

Immersed Into Life

by Thomas Merton

"That which is born of the flesh," says St. John, "is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (3:6). Contrasting Adam who was of the earth, and Christ who is the "man of heaven," Paul says: "Even as we have borne the likeness of the earthy, let us bear also the likeness of the heavenly" (1 Cor. 15:49). This means, as St. John explains, being born "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). What is this new birth without which we cannot become sons of God?

The supernatural life is the reformation in us of the image and likeness of God by grace and divine love. What agency brings about this change within us? It is faith, symbolized in baptism. The "likeness" to God can only be reestablished within us, in the image imprinted in our souls, when into that image we receive the light of Christ, the Word and Son of God.

The process called "justification" means little if it does not bring with it the healing and restoration of the divine likeness in us. It makes us spiritual men. The only way in which we can become "spiritual" in the true sense of the word is to possess within us a *pneuma* or spirit which is formed by the coalescence of our spirit with the Spirit of God in one principle of supernatural action.

We become "spiritual" people by believing in Christ and by receiving baptism. Thus we are "born again of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5). The act of faith by which we "die" to the evidence of mere unaided reason and accept the inner light that comes to us from a source too high for rational argument to reach by themselves, immerses us in the death of Christ in order that we may rise with Him in the spiritual light of His resurrection.

We are sanctified when we receive into ourselves His "word," that is to say, when we "take His word" about the divine nature, about the fact that God is Love, and about the fact that the Father loved His Son and sent Him to live in us so that we may become, in our turn, sons of God, united with Him as the source of our new life. "You are already clean," says Christ, "because of the word that I have spoken to you" (John 15:3). And this word is essentially the "word" and the "name" of the Father. It is the revelation of the mysterious identity of Him from Whom all proceeds, even the Son. "I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me . . . They have kept your word . . . the words that You have given Me I have given to them. And they have received them and have known of a truth that I came forth from You" (John 17:6-8). "Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth" (John 17:17).

The sacraments of the Church, therefore, are protestations of faith. They are outer signs of inner faith. They help us to recognize and express the inner action of spiritual forces which, if they are perceived at all, are usually only perceived in the most tenuous possible manner.

The sacraments belong to the order of signs. They manifest something more than themselves, something hidden. Indeed, a sacrament is at once something visible and something hidden. The Latin word *sacramentum* is the normal translation of the Greek *mysterion*, or mystery. In each sacramental "mystery" we have an outward sign, an action, the application or use of some material element. But, in each sacrament, the outward sign is accompanied by an inward, spiritual reality, which it signifies. This inward reality is an effect produced by God in our soul, through the instrumentality of the sacramental action. And so I believe that the sacraments are very special signs, differing from other signs not only in their divine institution, but above all in the fact that they signify a spiritual reality, and at the very same time produce the reality which they signify . . .

In the liturgy of the Oriental Church, the blessing of the baptismal font invokes the Creator, and recalls His presence and His power in all created things. This beautiful prayer reminds us that the same divine wisdom who made us is able also to sanctify us and unite us with Himself.

We are baptized "*into Christ's death*" (Rom. 6:3). The Passion of Christ is communicated to us as a remedy for our sins as if we ourselves had died on the Cross. At the same time, the power of the Resurrection flows out into our souls bringing us a new life in Christ. "*But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live together with Christ . . . Thus do you consider yourselves also as dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus*" (Rom. 6:8,11). . . .

"*God is light,*" says St. John, "*and in him is no darkness*" (I John 1:5). The Word, the glory and splendor of the Father, is also the "*light that enlightens every man who comes into the world.*" *He is the light which is the "life of men"* (John 1:4). This light shines in darkness, but unless God Himself draws us out of the darkness, we are not enlightened by Him, even though He is present. The illumination of grace by which we enter into the light is the effect of baptism. To be precise, the light of grace in our souls is the light of Christ Himself, made present within us by His Spirit. In the words of one of the Greek Fathers, the soul is illuminated when the "Face of Christ" (that is to say His spiritual and transforming presence) fills the soul with its light and its lineaments as though He were reflected in a mirror.

