LIFE *in* CHRIST

Practicing Christian Spirituality

JULIA GATTA

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CHAPTER ONE

Reliving Christ's Death and Resurrection

"What do you seek?"
Answer: "Life in Christ."

—Admission of Catechumens[1]

Life in Christ begins with baptism. With this sacrament, which many of us received as infants or children, the goal of the mystics—union with God—is already given to us, at least germinally. Yet living into this grace and letting it mold us over the course of our lives will cost us, as T.S. Eliot once said of the mystical way, "not less than everything." And a mature Christian spirituality demands nothing less than making the baptismal identity we received, at whatever age, our own. It requires us to embrace its astounding grace and its demanding commitments day after day and year after year. As we begin our exploration of Christian spirituality, we need first to plunge into the mystery of baptism to experience its depths. Before we can see why baptism shapes Christian life as definitively as it does, we must peel back the layers of cultural conditioning that trivialize it. Many people regard baptism as merely the occasion for a family celebration of a baby's birth—a worthy enough sentiment in itself, but one that falls far short of the spiritual reality of baptism. We have to overcome the impression that the rite of baptism simply issues a membership card in the church, without pondering what it means to become a living member of the living Christ.

1. Preparation of Adults for Holy Baptism: The Catechumenate in *The Book of Occasional Services* (New York: Church Publishing, 2004), 117.

Many religions have developed rites involving water. Rituals designed to enact, one way or another, an aspiration for interior purification have often drawn upon the inherent symbolism of this cleansing agent. By the time of Christ, elements within Judaism seem to have evolved forms of proselyte baptism: that is, as part of their initiation into the Covenant people, Gentile converts underwent a ritual bath, by which the filth of paganism was symbolically washed away. When John the Baptist appeared offering a "baptism of repentance," he was most likely building upon this and other ablutionary precedents. Yet the baptism he urged upon his contemporaries also differed significantly from these earlier models. For John's baptism was not intended for Gentiles but for Jews, at least for those who were aware of their need for inner cleansing and renewal. Above all, John's baptism was preparatory and temporary. It was a baptism full of expectation, anticipating its own fulfillment in another, messianic baptism: "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matt. 3:11).

It is remarkable that Jesus begins his public ministry by submitting to John's baptism of repentance since the New Testament and subsequent tradition never attribute personal sin to Jesus. What is Jesus doing in such a compromising situation? He is emphatically taking his stand with human beings in their sinfulness. He is defining the radical scope of his ministry from the outset. It is a position that will elicit criticism throughout his life as Jesus dines with public sinners and, finally, suffers a shameful and ignominious death, crucified between two criminals. His life and ministry and, at the last, his death address our desperate plight: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (Matt. 9:12).

When at his baptism Jesus embraces humanity in its sinful condition, the Father embraces him: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). The voice from heaven identifies Jesus as Son and beloved servant (Is. 42:1), thus ratifying all that is about to happen in Jesus's ministry. The descent of the Spirit tells us that with the coming of Jesus a new creation is springing into life, even as the Spirit of God moved

over the face of the waters in the beginning of creation (Gen. 1:2).The baptism of Jesus is thus both a commencement and a completion. It begins Jesus's public ministry in an electrifying Trinitarian epiphany as God the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus and God the Father manifests him as the Messiah, the Christ. And it brings stunning fulfillment to all the messianic expectation bound up in John's preaching and baptism. The baptism with the Holy Spirit foretold by John is here revealed and established.

Jesus fulfills the course presaged in his baptism through his death and resurrection. After his glorification, the Spirit is released upon Jesus's disciples, transforming them. Having accomplished the mission for which he was sent into the world and anointed at his baptism, Jesus's own pattern of baptism in the Spirit/death/ and resurrection becomes the paradigm for his followers: To be a Christian is to live the Christ-life, share the Christ-death, and enjoy eternal communion with the Father and the Spirit.

"Repent, and be baptized every one of you" (Acts 2:38)

Several New Testament texts work out various implications of participating in Christ's new life through baptism. These passages, written in the middle or latter part of the first century, were enriched by the experience of the church, which had already been living into this reality for a generation or two. A key text for understanding baptism, and an obvious place to begin, comes from St. Luke's description of the very first post-resurrection baptisms in the church (Acts 2). It is significant that these occur on Pentecost Day and are intimately tied up with a series of events that, as they unfold, establish enduring patterns of grace and living.

The time is Pentecost or the Jewish Feast of Weeks. The place is Jerusalem, the holy city—the destination of pilgrims drawn from every quarter of the Hellenistic world. Luke first focuses our attention on the small community of disciples who, after the Ascension of the Lord, have gathered in prayer, awaiting the promised Spirit: the Twelve, certain women disciples, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Jesus's brothers. The messianic baptism by the Holy Spirit and fire foretold by John the Baptist suddenly comes upon them.

Violent wind and flames of fire convey the sheer power and burning intensity of the Spirit's interpenetration, a shared experience of God. Those assembled will never be the same.

What had been a personal event for Jesus at his baptism now becomes communal. With a kind of ripple effect, the grace of Pentecost presses beyond even the original community of disciples. The apostles immediately leave their shelter and begin preaching about Jesus—a very risky business. Something has happened to them: the entirely natural fear of death, common to all sentient beings, has lost its power. Peter, spokesman for the group, explains the new situation. He recalls the crucifixion of Jesus, a well-known event that took place a mere fifty days earlier at the time of Passover. But then Peter announces, for the first time in a public forum, the heart of the gospel: "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses" (Acts 2:32).

Here is a transformation within a transformation. The disciples are now fearless in the face of death because death has, as St. Paul would put it, lost its sting. The resurrection of Jesus changes everything. Life is no longer confined to the familiar cycle of birth, growth, decay, and death. Something utterly new has happened. Across centuries and cultures there have evolved innumerable myths of death and resurrection, beliefs in reincarnation or the immortality of the soul, and stories of the "afterlife"—all of which attest to a profound human longing. We might cynically or resignedly dismiss these yearnings as mere wishful thinking or the stuff of fairy tales. But in the resurrection of Jesus, God reaches into our deepest hopes and fears. Death does not have the final word. The risen body of Jesus, radiant prototype of the new creation, leads the way.

The raising of Jesus also illumines our moral state of affairs. Surveying the ascendancy of power over justice and privilege over fairness, we might well conclude that "good guys finish last" and wonder along with Jeremiah, Job, and many of the psalms, "Why does the way of the guilty prosper?" (Jer. 12:1). Yet the Bible consistently affirms that God is just. The justice of God is played out in the Pentecost scene when Peter confronts his listeners with their role in Jesus's execution: "This man . . . you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law" (Acts 2:23). There

must be moral accountability. Like the apostles themselves, who abandoned or denied Jesus, the crowd gathered in Jerusalem cannot pretend innocence. And so Peter's announcement that "this Jesus God raised up" simultaneously convicts and liberates them from both personal guilt and shared culpability. What is more, God's action in raising Jesus is harbinger of the final undoing of injustice and the ultimate defeat of evil. Thus when Martin Luther King Jr. confidently asserted that, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice," his reading of history was shaped in part by this vision of faith.

