbers.

²The five other footnotes are in sections §1225 (two), §1238, §1257, and §1262. Also, in a recent survey of articles on the Internet, written between 1992 and 2000 to define/defend the matter of baptismal regeneration, the author found no less than eight out of twelve that began with, and/or were based upon, John 3:5.

³On the matter of infant baptism, Tertullian is hesitant. In the eighteenth chapter of "On Baptism," he writes that "the delay of baptism is preferable; principally, however, in the case of little children." A little later he goes on to say, "Let them 'come,' then, while they are growing up;...let them become Christians when they have become able to know Christ" (678).

⁴To be duly impressed, the reader is invited to scan the various indices of texts (under "John") in the eight volumes of Augustine's writings in the *First Series* of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*.

⁵References to the *Summa* are according to the traditional designation of part (P), question (Q), article (A), objection (O), and reply to objection (RO); this format, rather than page numbers, will be used here.

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