Baptism and Ministry

Teacher Background

Baptism, together with Confirmation and Eucharist, are sacraments that initiate an individual into the Christian community and into the life of Christ, which the Christian community strives to make real and present in history. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus exercised his ministry among the people of his time, teaching the multitudes and healing the sick. Jesus’ ministry centred on the proclamation of the reign of God, a time of justice and peace, of forgiveness and reconciliation, of freedom from oppression, of evil overcome, enemies reconciled and wrongs made right. Jesus pursued his ministry, his mission in life, tirelessly and despite opposition. Finally, he gave his life in fidelity to that mission. For Christians, Jesus’ mission is key to understanding who Jesus is and thus who Christians as followers of Jesus, are to be.

Through Baptism and Confirmation, each Christian is caught into Christ’s mission, which is in fact the mission of the Church. For there is no Church apart from those who accept the call to be followers of Christ! The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on each Christian in Baptism and Confirmation is a summons to share in that same mission that Jesus undertook at his baptism in the Jordan. The Catechism of the Catholic Church sees Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan as an anointing and messianic consecration. Jesus is the Christ, the ‘anointed one’. The Catechism states: “[Jesus] eternal consecration, was revealed during his earthly life at the time of his baptism by John, when ‘God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power,’ ‘that he might be revealed to Israel’ as its Messiah (Acts 10:38; Jn 1:31). The words and works of Jesus will reveal him as “the Holy One of God” (Mk 1:24; Jn 6:69; Acts 3:14). Through Baptism, each Christian is incorporated into the body of Christ, the Church. Through Baptism, each Christian shares the life of Christ and is anointed for mission.

The word ‘Mass’, as an alternative designation of the Eucharist, is related to the Latin word missa, meaning ‘sent’. In the Latin text of the Mass, the words of dismissal at the conclusion of the celebration are ‘Ite missa est’. These words are a reminder that the celebration of Eucharist is intimately and integrally related to Christian ‘mission’. At the end of each Mass, we are sent back into the world, instructed and strengthened for the Christian mission. Celebration of Eucharist is oriented to the mission and ministry of Christians to live and proclaim the reign of God in the world following the pattern of Jesus.

Jesus’ mission

The Jews waited in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah – the promised one. Conscious of its recurring infidelity and sinfulness, Israel relied on God’s promise to send one who would save the people from their sins. He would be the ‘anointed of God’ – the Messiah (Hebrew), the Christ (Greek). In Jesus, we recognise the fulfilment of that promise. God sent the Son into the world to be our saviour.

At the very beginning of his public life, Jesus expressed his understanding of the mission he had to carry out. In the synagogue of Nazareth, he applied to himself Isaiah’s description of the messianic mission: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’ (Lk 4: 16-19). In the months that followed, he preached ceaselessly the coming of God’s kingdom or reign into our midst. ‘I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose’ (Lk 4: 43). He described the kingdom through such parables as the Good Shepherd, the
seed sown in the field and the dragnet cast into the sea. His miracles were signs of God’s healing presence in our world.

Central to life in God’s kingdom is the experience of God’s mercy in the forgiveness of sin. Jesus proclaimed the need for repentance. He often prefaced his miracles with the statement: ‘Your sins are forgiven’. He readily forgave the sinner whilst denouncing the hypocrisy of the self-righteous. His mission to save us from sin is most clearly expressed in his prayer at the Last Supper: ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’ St Paul summarises Christ’s mission this way: ‘God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.’ Jesus’ mission was to be our saviour.

**Christian mission**

Jesus came to save all people and to call them into God’s kingdom. He completed that mission through his public ministry and his saving death and resurrection. What he did once and for all is now accessible to all people of every age. But there is a sense in which his mission continues. People today must hear the gospel he preached and accept the salvation he brought about. St Paul puts it this way: ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?’ The synoptic gospels conclude with Jesus sending his disciples into the world to carry on his mission of proclaiming the good news.

The Church exists to carry on that mission. Through the sacraments and its preaching, the Church makes Christ present in today’s world as the one who still calls to conversion, forgives sin, heals, and proclaims the law of love. The Holy Spirit, who guided Jesus in his earthly ministry, continues to lead the Church in its continuation of his saving mission. There is one notable difference between Christ’s mission and that of the Church. Jesus preached the reign of God first and foremost. The Church preaches Christ first, as Lord and Saviour. In so doing it also proclaims Jesus’ central message about God’s kingdom, the reign of God.