What Acts goes on to relate is a blueprint of the conversion process. First, the gospel is proclaimed, and this proclamation has a transforming effect. The crowd is stirred, indeed pierced, by the gospel message: "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37). The Spirit, which had invaded the disciples, now moves the assembly to compunction of heart, a rending conviction of sin. Yet they do not stay there, paralyzed by remorse and immobilized by sorrow. They immediately ask the apostles an eminently practical question: "What should we do?" What to do about guilt? What to do about this resurrection? How do we connect with it? Peter replies with a fully practical response: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). This is where Christian life—life in Christ—begins: with baptism. It addresses the most crucial issues that confront human beings: life and death, sin and guilt, justice and injustice, forgiveness and hope.

The gospel is proclaimed and the people respond. Baptism is the way forward. This is how we take on a new identity: the paschal mystery of Christ's death and rising becomes ours. So baptism is both a gift of God and our faithful response to the pressure of the Holy Spirit who leads us to conversion in the first place. Is baptism God's work or ours? It is both. God initiates, yet does not override our free response as human beings who have been invited to cooperate with the divine action. This dynamic synergy of God's grace coupled with our effort, which begins at baptism, characterizes all of Christian life. In many cases, we are

more aware of one side of this partnership than the other. Sometimes hard human labor or struggle seems paramount. At other times, we can seem almost carried away by grace. But even then, grace needs to find a receptive home. Like a double helix, divine action and human response are inseparably intertwined.

In the case of adult baptism—certainly the typical situation envisioned in the New Testament and early centuries of the church—baptism entails a deliberate personal commitment to Jesus Christ springing from faith in his saving death and resurrection. In the baptism of an infant or young child, the gracious gift of God towards one who cannot yet make a personal response of faith is evident. Yet faith remains an essential component in infant baptism as well. Here it is the faith of the believing community, embodied above all in the covenant promises of the parents and sponsors, which creates the pastoral milieu in which this sacrament can be responsibly administered.

In every case except emergency baptism, the church requires prior catechesis of all parties: whether adult candidates, parents, or godparents. This instruction involves basic teaching: "Conversion of mind" or the capacity to view everything afresh with the eyes of faith is one aspect of conversion. Catechesis also begins the process of learning distinctly Christian habits, practices, and virtues. This formation cannot be hurried. It takes time to learn a new way of thinking and to unlearn old habits of mind and behavior. New Christians and their sponsors need to understand the faith articulated in the creeds, grasp its internal coherence, and experience this faith from the "inside"—as an inner dynamic creating order, insight, beauty, and direction in one's life. Christian formation also entails shedding obsolete and defeating patterns of thought and conduct.

St. Paul insists that baptism forges a union with Christ in his death and resurrection: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death . . . so we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:3–4).How did Paul come to think of baptism as a "burial" with Christ? The metaphor of death and burial would have suggested itself naturally enough since all baptisms at the time took place

Baptism of Christ, fifteenth century, Tver School. *Used with permission.*

by immersion in "living water"—a lake, river, or stream. When the church expanded into climates and regions in which baptism in natural bodies of water was no longer practical, for many centuries churches still built baptisteries (some of them very beautiful) so that baptism could continue to take place with complete immersion of the candidate. Baptism by immersion can be frightening, as the candidate "goes under" three times in a symbolic dying with Christ. Fortunately, some churches have maintained this arresting tradition, including the Eastern Orthodox, and the practice is being revived in some places in the Episcopal Church. One parish church in rural England recently recovered from its neighborhood an old stone watering trough once used for horses, moved it in front of the church, and now uses it for immersion baptisms. The coffin-like shape of an animals' watering trough suits perfectly the action of being buried with Christ in baptism.

For tomb it is. Some traditional icons of the baptism of Jesus show him fully surrounded by dark waters, foreshadowing his own entombment. St. Paul contends that baptism into the "death of Christ" spells an end to the deathly grip of sin over a believer's life, its power to control our choices and actions: "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin" (Rom. 6:6). If St. Peter counseled those assembled in Jerusalem on Pentecost to "repent, and be baptized every one of you . . . so that your sins may be forgiven," Paul presents the repentance enacted in baptism as a crucifixion of sin. The language of crucifixion, of course, underscores the spiritual union with Christ in his particular form of death that is accomplished by baptism. What Christ achieved on the cross for our salvation is now part of the believer: he or she has been immersed in this grace. Crucifixion language also highlights the suffering entailed in renouncing sin and struggling against it daily. Repentance is no easy matter. There are layers and layers to sin and thus to repentance, many of which we discover only after years of effort, and countless humiliating lapses. Baptism begins the process of a "death to sin," but it is a death Christians feel every day.

Baptism thus sets us on the "purgative way," a painful cleansing from sin that lasts a lifetime. Writing of the petition "Thy kingdom come," Evelyn Underhill insists that its advent demands costly inner purification: "None can guess beforehand with what anguish, what tearing of old hard tissues and habits, the Kingdom will force a path into the soul, and confront self-love in its last fortress with the penetrating demand of God."[2] As the Spirit gradually sets us free from destructive patterns of "thought, word, and deed," we come to realize just how bent we actually are, and how all-embracing and utterly necessary to us is the gift of grace. Indeed, it is only by grace that we can even begin to see sin for what it is and how deeply its malignant roots penetrate us. Life itself has a way of repeatedly holding a mirror

2. Evelyn Underhill, *Abba: Meditations Based on the Lord's Prayer* (Cincinnati: Forward Movement Press, 1982), 32.

up to our disordered desires and habitual failings. So as we move out of the pseudo-innocence characteristic of the secular mindset, our awareness of the distortions of sin—in ourselves and in the world around us—grows rather than diminishes. Even though our personal entanglement in sin may become objectively diminished over time, grace clears our vision to see things as they are.

The way of purgation is the first component of the ancient threefold path of Christian spirituality: purgation, illumination, and union. All three aspects of this graced paradigm are present, at least in germinal form, in baptism: the renunciation of evil and ongoing death to sin (purgation); the profession of faith and turning towards Jesus as savior (illumination); and participation in Christ's death and resurrection (union). In this context "illumination" means nothing other than the Light of Christ, signified by the paschal candle prominent at every baptism. The radiant truth of Christ now shines upon our entire landscape, revealing its shadows and its beauty. As we continue on the illuminative way, we grow in *insight*: into ourselves, others, and God, perceiving both distinctions and connections. Illumination is intertwined with purgation when our degraded and alienated state becomes painfully clear. But it also opens up the vision of God in Christ. The profession of faith in the Creed is both a summary of this vision and an entry into its continuous unfolding. The grace of illumination bears fruit in such gifts of the Spirit as wisdom, greater understanding of the mysteries of the faith, and discernment. It is, finally, a transformative vision. As St. Paul says of the vision of Christ apprehended in faith: "All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor. 3:18).

