

Institution of the sacrament

That Christ instituted the Sacrament of Baptism is unquestionable. Rationalists, like Harnack (*Dogmengeschichte*, I, 68), dispute it, only by arbitrarily ruling out the texts which prove it. Christ not only commands His Disciples (Matthew 28:19) to baptize and gives them the form to be used, but He also declares explicitly the absolute necessity of baptism (John 3): "Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he can not enter into the Kingdom of God." Moreover, from the general doctrine of the Church on the sacraments, we know that the efficacy attached to them is derivable only from the institution of the Redeemer.

When, however, we come to the question as to when precisely Christ instituted baptism, we find that ecclesiastical writers are not agreed. The Scriptures themselves are silent upon the subject. Various occasions have been pointed out as the probable time of institution, as when Christ was Himself baptized in the Jordan, when He declared the necessity of the rebirth to Nicodemus, when He sent His Apostles and Disciples to preach and baptize.

The first opinion was quite a favorite with many of the Fathers and Schoolmen, and they are fond of referring to the sanctification of the baptismal water by contact with the flesh of the God-man. Others, as St. Jerome and St. Maximus, appear to assume that Christ baptized John on this occasion and thus instituted the sacrament. There is nothing, however, in the Gospels to indicate that Christ baptized the Precursor at the time of His own baptism. As to the opinion that it was in the colloquy with Nicodemus that the sacrament was instituted, it is not surprising that it has found few adherents. Christ's words indeed declare the necessity of such an institution, but no more. It seems also very unlikely that Christ would have instituted the sacrament in a secret conference with one who was not to be a herald of its institution.

The more probable opinion seems to be that baptism, as a sacrament, had its origin when Christ commissioned His Apostles to baptize, as narrated in John 3 and 4. There is nothing directly in the text as to the institution, but as the Disciples acted evidently under the instruction of Christ, He must have taught them at the very outset the matter and form of the sacrament which they were to dispense.

It is true that St. John Chrysostom (Homily 28 on the Gospel of John), Theophylactus (in cap. iii, Joan.), and Tertullian (On Baptism, Chapter 2) declare that the baptism given by the Disciples of Christ as narrated in these chapters of St. John was a baptism of water only and not of the Holy Ghost; but their reason is that the Holy Ghost was not given until after the Resurrection. As theologians have pointed out, this is a confusion between the visible and the invisible manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

The authority of St. Leo (Epistle 16) is also invoked for the same opinion, inasmuch as he seems to hold that Christ instituted the sacrament when, after His rising from the dead, He gave the command (Matthew 28): "Go and teach . . . baptizing"; but St. Leo's words can easily be explained otherwise, and in another part of the same epistle he refers to the sanction of regeneration given by Christ when the water of baptism flowed from His side on the Cross; consequently, before the Resurrection. All authorities agree that Matthew 28, contains the solemn promulgation of this sacrament, and St. Leo does not seem to intend more than this. We need not delay on the arguments of those who declare baptism to have been necessarily established after Christ's death, because the efficacy of the sacraments is derived from His Passion.

This would prove also that the Holy Eucharist was not instituted before His death, which is untenable. As to the frequent statement of the Fathers that the sacraments flowed from the side of Christ upon the Cross, it is enough to say that beyond the symbolism found therein, their words can be explained as referring to the death of Christ, as the meritorious cause or perfection of the sacraments, but not necessarily as their time of institution.

All things considered, we can safely state, therefore, that Christ most probably instituted baptism before His Passion. For in the first place, as is evident from John 3 and 4, Christ certainly conferred baptism, at least by the hands of His Disciples, before His Passion. That this was an essentially different rite from John the Precursor's baptism seems plain, because the baptism of Christ is always preferred to that of John, and the latter himself states the reason: "I baptize with water . . . [Christ] baptizeth with the Holy Ghost" (John 1).

In the baptism given by the Disciples as narrated in these chapters we seem to have all the requisites of a sacrament of the New Law:

- the external rite,
- the institution of Christ, for they baptized by His command and mission, and
- the conferring of grace, for they bestowed the Holy Ghost (John 1).

In the second place, the Apostles received other sacraments from Christ, before His Passion, as the Holy Eucharist at the Last Supper, and Holy orders (Council of Trent, Sess. XXVI, c. i). Now as baptism has always been held as the door of the Church and the necessary condition for the reception of any other sacrament, it follows that the Apostles must have received Christian baptism before the Last Supper.

This argument is used by St. Augustine (Epistle 44) and certainly seems valid. To suppose that the first pastors of the Church received the other sacraments by dispensation, before they had received baptism, is an opinion with no foundation in Scripture or Tradition and devoid of verisimilitude. The Scriptures nowhere state that Christ Himself conferred baptism, but an ancient tradition (Nicephorus, Hist. eccl, II, iii; Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, Book III) declares that He baptized the Apostle Peter only, and that the latter baptized Andrew, James, and John, and they the other Apostles.