Christian illumination confronts man—a spiritual creature of God who was born to know God; a person, yet not a person in the fullest spiritual sense of the word—because he does not yet fully know himself. Man struggles to make his way out of the mists and confusion of error in which he is helpless to know himself. Yet, the confusion, the error, the illusion, the slavery of man's reason, pitiable, understandable though it may be, is still imputable in some measure to man's own will. No matter what may be the extenuating circumstances, every one of us has to admit that this blindness is largely his own fault. . . .

The unilluminated one does not and cannot know his true self, and, therefore, cannot fully be himself. He needs to be enlightened because he is imprisoned in the darkness of an error conjured up and kept in existence by the devil. . . .

First, he must declare his faith in Christ. For his recovery of his true identity, in supernatural life, can only be the effect of a free will strengthened and elevated by the grace of God. It is this act which is at the same time an option and a self-dedication, and by it man enkindles within himself what the mystics of the High Middle Ages called the *scintilla animae*—the spark of the soul. It will thereafter burn in the summit of his soul and guide him to repeat these acts of free choice that lead him along the desert road by which faith travels to God. . . .

The most fundamental question raised by baptism is man's true identity. When an adult presents himself for baptism (and the baptismal rite was originally framed for adults), he is supposed to have entered within himself, to have struggled as far as he could to dispel all his illusions about himself, to come to some rough answer to the question: "Who do I think I am? What do I think I am doing? And why do I think I am doing it?" . . .

What happens when the soul is enlightened by God? The summit of the soul is like a mountaintop which has been hidden in the clouds, but from which the clouds now melt away, leaving the peak free in the clear upper air through which it receives the full light of the sun. It is then that the spirit of man, illuminated and transfused with the presence of the Spirit of God and full of grace, becomes the pneuma. Man's freedom and his understanding then become capable of a totally new dimension. He finds himself able to aim his activity in a direction he had never before known. New horizons open out to him—

horizons which are not below him, nor on his own level, but above his own con-natural powers. Yet at the same time he has received virtues and gifts of God which, like new instincts, prepare him to move in this new spiritual field.

The Spirit, the *pneuma*, is then strictly a “new nature.” The person who has become spiritual is indeed a “new creature.” And St. Paul was right to stress the fact that this is the one essential thing in our religion. No rites, ceremonies, religious practices, nor codes of ethical behavior are the essence of the spiritual life. This “new creature” is able to love God for His own sake because, by faith, it knows Him as He is. The “new creature” lives by the Spirit of Christ.

The *pneuma* makes our freedom and our understanding sensitive to utterly new values, and capable of supernatural experience. It enkindles, so to speak, the *scintilla animae*, or the spark of the soul. Thus sanctifying grace not only brings with it the bland, mild diffuse light which spreads over the whole purified atmosphere of the soul’s summit, but at that precise peak of the spirit, the apex of man’s inmost intellect and will, there now burns the white-hot point of mystical receptivity, that insatiable little diamond of spiritual awareness which is the most precious thing in the spirit of man—a treasure for which the world and all that is in it can only be thrown away and counted as loss. . . .

Baptism gives us our true identity, our spiritual existence in God. It makes us begin to be the person we are supposed to be, uniting us with God through our own free option, by faith in Christ. It sets us on the road we are supposed to travel, if we are to fulfill our own individual destiny, and if our name is to mean anything. And all this is to be accomplished by the *affirmation of our own freedom*, elevated and transformed in the freedom of God. A “person” is one who leads his own life according to his state and his function and his place in the world. . . .

The sacramental illumination of Christian baptism is not the end of the journey but only its beginning. The sacrament, the “mystery,” is not a mere ritual symbol that ceases to exist when the rite is terminated. It is the beginning of a new life. Our souls have now been changed, and we have received a new identity in God. The fire has descended upon us from heaven. We have not stolen it, like Prometheus. It has been given to us because the Father wanted us to have it, in order that we might find ourselves, and become His sons. More than that, the unction of the Spirit is given to our own free wills, in order that our liberty, in union with the liberty of the Spirit of God, may give glory to God in the creation of our own unique identity of which He alone possesses the secret.