Our baptismal union with Christ in the paschal mystery unites us, through Christ, to God. We wade deeper into this divine life by love: "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (John 14:23). Because God is love straight through, we travel the unitive way by loving as Christ loves.

Eventually we come to love with Christ's own love. Not a shred of sentimentality is involved here, for Christ's love embodies self-sacrificial commitment: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:12–13). As Jesus speaks these words at the Last Supper, he is poised to lay down his own life for us, his friends.

We lay down our lives bit by bit, day by day, in service and availability to others. It requires a high degree of vulnerability, connecting us once again to the Love that went to the cross. But as Paul astutely realized, what may appear to be sacrificial love may turn out to be the opposite: "If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body . . . but do not have love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor. 13:3). What can pass as heroic service may spring from spiritual pride, pandering to self-image, or the presumptuous attempt to manipulate and control. Self-deception covers a multitude of sins. Hence the unitive path of love depends upon ongoing purgation of love. It requires the cultivation of what the desert tradition called *apatheia*, usually translated as "detachment" or "indifference." The "detachment" in question is not an icy distancing from others or the goodness of the created order. It rather signals a process by which we gradually become free from our ego-driven compulsions and disordered passions—our "attachment" to status, approval, self-gratification, and the desire to make others over in our image. Only detached love—a love utterly respectful of the mystery of the other—is pure. It alone produces the fruits of love: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way . . ." (1 Cor. 13:4–5). What union with God entails, then, is not some special, unusual experience of God, however conceived. It is rather participation in the divine life (2 Pet. 1:4) and through that union, sharing in the divine attributes, the foremost of which is love.

The threefold path of purgation, illumination, and union has sometimes been construed as a sequence of stages leading to mature Christian holiness. According to that reading, we progress from purgation to illumination and, finally, to union with God. But as even this brief survey indicates, these facets of Christian life

are interpenetrating and overlapping, and they all inform Christian life from baptism onward. Rather than thinking of them as a ladder with ascending rungs, we might conceive of them as a spiral: circling round and round, with one aspect or another strongly coloring our journey at different seasons, we always come back to the others, now experienced with greater intensity. In his comprehensive and wise theology of Christian spirituality, *Beloved Dust: Tides of the Spirit in the Christian Life*, Robert Hughes likens the threefold path to tidal currents: "As in a real ocean, these tides are concurrent, though one may predominate at any given moment in a person's life. This requires us to think and navigate in three dimensions, as it were: pitch, roll, and yaw."[3] Hughes appropriates the threefold way as "conversion, transfiguration, and glory"—terms more common in the Eastern Orthodox tradition—and organizes his treatment of Christian spirituality around these currents of grace.

DYING IN CHRIST: THE BAPTISMAL RENUNCIATIONS

In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, book five in The Chronicles of Narnia, C.S. Lewis depicts a baptismal scene that illustrates both the pain and the grace of embarking on a new life. It occurs in a chapter about Eustace, the thoroughly obnoxious cousin of the Pevensie children, who are now back in the enchanted world of Narnia. In this episode, Eustace has wandered away from his companions and come upon a dragon's lair, full of treasure. In his greed, Eustace puts on a bejeweled bracelet, stuffs his pockets with diamonds, throws himself upon a pile of gold coins, and falls asleep. When he awakens from the pain of the bracelet that is now much too tight, he discovers to his horror that he has become a dragon himself. Eustace's sinfulness—his habitual selfishness, greed, and mocking cynicism—have made him less than human. When in his dragon state he returns to his cousins and others

3. Robert Davis Hughes, III, *Beloved Dust: Tides of the Spirit in the Christian Life* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 8.

he had formerly disdained, he appreciates the wholly undeserved comfort and practical help they offer him. His humiliation softens him, and for the first time he tries to be useful. Thus prepared by the beginnings of a moral conversion, Eustace encounters a mysterious lion, whom readers will instantly recognize as the Christ-like figure of Aslan, who will deliver him from his plight. Aslan leads him to a mountain in which there is a garden with a well in the middle of it. As Eustace later narrates to Edmond:

> "I knew it was a well because you could see the water bubbling up from the bottom of it: but it was a lot bigger than most wells—like a very big, round bath with marble steps going down into it. The water was clear as anything and I thought if I could get in there and bathe it would ease the pain in my leg. But the lion told me I must undress first. . . .
>
> "I was just going to say that I couldn't undress because I hadn't any clothes on when I suddenly thought that dragons are snaky sort of things and snakes can cast their skins. . . . So I started scratching myself and my scales began coming off all over the place. And then when I scratched a little deeper and, instead of just scales coming off here and there, my whole skin started peeling off beautifully. . . . In a minute or two I just stepped out of it. I could see it lying there beside me, looking rather nasty. It was a most lovely feeling. So I started to go down into the well for my bathe.
>
> "But just as I was going to put my feet into the water I looked down and saw that they were all hard and rough and wrinkled and scaly just as they had been before. Oh, that's all right, said I, it just means I had another smaller suit on underneath the first one, and I'll have to get out of it too. So I scratched and tore again and this underneath skin peeled off beautifully and out I stepped and left it lying beside the other one and went down to the well for my bathe.
>
> "Well, exactly the same thing happened again. And I thought to myself, oh dear, how ever many skins have I got to take off? For I was longing to bathe my leg. So I scratched away for the third time and got off a third skin, just like the two

> others, and stepped out of it. But as soon as I looked at myself in the water I knew it had been no good.
>
> "Then the lion said—but I don't know if it spoke—"You will have to let me undress you." I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty near desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.
>
> "The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. . . ."
>
> "And there I was as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me—I didn't like that very much for I was very tender underneath now that I'd no skin on—and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again. . . .
>
> "After a bit the lion took me out and dressed me—"[4]

It is worth noticing that Eustace is not a wholly passive partner in his rehabilitation. Once Aslan brings him to the regenerative well, he requires further action from him. Eustace must take off his snakeskin three times, layers upon layers of his corrupted self, reminiscent of the three renunciations of sin in the baptismal liturgy. Eustace can make only limited progress, however, by his own exertions, and in the end he must submit to the still more painful stripping that Aslan alone can accomplish. It is an interplay of effort and grace with which every serious Christian is familiar. Eustace is "afraid of his claws," which indeed cut him to the heart, but desperation drives him to accept Aslan's more penetrating work of slitting and slashing. Imagery of being divested of old clothes and then reclothed in new ones runs through several Pauline texts: "You have stripped off the old self with its practices

4. C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: HarperCollins, 1952), 107–110.

and have clothed yourself with the new self" (Col. 3:9–10; cf. Eph. 4:24; Rom. 13:14). And it was an image compellingly enacted in the ancient baptismal liturgy when candidates were stripped completely naked before entering the font. A more effective way of dramatizing the abandonment of one's old life can scarcely be imagined, as candidates shared in the utter vulnerability and shame of Christ's own nakedness on the cross. When Eustace emerges from the well, Aslan dresses him in fresh clothes, just as the newly baptized were clothed in white garments, signifying their newly-minted innocence in Christ: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Gal. 3:27). This is, of course, the origin of the white christening gown, and the baptismal robe continues in use as a liturgical undergarment: the alb.

