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Baby Lay

by

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Baby Lay¹ died when she was thirty hours old, having spent her entire life in one of the temperature controlled isolettes of a large urban neonatal intensive care unit.

She was born prematurely with severe fetal hydrops – fluid overload – from a congenital heart defect. The handful of hours in her life were filled with desperate attempts by the NICU physicians to get her stable enough for surgery. She was filled with lines and covered with wires, all to manage and monitor her physiology while the physicians repeatedly removed fluid from her, the rapidly accumulating fluid which was killing her, the fluid which her defective heart could not move around her circulatory system so that it could be balanced, regulated, and the excess eliminated by her kidneys in the usual manner.

Even had she been able to get to surgery, Baby Lay's prognosis was not good. As it was, though, she had too much going against her from the outset, and thirty hours after her birth Baby Lay's soul was released from her body and from this world. Baby Lay never saw the clouds in the sky, and never saw the sunshine. And no one had her baptized.

The word “sacrament” (L., *sacramentum*) in pre-Christian times referred to a solemn oath, pledging the performance of a service. In the Roman Army there was a military sacrament, pledging service to the Empire. In Holy Scripture the same word is used to express a mystery, a sacred thing which is concealed.² And so, very early on, the Church Fathers began using the word, *sacramentum*, to denote the outward sign of an inward grace.

But a sacrament was never understood as merely a sign. Rather, a sacrament, by virtue of its divine institution, *causes* the grace: it is the outward sign of the inward grace which it causes.³ For a thing to be a sacrament, three parts are necessary: the outward sign, the inward grace,

and divine institution. The outward sign, in turn, has two components: the matter (the element) and the form (the word). There are seven sacraments in the Church: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, Matrimony, Holy Orders, Penance, and Extreme Unction. Each of these sacraments has its own outward sign, made up of a specific matter and form, and each confers a particular grace. While the ceremonies surrounding these sacraments may be changed by the Church (but *not* by the minister) the matter and the form, being as they are instituted by Christ, cannot be changed.⁴ Which brings us to the matter of Baptism.

“Baptism” comes from *baptizo* (Gr.) meaning to wash or immerse. Thus, the matter of the Sacrament is water, as pretty much everyone knows. But what kind of water? Well, for the normal, planned, public Baptism it is to be water which has been properly prepared and consecrated beforehand at the appropriate solemnity. But in the case of emergency any water will do, as long as it is *water*.⁵ Seawater, swamp water, water from dew or melted snow, clean water, dirty water (not preferred), or any water so long as it is “what men would ordinarily declare water...” It can even have other stuff in it, so long as the majority of it is water. Note, however, that it is *not* to be beer, goat’s milk, saliva, or whatever other non-water thing may pop into someone’s head. The water, once procured, is to be poured on the forehead three times. Triple dunking is OK, but messy and not necessary.

The form of the sacrament is, “I baptize thee in the Name of the Father(pour) and of the Son (pour) and of the Holy Spirit (pour).” Not, “...in the name of the Trinity”, “...of the angels”, “...of Mother Earth”, or whatever.

The minister of the sacrament is a priest in the normal, planned baptism. But in a true emergency *anyone*, even “sinners and heretics”⁶ can baptize validly, provided that (1) they use the proper matter, (2) they use the proper form, and (3) *they intend to do as the Church does*. That means that even if the person administering the Sacrament in an emergency doesn’t believe anything about the Christian faith, as long as he, for whatever reason, sincerely desires to do what the Church does, even though he doesn’t believe it, the Sacrament is valid.

The Catechism of the Council of Trent lists five effects of Baptism. The first is the remission of sin, all sin, completely and without reservation. The new man, after Baptism, is “innocent, spotless, pure, upright, and beloved by God...”⁷ It should go without saying that this presumes the adult has the correct intentions: that he understands the sacrament and truly desires its effects, and wants to seek a sinless life in the Christ. If so, in the adult, Baptism removes both original sin as well as the laundry list of actual sins committed. Were I, as an adult who had just received the sacrament rightly and validly, to be run down by a truck while walking out

of the church, I would be received directly into the presence of God. No need to weep for me in that circumstance! But most of us don't get ushered directly into Heaven upon our Baptism, and for us, the proclivity to sin, the "infirmity on concupiscence" as St. Augustine called it, remains. But that is beyond the scope of this piece.

The second effect flows directly from the first; it is the remission of all punishment due to sin prior to Baptism. Sins committed subsequent to Baptism are not included: these will be punished unless rightly and validly repented (the sacrament of Penance is also beyond the scope of this piece). Likewise, Baptism does not protect us from the effects of civil law and it does not protect us from the miseries of this life, lest there be any confusion on this point.

The third effect, and the most central, is the grace of regeneration which comes through Baptism. It is the grace which gives our souls a divine image, an imprint, a likeness to God which was lost in original sin. It is the grace which makes us Man, created in the image of God, and not just walking talking animals who wear clothes.

The fourth effect flows from the third: it is the infusion of virtues and the incorporation with Christ, "as members to their Head".⁸ It should not "excite our surprise," as the catechist says, that these virtues are difficult to perform, conflicted as they are with what the world would have us do. But they are there, nonetheless. We will do well to remember that.

The fifth and final effect is the consummation of the first four: our souls are forever and indelibly sealed with the character of a Christian. This is a permanent imprint, it cannot be erased no matter how grievous the sin I may commit in the future.⁹ That's why Baptism is performed only once. It cannot be erased even if I publicly, repeatedly, and sincerely repudiate the Catholic faith and all it stands for. I can condemn myself after Baptism if I live outside of Christ as an unrepentant sinner or disbeliever, but I cannot remove this mark. The character is there, an indelible mark on my soul. What I do with it is up to me.

Once upon a time, priests were enjoined to frequently explain the effects of Baptism so that "the faithful maybe rendered more sensible of the high dignity to which they have been raised..."¹⁰ Indeed, the Sermon Program developed out of the Roman Catechism assigned Baptism to Trinity Sunday, along with the topic of the Triune God. Further, the Church put great weight on the importance of the Baptism of helpless infants at the earliest opportunity, and placed the obligation for this squarely on the shoulders of those responsible for their care. Those caretakers who failed in this obligation were, the Church taught, committing a grievous sin. Woe to the person who allowed an infant to die without Baptism, were it in their power to have it performed.¹¹ That is how the Church taught then. But this is now.

The Church has never been certain of the exact fate of infants who die without Baptism. We “hope that there is a way of salvation...”¹² and over the millennia the Church has hypothesized about angels performing the Baptism, or the desire of the mother, or Baptism by blood (eg. as in an abortion) or some other way we do not know of.¹³ The hypothesis of limbo, a place where unbaptised infants enjoy natural happiness, but are deprived of the Beatific Vision, has been around for centuries.¹⁴ But it is only an hypothesis. The Church does not *know*. Therefore, all the more urgent, says the Catechism of the Catholic Church, *not to prevent little children from coming to Christ* by failing to provide the Sacrament of Baptism.¹⁵

Baby Lay lived and died in a time when none of this is taken very seriously. She lived for thirty hours under the threat of immanent death; there was plenty of time to call a priest. Baptism could have been performed right there in the NICU. If a priest were unavailable a doctor, nurse, ward secretary or the guy who takes out the trash could have done it, even surreptitiously. But no one did. And the fate of the eternal soul of Baby Lay is uncertain, and those adults who surrounded her in this life have, just perhaps, incurred a judgment against themselves in their failure to discharge their obligation to that little child.

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