

looking forward to its fulfillment in the kingdom of heaven.

What then about infants who die without baptism? Here, we trust in the infinite mercy of God, who desires all people to be saved. We cherish the beautiful story of the Gospel where Jesus said, "Let the children come to me and do not hinder them. It is to just such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Mk 10:14). Therefore, we hope that these children who die without the benefit of sacramental baptism will have eternal salvation — that is the desire of the whole Church, the family of the child, the innocent child himself who naturally longs for God, and — we trust — the desire of God. Just think of the holy innocents who died because of Herod's wrath; we consider them saints and honor them on Dec. 28. Nevertheless, we must not again be seduced into thinking baptism does not matter — baptism is the definite means that opens the path of salvation. The *Catechism* rightly cautions, "As regards children who have died without baptism, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them All the more urgent is the Church's call not to prevent little children coming to Christ through the gift of holy baptism" (No. 1261).

Baptism is indeed a precious gift. In examining this question, we see the need to be vigilant in insuring the baptism of our own loved ones. Here grandparents should encourage their children, who may have become lax, to return to Church, to have

their own children baptized and to live the faith with them. Faithful family members should do their best to share their faith with those children who are neglected spiritually by their own parents. Moreover, we also see the responsibility of bearing witness to the faith in word and action, so as to lead others to baptism and to a full life in Christ.

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Is Baptism Necessary For Salvation?

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Jesus said, "I solemnly assure you, no one can enter into God's kingdom without being begotten of water and Spirit" (Jn 3:5). At the ascension, our Lord commanded the apostles, "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" (Mt 28:19-20). In another account of the ascension, Jesus added, "The man who believes in [the good news] and accepts baptism will be saved; the man who refuses to believe in it will be condemned" (Mk 16:16).

Given these teachings of our Lord, the Second Vatican Council in the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* stated, "[Jesus] Himself explicitly asserted the necessity of

faith and baptism, and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter through baptism as through a door. Hence they could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it, or to remain in it" (No. 14). Therefore, sacramental baptism is the only means given by our Lord which assures salvation. The Church must never neglect the duty to proclaim the Gospel, and by the grace of God, call people in faith to baptism.

The *Catechism*, however, adds a caution: "God has bound salvation to the sacrament of baptism, but He Himself is not bound by His sacraments" (No. 1257). Besides the normal ritual baptism of water and the invocation of the Holy Trinity, the Church has also accepted two other forms of baptism — a baptism of blood and a baptism of desire. While these two forms are not the sacrament of baptism per se, they do render the same graces and effects (*Catechism*, No. 1258).

First, consider baptism by blood. During the age of Roman persecution, catechumens — those individuals who were preparing for baptism and entry into the Church — oftentimes were arrested, tried as Christians and condemned to death. The Church considered them to be martyrs since they died for the faith and with Christ. In his treatise on baptism, Tertullian (d. c. 220) coined the phrase "laver of blood," to distinguish the baptism of these catechumens from that of those baptized with the

"laver of water": He wrote, "We have a second laver which is one and the same, namely the laver of blood." St. Augustine (d. 430) (writing after the persecution) stated, "When any die for the confession of Christ without having received the laver of regeneration, it avails as much for the remission of their sins as if they had been washed in the sacred font of baptism" (*City of God*, XIII, 7). This belief in the efficacy of a baptism by blood is based again on the teachings of Christ: "Whoever acknowledges me before men I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven" (Mt 10:32) and "Whoever wishes to be my follower must deny his very self, take up his cross each day, and follow in my steps. Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will save it" (Lk 9:23-24).

The baptism of desire is based on the belief that Christ desired all people to be saved. The saving action of our Lord's passion, death and resurrection eternally radiates touching even those people who may not explicitly ever have the benefit of missionary activity, come to know the Gospel, or to receive the Lord through the sacrament of baptism. The Second Vatican Council stated, "Since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partakers, in a way known to God, of the Paschal mystery" (*Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World*, No. 1260).

In speaking of the "People of God," and affirming that the fullness of the means of salvation subsists within the confines of the Catholic Church, the Council clearly expressed that other Christians, who share with Catholics baptism, the sacred Scriptures, and perhaps even the other sacraments and apostolic succession (as with the Orthodox Churches), can also be saved (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, No. 15). The Council then addressed non-Christians: those who "seek the unknown God": "Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and moved by grace, try in their actions to do His will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience — those too may achieve eternal salvation" (No. 16). In this sense, these people have a sincere desire for God and would have desired baptism explicitly if they had the opportunity to receive it or if they had known its necessity (*Catechism*, No. 1260).

However, such a statement should not seduce us into an indifferentism where one thinks that baptism is either not important or optional: baptism is the sacrament which infuses the divine life of the Holy Trinity into our souls and opens to us fully the mystery of Christ's passion, death and resurrection. Through the nourishment of grace from the reception of other sacraments, the study of the faith and our life within the Church, we live our baptism