With his "baptism," Eustace is "turned into a boy again," his humanity recovered. This is the goal of baptism: the restoration of a human nature that has been distorted by sin and doomed to death. Only in Christ, the "last Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45), is our humanity fully restored and transfigured. We do not leave the "first Adam" completely behind, however, not even in baptism, but it no longer limits and defines us. Those who are baptized thus share simultaneously in the inevitable mortality and propensity to sin characteristic of the "first Adam" and the resurrected life accomplished by the "last Adam," Christ. We move towards glory as Christ did: by entering the tomb of baptism and emerging into a new plane of existence. The baptismal renunciations and affirmations, which reverberate throughout Christian life, are key moments in this passage.

As Eustace sheds skin after skin, he experiences a sense of liberation and growing lightness. In the baptismal renunciations, candidates tear off allegiances which, like Eustace's snakeskins, are "hard and rough and wrinkled and scaly"—in fact "rather nasty." The renunciations move in a descending scale from the cosmic to the social to the personal: evil in its various guises.

The first question—"Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces that rebel against God?"—sometimes causes consternation among contemporary people. Some might wonder whether

the Christian faith demands subscription to literal belief in Satan or the devil. Christian faith requires belief in Jesus Christ and his saving power, as the affirmations attest. Since belief in Satan is not part of the creed, nor is any particular demonology required of Christians, this issue should not be unduly unsettling. Yet it is unwise to distance ourselves too far from the reality to which this mythic language points. From time to time we do encounter evil in raw form. In *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, the savvy protagonist of this novel finds herself at one point pursuing an African witch doctor. She suspects him of killing an eleven-year-old boy in order to concoct one of his potions:

> She parked the van and drew in her breath. She had faced down fraudsters, she had coped with jealous wives, she even stood up to Mr. Gotko; but this meeting would be different. This was evil incarnate, the heart of darkness, the root of shame. This man, for all his mumbo-jumbo and his spells, was a murderer.[5]

Yet to appreciate the first renunciation we need not go so far as to visit, imaginatively or otherwise, the world of witchcraft or the occult. There is plenty of enslavement to forces of evil much closer to hand. What family, for instance, has not been touched by the scourge of addiction, whether of alcohol, food, drugs, gambling, sex, the Internet, or work? Participants in twelve-step programs are familiar with a sense of struggling against fiercely ruinous impulses that seem to assault from within and without. Such powers feel larger than life, and their malignant energy and direction can only be termed "demonic."

Writing about the traditional baptismal renunciation of "Satan and all his works," theologian Kenneth Leech quite sensibly observes this about "evil spirits": "Whether they were non-human minds external to man, or disturbing forces within the psyche, the result was the same: a reduction of human freedom, and spiritual disturbance." It is thus a mistake to discount, belittle, or ignore such evil forces, no matter their precise location. Nor

5. Alexander McCall Smith, *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005), 223.

should we rule out the possibility that malevolent "non-human minds external to man" do in fact exist. Leech continues, citing Archbishop Michael Ramsey: "It is arbitrary to assume that we human beings are the only rational beings, knowing good and evil, in the universe, and it seems to be a reasonable assumption that there are, outside the human sphere, beings who can do good and evil."[6]

So while the first renunciation of evil does not require an unvarnished belief in Satan, it does presuppose our taking full stock of the power of evil. We must relinquish any lingering naiveté about its subtlety and strength. Exorcism characterized much of Jesus's Galilean ministry. Today we would attribute many of the ills ascribed in the first century to "demons" to physical and mental illness. But we miss the mark if we fail to see that Jesus exercised a ministry of deliverance from all forces operating in body, mind, and spirit that undermined human integrity. The traditional mythology of demons understands such forces as alien and non-human. It generously implies that evil does not spring from human nature, but rather afflicts it. The work of grace restores us to our true humanity, just as Eustace "turned into a boy again."

With the second renunciation we turn to the social arena: "Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?" Contemporary development of the social sciences has helped us become more aware than ever of the many ways we are shaped by history and culture. There are some "evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God" so blatantly that they cannot be missed. The fever of fascism in the decades leading up to the Second World War is an oft-cited example. We find ourselves amazed at its power to sweep up millions in its murderous fervor. Yet the twenty-first century has also been filled with blood and hate, stirred into motion by skewed political, social, and even religious forces, issuing in war, terror attacks, random killings, and gun

6. Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend: The Practice of Christian Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977), 131.

violence. In some quarters, publically articulated ethnic bigotry, racial and religious prejudice, and misogyny have even become socially respectable. We seem willing to accept vast and growing economic disparities between rich and poor, in our own country and internationally, as if they were simply inevitable. Most people recognize the scientifically verified fact of climate change—arguably the greatest threat to all forms of life on this planet—but few are willing to contemplate the entirely feasible social and personal changes that would offset some of its more devastating effects. Surely those who cynically benefit from the short-lived status quo are among the most "evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God." By renouncing them, we also renounce our own indifference and apathy.

Parents and teachers find themselves combating a tidal wave of "evil powers of this world" that seem bent on harming children. The advertising world turns toddlers into consumers and pre-teen girls into objects of sexual attraction. Adolescent peer pressure can take a sinister turn with the unlimited possibilities available in social media for exposure and mocking, leading in some cases to depression and suicide among its victims. The imaginations of children and adults are fed by an entertainment industry that capitalizes on violence, ridicules chastity, discounts honesty, and glorifies greed. What is most insidious about these evil powers is their confident, unquestioned presumption that this is the way the world is and must be. The unspoken message is: You're trapped. You have no choice but to conform. In baptism, we renounce that lie and all the others.

Precisely because we are so thoroughly conditioned by our cultural matrix, we often have difficulty seeing how aspects of our cultural formation may have warped us. Although we can never stand entirely outside our "social location," searching self-knowledge and vigilance can help us gain some perspective. This discipline entails a willingness to confront cultural assumptions, events, and changes in the searing light of the gospel. Sometimes it will mean stepping beyond our political comfort zone. It is easy for religious liberals to expose social sin and for religious conservatives to decry personal sin, and most of us

know where we stand on that spectrum. We see the speck in our brother or sister's eye but not the log in our own. Can we learn from the well-informed and conscientious critique of Christians who, because they see things from a different angle, just might be able to identify our blind spots?

The final renunciation hits us where we live: "Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?" Having renounced evil on the cosmic and social scale, we now tear away the snakeskin of personal sin. We are renouncing everything—all "thoughts, words, and deeds"—that compromise our total dedication to God. Jesus taught that we are defiled by what comes out of our hearts, from the welter of contaminated desires and motives that lodge there: "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person" (Mark 7:21–23). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus pressed his listeners to consider the interior dispositions that lie behind the Torah's various prohibitions. What gives rise to murder, for instance, except violent, hateful anger? To adultery, except the cultivation of a lustful imagination? (Matt. 5:21–22; 27–28). Jesus urges us to scrutinize our hearts and explore the landscape of our desires. Often what we will find there is not pretty. Our prayer will then echo the great penitential psalm: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (Ps. 51:11). By renouncing "all sinful desires" that draw us from the love of God we make a start. We express our intention, our direction. We will have to keep working at it. In the end, we will have to let Aslan make the most piercing cut into our hearts: what the ascetical tradition calls "passive purification." Like Eustace, however, we must desire this change and accept its pain. The deep-rooted impurity of our hearts has simply become too burdensome. We want to be free.

