

Module 4 mini-lecture transcript: “Baptism – Gateway to the Sacraments”

In the sacrament of Baptism, we are born again of water and the Holy Spirit. When Jesus told Nicodemus that this would be necessary for salvation, Nicodemus was perplexed by what it would mean to be “born again.” You likely already know the basics of this sacrament. sacraments are visible signs of invisible grace, and in this sacrament the visual, tangible matter is the water and the words of Baptism. Also included are the holy oils of catechumens and sacred chrism. Baptism wipes away original sin, enabling us to receive the grace of God – that is, God’s life in us. It is the gateway to all the other sacraments, the one that opens the door to the sacramental life of the Church.

But what does it mean to be “born again” in this sacrament?

A few things happen when we are baptized. First of all, as the priest or deacon prays as he anoints the newly baptized with chrism oil, we recall that Christ is “prophet, priest, and king” and are called to take part in the same. The baptized are called to be prophets, in so much as they are now capable of hearing and proclaiming the Word of God. The common priesthood (or the priesthood of the baptized) means that the baptized are now able to unite their own sacrifices to Christ’s, especially in their participation in the Mass. And, now adopted sons and daughters of God, the baptized have come to partake in the royal lineage of Christ – brothers and sisters of the Prince of Peace and King of Kings.

The baptized are born again, in so much as their entire identity is changed, elevated, and transformed by new life in Christ. Each baptized person has been re-created in Christ, and union with God is now the highest, ultimate purpose of their life.

In baptism, we are adopted by God as his sons and daughters, and with that comes a dignity beyond any that the world could ever bestow.

When a person with disabilities or their family approaches you inquiring about preparation for further sacraments of initiation, they are approaching you with this firm foundation in the identity of the baptized.

Theologically, this is enough grounds to make you want to eagerly embrace the gift of each child or adult with disabilities who desires Baptism or any of the subsequent sacraments of initiation. But even from a practical level, we should be compelled to make a place that is safe and welcoming for those who approach the Church with heavy burdens and weariness.

As we have seen even in legislation related to abortion, the lives of those with disabilities are viewed differently than those without disabilities. A mother who finds out she is carrying a child with a disability is often offered to have that child’s life terminated before birth. If she and that child’s father decide to fight for their child to live, many will not understand their choice. Then, if that child does survive birth, they will find themselves on a journey with their son or daughter that is more challenging (for all three of them) than the childhood of a child without a disability. By the time parents approach your parish and ask for Baptism for their child, they may have

experienced a NICU stay, a difficult pregnancy, therapies being established alongside feeding routines, and maybe even additional challenges such as learning to maintain a feeding tube or oxygen.

If parents, wearied by that journey and barely holding on, approach their pastor about Baptism and he responds, “Of course, but first you have to come take these Baptism classes. It’s required for all parents – no exceptions!” they hopefully will do so, but I can promise you that they will be in tears after that conversation. Life has already been insurmountable for them. The last thing they need is another hoop to jump through.

What if, instead, the priest, or deacon, or lay minister welcomed them with genuine joy and great flexibility? To parents who may not have had the birth of their child received with joy by all, what a great relief it would be to them if the Church received their child as the gift to the Church that he or she is. What if requirements were made easy and accessible – a conversation with the pastor on the phone, so that a post-partum mother, trying to stay by her baby’s side in the NICU, didn’t have to leave her child in order to attend an in-person class? Or a video the parents could watch, on their smartphones, while changing the dressing on a feeding tube of a crying newborn?

How we welcome children and adults with disabilities makes a huge difference in their lives. For those who are used to having to advocate for themselves or their child, to fight to have their little one’s needs met – what if the Church were one place where they wouldn’t have to fight, but where the Scripture held true, “Come to me, all you who are laden and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest”?