Another question soon arises to probe once more the depth of our repentance. In the course of the Baptismal Covenant, the candidate is asked: "Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?" Although we have

just renounced evil three times, we have not yet finished with it. Evil will be waiting to ensnare us just as surely as Jesus, after his own baptism, was driven into the desert to be "tempted by Satan" (Mark 1:12–13). Perseverance—not perfection—is the characteristic virtue of the maturing Christian. Growth in Christ demands persistence to keep resisting the great and small temptations that come our way each day. Perhaps even more importantly, perseverance requires that we "repent and return to the Lord" after each of our humiliating falls. We never outgrow our need for divine mercy; we are sinners to the end. A story from the desert ascetics of the third and fourth centuries relates how a visitor once asked a monk what the brothers did all day. He simply replied: "We fall down and get up, and fall down and get up." Getting up—abandoning self-contempt, despair, and the temptation to stay down—is hard. So we are asked, "Will you persevere . . . ?" In his final words about Eustace's conversion, the narrator closes off the chapter with a recognition that spiritual progress is a slow business:

> It would be nice, and fairly nearly true, to say "from that time forth Eustace was a different boy." To be strictly accurate, he began to be a different boy. He had relapses. There were still many days when he could be very tiresome. But most of these I will not notice. The cure had begun.[7]

So for us all in baptism.

RISING IN CHRIST: THE BAPTISMAL AFFIRMATIONS

With the affirmations we make an emphatic turn-around. In the fourth century in Jerusalem, this about-face was enacted literally as the baptismal candidate, having faced the west during the renunciations, was then turned towards the east for the affirmations. The sun was setting on the old life defined by sin; new life in Christ, "the morning star," was rising. The first topic for affirmation presents the most crucial question we can ever be asked: "Do

7. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 112.

you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?" Like the disciples at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus is asking us, "But who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:29). Our answer to that question does not so much define *him* as it defines *us*. Here we take our stand with Jesus, accepting the salvation he offers. We regard him not simply as a prophet, a martyr, a teacher, or a healer: common enough designations in his time, and our own. We say that he is our "Savior." He is the one "who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven." It is worth noticing that when the Creed (whether the Nicene or the Apostles') narrates the work of salvation, it starts with the Incarnation. Salvation begins when the Son of God enters the human race by the power of the Holy Spirit, taking flesh from a human mother. Becoming human, he sanctified the whole of creation from the "inside," so to speak. Only two other people are named in the Creeds—Mary and Pontius Pilate—one instrumental in Jesus's birth; the other, in his death. These two personages anchor Jesus firmly in history with all its particularities. Yet the salvation he achieved—everything he accomplished through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension—is universal in scope. So by accepting Jesus as "our Savior," we embrace him as our "personal savior," to be sure; but we are doing more. We are acknowledging him as the savior of all.

With this affirmation, we are admitting that we need to be *saved from* something. But what? Those assembled in Jerusalem at Pentecost heard a twofold message of deliverance: from sin and from death. The proclamation of Jesus's resurrection released them from the crushing burden of complicity in an innocent death: "this Jesus whom you crucified." If God could undo that evil, there could be no bounds to God's power to forgive and recreate lives. They had only to "repent, and be baptized" for their "sins to be forgiven." Yet our need for forgiveness does not stop once the baptismal liturgy is over. It continues over the course of our lives. Again and again we will draw on the grace of the "one baptism for the forgiveness of sins," sometimes in desperate straits because of serious sin; more typically, because of everyday lapses or ingrained habits resistant to reform. The query about repenting "whenever we fall into sin" is

utterly realistic. We never outgrow the need for forgiveness. We return to God over and over, and find an infinite wellspring of divine mercy awaiting us. By repeatedly jumping into this ocean of love, we become so saturated with divine compassion that we are able to "forgive those who sin against us" as we ourselves have been forgiven.

Forgiveness is inextricably intertwined with the Easter event. When on Easter evening the risen Lord appears to disciples who have barricaded themselves behind locked doors, his first word to this guilty and fearful band is "Peace be with you." Having in effect absolved them from their cowardly abandonment, he immediately sets in motion a ministry of forgiveness: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them" (John 20:22–23). When Jesus later appears to the disciples by the Lake of Tiberius, he restores Peter to fellowship with himself, undoing his threefold denial with a threefold question and affirmation, "Do you love me? . . . Yes, Lord; you know that I love you" (John 21:15–17).

The strength to forgive even mortal enemies is one of the most convincing witnesses to the resurrection. Facing their own imminent death, the martyrs frequently offer such a powerful testimony. Jesus forgave his enemies from the cross (Luke 23:34). St. Stephen, the first martyr, echoes his words as he is stoned to death (Acts 7:60). In our own time, the martyred prior of a Cistercian monastery in Algeria forgave his killer in advance in an extraordinary letter only discovered after his death. In March 1996 he and six of his brothers were kidnapped by Islamic extremists during a civil war. Two months later they were killed under ambiguous circumstances. During the war, the monks had refused to take sides, maintaining a pacifist stance of love towards everyone. This position infuriated all contestants for power, and the brothers knew that their days were numbered. Still, they did not flee, but maintained the quiet witness of their common life of worship, prayer, and service to their Muslim neighbors. In his "testament" Dom Christian de Chergé, prior of the community, disclaims any pretense of personal innocence, aware that the evil of the world now convulsing his beloved

Algeria is part of him, too. In this same remarkable letter he also addresses his future killer:

> I have lived long enough to know that I share in the evil which seems, alas, to prevail in the world, even in that which would strike me blindly. I should like, when the time comes, to have a clear space which would allow me to beg forgiveness of God and of all my fellow human beings, and at the same time to forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down. . . .
>
> And you, also, the friend of my final moment, who would not be aware of what you were doing. Yes, for you also I wish this "thank you"—and this *adieu*—to commend you to the God whose face I see in yours.[8]

The generosity of the martyrs towards their executioners springs from a transformed apprehension of death. We see a similar calm courage in many people facing terminal illness and the elderly who, aware that they are near life's end, are filled with gratitude rather than bitterness. The witness of a "holy death," while not universal among people of faith, is still very common, and it is always moving. But we do not have to wait for the deathbed to experience how faith in the resurrection of Jesus can change our experience. It permeates our present condition and alters the way we live now. Some people sneer at belief in the resurrection as "pie in the sky when you die." They charge that hope in eternal life fosters indifference both to the beauty of the world and to its suffering. Just the opposite is true. By freeing us from a crippling fear of death, the resurrection of Jesus enables courageous, prophetic, and compassionate action throughout our lives. Sister Constance of the Episcopal Community of St. Mary and her companions—the "martyrs of Memphis"—responded to the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1878 by caring for the sick and dying, knowing that it was only a matter of time before most of them would succumb as well. There are innumerable, similar examples of recognized and hidden service, undertaken at great personal cost, throughout

8. Christian de Chergé, "Last Testament," trans. Monks of Saint Bernard Abby, Leicester, England, *First Things* 65 (August/September 1996): 21.

Christian history right up to the present. Accepting Jesus as our "Savior" means stepping into a realm of ultimate freedom. What we are *saved from* is death and, in our lifetimes, the disabling fear of death. Death will certainly come to us, one way or another. But as Doris Westfall has said, "The Easter message is that the worst thing to happen to us is never the last thing to happen to us."[9]

The next two affirmations intensify the foundational promise to "turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as our Savior." If we thought that faith was just a matter of subscribing to a set of creedal propositions, we are here confronted with the challenge of a faith that is fully personal: "Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?" Faith in anyone, and certainly in Jesus, means trusting him, but such confidence does not spring up instantly. We come to trust people over time, sensing their steadiness of character through all sorts of circumstances. People prove themselves trustworthy; there is no other way for trust to be instilled. The same process holds true in our relationship with God. Deep down, many of us wonder whether God really loves us, either because we have inherited harsh images of God, or because we doubt whether we are really loveable, or both. We will never be able to place our "whole trust in his grace and love" without a vibrant, ongoing relationship with Christ. By using all the means at our disposal, including prayer, meditation, sacrament, worship, and study, we can come to know Jesus in an altogether personal way. We can let him show us just how trustworthy he is. For baptismal life will be hard, that much we know; only the form that difficulty will take is unknown. We can assume that it will be arduous to die daily to sin, to "persevere in resisting evil," but what other sacrifices might be asked of us? We cannot know the full extent of them. At times we will be tempted to give up, wondering whether we have it in us to endure. Knowing full well our own weakness, we turn once again to Jesus, placing our "whole trust in his grace and love." Even if we falter, he will not fail us.

With the final affirmation we move from attitude to action: "Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?" When

9. Sermon preached at Grace Episcopal Church, Kirkwood, Missouri, on May 6, 2014.

Jesus called his first disciples, he simply said, "Follow me." Responding to the call to follow Jesus sets us on the path of discipleship and connects us to a community of disciples. Jesus deliberately gathered a group of his followers around himself, forming them by teaching and example, and keeping company with them in everyday life. They travelled, prayed, and worked together. In the end, these first disciples witnessed his death and resurrection. Finally, the Risen One sent them out to make new disciples, and we are their heirs. St. Matthew's Gospel concludes with the risen Lord's issuing a resounding mandate and breathtaking promise: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19–20). This "Great Commission" is loaded with meaning. It defines discipleship actively: Jesus's followers are entrusted with bringing the gospel to every corner of the earth. Disciples are made, not born, through teaching and obedience, as one generation after another hands on what Jesus himself taught his apostles. Baptism "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" is charged with divine power. To do anything "in the name of" a higher authority—whether of a king or of God—is to do it as a surrogate, as one representing that very regal or divine authority. And finally, the Lord's promise to be with us always assures us that his presence among us is real and palpable. God is not far off: Jesus remains Emmanuel, God-with-us. We know Jesus in the community of his disciples, the church. We continually experience him from the inside, as an abiding presence.

We may wonder how any of this can apply to the baptism of babies and children, who cannot understand the significance of what is taking place. Yet in the natural order of things children inherit all sorts of conditions which they will only understand later, if at all: their DNA, for instance, or a windfall bequest. God graciously gives all the baptized the fullness of life in Christ: sharing his death and resurrection; becoming members of his body, the church; the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; even the forgiveness of sins. Babies do not need forgiveness now for personal sins, but they

will later. For all children are born into a world, society, and family warped by sin; and all children are born with a death warrant hanging over them. Baptism pushes our boundaries beyond these limitations into the freedom of forgiveness and the joy of resurrection.

The baptismal renunciations and affirmations prepare us for the core commitments of the Baptismal Covenant. Here the candidate professes faith in God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The question-and-answer form of the creed reflects ancient baptismal usage. The Apostles' Creed itself is based on an early Roman baptismal creed. Unlike the corporate confession of faith ("We believe") of the Nicene Creed used in the Eucharist, the Apostles' Creed exhibits its baptismal origins in the "I believe" format. In the liturgy of baptism the candidate must confess personal adherence to God, revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The creeds of the church are sometimes disparaged as a dry set of dogmas imposed from above. This charge, however, creates a false dichotomy between "creedal faith" and "heart faith," true to neither the baptismal liturgy nor Christian experience. The baptismal affirmations themselves, as we have seen, unify the believer's faith on several levels at once—mind, heart, and will—as the candidate confesses faith in Christ, affirms trust in Christ, and pledges obedience to Christ. Within the household of faith, the creeds serve as summary statements—a kind of distillation—of the church's lived experience of God. Most of their language is drawn from Scripture. Even when the Nicene Creed employs philosophical terminology, it does so to clarify, not obscure, what we know of God in Christ and the Spirit. When baptismal candidates profess faith in "God the Father . . . in Jesus Christ, the Son of God . . . in God the Holy Spirit," they are aligning themselves with generations of Christians before them. They are not joining a "Christian club," in the way one might join a political party or action group. Nor are they subscribing to a particular philosophy, in this case, a Christian one. They are making a confession of faith—a personal yet shared witness and testimony. The candidates will then be baptized in the name of the one God they have come to know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for Christian spiritual experience is radically Trinitarian. Thus the significance

for Christian spirituality of baptism in the threefold name can scarcely be overestimated, as we shall see.

What immediately follows is a key commitment to a distinctive way of life: "Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?" This, too, serves as a crucial framework for the practice of Christian spirituality. The four terms of this promise are identical to the patterns of living described in Acts 2:42, immediately after the first Pentecost baptisms: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." These promises constitute a corporate Rule of Life—that is, a set of practices which Christians embrace so that the life of Christ, begun in baptism, can flourish in them.

It should be apparent by now that Christian spirituality is a fundamentally corporate exercise, not a solitary quest, though it contains individual dimensions. Such a corporate context makes the practice of Christian spirituality both easier and harder. Easier because we live out Christian discipleship not solely on our own but within a community to which we are accountable and which is accountable to us. The faith community is the Body of Christ of which we become members at baptism. As part of this Body we participate in the sacraments, and are built up by the teaching, preaching, guidance, and companionship we receive. The church, ideally at least, should be there to support us through the varied challenges we face with prayer, counsel, and fellowship. But as we all know from family life at least, "community" can be a mixed blessing. We can be disappointed in our local church, usually our parish, for any number of reasons. Or we may be disheartened by larger trends in the church. People invariably let us down sometime or other. We can find the faults, pettiness, limitations, or more monumental failings of our fellow Christians a hard pill to swallow. And certain personalities can be just plain irritating. Yet we promise to be part of the church—the "fellowship"—in a vital way for the rest of our lives. There is an arduous asceticism involved in belonging to the church's fellowship, just as in any form of family or community. It is a primary way we learn to "die to self" in order to live in Christ. It is among the most distinctive features of

Christian spirituality, and we must undertake the pledge to continue in the apostolic fellowship with our eyes open to its graces and its suffering.

When we promise to "continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers" we embark upon a way of life that has characterized Christians from the first. There are four somewhat overlapping elements to this corporate discipline: fidelity to apostolic teaching; involvement in the fellowship of the church; participation in the Eucharist (the "breaking of bread"); and observance of "the prayers." This last item probably refers to the round of Jewish devotion that punctuated the day at set intervals: evening, morning, and mid-afternoon. Whenever possible, devout Jews joined with others at the temple or synagogue for this service of psalms, prayers and, at least on the Sabbath, lessons from Scripture. Otherwise these daily devotions were performed at home, in a spirit of solidarity with other members of the Covenant community. As we learn from Acts, first-century Jewish Christians continued to join in these communal prayers. Over time, this devotional matrix developed into what we know as the Daily Office. The rule of life embedded in the Baptismal Covenant is so defining for Christian spirituality that later chapters will be devoted to discussing each of its elements. For now, it is sufficient to note that the baptismal life entails active participation in the community of the church as well as the performance of specific practices.

The final three promises of the Baptismal Covenant turn us beyond ourselves to evangelism and service. Since the liberating word of the gospel is not for ourselves alone, we will "proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ." Naturally, we want to make the joy we have discovered in coming to know Jesus available to others. It takes generosity and courage to share something of our faith or to invite people to consider what the Christian church has on offer. It also requires us, as we do so, to honor the final promise of the Baptismal Covenant to "respect the dignity of every human being"—including someone's freedom to reject Christian faith or any faith at all. Without succumbing to timidity, we need considerable wisdom, tact,

and discernment to know when and how to fulfill the command to "make disciples" in our own cultural context. Yet there will be opportunities to speak of Christ and his church to unbelieving or lapsed family members, colleagues, neighbors, or total strangers. We also effectively proclaim the gospel "by example." "Example" includes every aspect of faithful adherence to Christian belief and practice, including unstinting service. The second promise of this trio, to "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself," directs us to ongoing, sacrificial ministry. Nothing is more converting than love.

BY WATER AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

Most obviously, baptism involves *water*. Utterly commonplace, yet increasingly precious, water encompasses a wide range of disparate associations, many of which are captured in the baptismal rite. We begin to be born when our mother's amniotic sac breaks and we leave the aqueous environment of our first nine months. We need water for cleansing, and we delight in a good shower or a refreshing swim. For some who have suffered hurricanes and floods, water is a feared and destructive force. For all of us, water is essential. Plants and animals require water to survive and thrive. Astronomers scan near and distant planets for traces of water, a necessary condition for even the most primitive forms of life. Our own planet seems awash in water; but increasingly clean, available, and potable water is becoming scarcer, with climate change causing flooding in some areas and drought in others. We are beginning to realize just how valuable this substance is and how it must be conserved and protected.

Water imagery, drawing on these natural resonances, abounds in the Bible. Water is mentioned in the opening verses of the Book of Genesis when the Spirit activates creation (Gen. 1:2). The Holy Spirit appears again over water at the baptism of Jesus as a new creation is inaugurated. The story of the Great Flood dramatizes the destructive potential of water by cleansing the earth of sin, while the Crossing of the Red Sea involves both destruction (for the pursuing Egyptian army) and salvation (for

the escaping Hebrews). Already in the New Testament some of these water events began to be understood allegorically as prototypes of baptism. Exodus itself, the foremost instance of salvation in the Old Testament, came to be seen as a foreshadowing of salvation through baptism. Just as the ancient Hebrews were delivered from the bondage of slavery by passing through the waters of the Red Sea, so new Christians are delivered from the bondage of sin by entering the waters of baptism. Several of these biblical allusions are woven together in the opening words of the Thanksgiving over the Water in the liturgy of Holy Baptism:

> We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.

This solemn prayer continues with nearly direct quotation from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, where he interprets baptism as effecting union with Christ in his death and resurrection. It also affirms the infusion of the Holy Spirit, promised in Acts 2:38. Hence "baptism in the Holy Spirit," characteristic of the messianic age, is not relegated to some future, post-baptismal event. It is not the result of a dramatic conversion experience. The Holy Spirit is given in sacramental baptism, a feature of rebirth in Christ. We are baptized by water and the Holy Spirit:

> We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.[10]

And so, after plunging the candidate three times in the water of baptism, the bishop or priest marks the forehead with chrism—that is, olive oil that the bishop has previously blessed for this

10. *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 306. All future references to the BCP are given in the text.

purpose. "Chrism" and "Christ" are etymologically related words. "Christ" (*Christos* in Greek) means "Messiah" or the "Anointed One." Just as Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Christ or Messiah at his baptism, so the newly-baptized are anointed with the Holy Spirit at theirs: "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever." We are thus "christened." We belong to Christ; we become "another Christ" through the sanctifying and creative energy of the Holy Spirit.

Chrism is applied to our foreheads in "the sign of the cross" (BCP, 308). It is a terrible and glorious moment. Once again the death of Jesus is stamped on our flesh and thus into our souls. Then the newly baptized are usually given a small candle lit from the large paschal candle: we are led "through fire and water." Signifying the light of the Risen Lord, the paschal candle stands near the font. Its use at baptism is bound up with the other distinct occasions when it is employed in the liturgies of the church. Lit from the new fire kindled at the Great Vigil of Easter, the paschal candle is most plainly on display during the Great Fifty Days of the Easter season. It stands near the font at every baptism, and it stands next to the coffin at the burial liturgy. Thus the light of the Risen Christ frames baptismal life from font to grave.

For the baptized, Jesus's death and resurrection are not simply stupendous events, evoking our awe and gratitude. They do not stand outside us as something to admire—or even believe in—from the remote past. Baptism links us to them. It is how Jesus's death and resurrection get inside us. From the moment of our baptism, our very identities are shaped by these realities. The baptismal liturgy dramatizes and enacts the process of becoming one with Christ by sharing in his death and resurrection. It is a process that reverberates through every season of life. We never get to the bottom of it, and it becomes the lens through which we interpret the world and the events of our life.

PASCHAL MYSTERY

Suffering and death are everywhere, from roadkill to mass shootings to tsunamis: "We know that the whole creation has been

groaning in labor pains until now, and not only the creation, but we ourselves . . ." (Rom. 8:22–23). Paul's metaphor of "labor pains" implies that suffering is woven into the process of creation from the very start, and it continues through the birth of the new creation. "Life is suffering" is the first of Buddhism's Four Noble Truths. All sentient beings suffer, and even what we might regard as the inanimate creation is in some sense in travail as stars explode, galaxies form, volcanoes erupt, and tectonic plates laboriously shift. Over the millennia the scale of human suffering alone from warfare, disease, and scarcity has been monumental. Even if we happen to be among those who enjoy relative security, our lives are riddled with both physical and mental suffering: disappointment, illness, pain, loss, bereavement, failure, dislocation, and shame.

Theologians often distinguish between horrendous evils (including natural disasters, exceptional losses, and heinous crimes) and the ordinary forms of suffering common to all.[11] But in no case does God *send* suffering our way. Jesus saves us from the manifold evils we have committed and liberates us from those which afflict us. We particularly need deliverance from horrendous evils and healing in their aftermath. Those who have endured appalling evil or outrageous pain are one with the Crucified. As with Jesus's own suffering, such afflictions cannot be rationalized. They never "make sense." Yet the other sort of sufferings—ones that come through the daily vicissitudes of life—can play an educative and purgative role. We can view them as sheer bad luck and so learn nothing from them, growing ever more bitter. Or we can notice how God might be effecting our deeper conversion through them. According to Robert Hughes, in most cases God uses the material closest to hand—our experience of life with its various developmental stages—to work the ongoing conversion we need:

11. It is the horrendous evils which usually constitute the "problem of evil." See Thomas G. Long, *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011) for a compelling treatment of the issue.

> God provides ordinary life with all its ups and downs as the pedagogy, school, or discipline by which we are formed as persons for the fellowship and citizenship of God's reign, the dominion of love. As long as we remain unconverted and stuck in the mire, we will continually be offered by life a series of shocks inviting us to get unstuck, to give up our illusions and disillusions, resentments, judgments, and unwarranted expectations, to get in touch with reality, and unleash our co-creativity with God. This is not life as a "test," but a setting in which the Holy Spirit makes concrete offers for self-transcending growth. . . . One of the mysteries of the graciousness of ordinary life is that as long as we are stubbornly refusing to learn a particular lesson, we will be vouchsafed an endless series of annoying opportunities to learn it.[12]

There are also distinctive forms of spiritual suffering which many people assume separate them from God: a sense of the absence of God, for instance, or the silence of God. Yet a sense of abandonment by God actually unites us to Jesus in his own dereliction on the cross. This theme runs through Japanese novelist Shūsaku Endō's gripping novel *Silence*, set in seventeenth-century Japan. It is the story of an idealistic Portuguese missionary who secretly enters Japan after Christianity has been banned and terrible persecutions are underway. The situation rendered in the novel is historically accurate: during the period 1614–1640, five or six thousand Christians were martyred, most of them Japanese peasants.[13] The priest, who spends his brief ministry in hiding until his inevitable capture, repeatedly asks God why he permits his children to suffer as they do. But this, like nearly all of his prayers, is met with resounding silence. On only one night, as he "felt the face of Christ looking intently at him," did an answer seem to come: "I will not abandon you" (113). Another time, after the priest had witnessed the forced

12. Hughes, 106–107.

13. William Johnston, "Translator's Preface" to Shūsaku Endō, *Silence* (New York: Picador Modern Classics, 2016), xviii. Subsequent references given in the text are to this edition.

drowning of Japanese Christians who had befriended him along with the death of his sole missionary companion, he meditates on the face of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He then asks himself:

> On that night had that man, too, felt the silence of God? Had he, too, shuddered with fear? The priest did not want to think so. . . . The rainy sea into which Mokichi and Ichizo had sunk, fastened to stakes! The sea on which the black head of Garrpe, chasing after the little boat, had struggled wildly and then floated like a piece of drifting wood! The sea into which those bodies wrapped in straw matting had dropped straight down! This sea stretched out endlessly, sadly; and all the time, over the sea, God had simply maintained his unrelenting silence. "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabacthani!" With the memory of the leaden sea, these words suddenly burst into his consciousness. "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabacthani!" It is three o'clock on that Friday; and from the cross this voice rings out to a sky covered with darkness. The priest had always thought that these words were that man's prayer, not that they issued from terror at the silence of God. (147–148)

The priest is beginning to grasp the paradox of the cross. For the experience of abandonment by God is precisely a form of union with God. We can find ourselves in the same spiritual territory as Jesus, as he cries out in anguish, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" A sense of the absence of God or the silence of God does not in fact separate us from God. It is one of the most real if painful ways by which we are "united with Christ in his death."

In the riveting conclusion of *Silence*, Endō dramatizes an almost unthinkable case of union with Christ in his passion: fidelity to Jesus through the act of apostasy. The priest at this point has been in prison for some time, interrogated by the authorities, and urged to commit the act Japanese officials have devised for indicating abandonment of the Christian faith: stepping upon an image of Jesus. In the case of this priest, such a step would be a singularly painful act of treason to his Lord. Despite the silence of

God that he has suffered in prayer, the beloved face of Jesus in his meditations has been a regular source of comfort and companionship. Yet the authorities are especially keen to have priests commit apostasy in order to demoralize the thousands of secret, lay Christians. Rather than subject the priest himself to physical torture, which might backfire as a heroic martyrdom, they instead force him to hear the groans of other Christians, suffering a horrendous, slow death, suspended headlong over a filthy pit containing corpses and excrement. The agony will cease and the prisoners be released only if the priest agrees to set his foot on a copper image of Jesus crowned with thorns. In this hell of moral ambiguity, the priest decides, "to perform the most painful act of love that has ever been performed":

> The priest raises his foot. In it he feels a dull, heavy pain. This is no mere formality. He will now trample on what he has considered the most beautiful thing in his life, on what he has believed most pure, on what is filled with the ideals and the dreams of man. How his foot aches! And then the Christ in bronze speaks to the priest: "Trample! Trample! I more than anyone know of the pain in your foot. Trample! It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world. It was to share men's pain that I carried my cross." (183)

In this act of love, the priest loses everything dear to him: his Christian identity, his priesthood, his self-respect. He can never return to his homeland. But in the self-emptying, kenotic act by which he "tramples" on Christ, he is profoundly united to him. He "dies in Christ" more completely in this act of apostasy than in any version of heroic martyrdom that was his early dream. Although to outward appearances he seems to save himself by a fatal compromise, in reality he has turned himself inside out in sheer self-giving love. He has become Christ, utterly one with Jesus in his passion and death—yet he does not know it.

Recent centuries, including our own, have also produced thousands of martyrs. Most readers of this book, however, will probably not be called to witness to Christ by that ultimate sacrifice nor be faced with anything like the ordeal of Endō's main

character. Yet our own sufferings—whether physical, emotional, or spiritual—are real enough. We who have been "buried with Christ by baptism into death" experience his death every day in innumerable ways—some small, and some momentous. Many of these "death" experiences are common to everyone. Baptism into Christ's death frees us to face them. "Marked as Christ's own for ever" with the sign of the cross, we can stop pretending that we are not growing old, or that our bodies are not slowly wearing down, or that death is only a remote possibility—an accident befalling the unlucky. The cross liberates us from an oppressive culture that tells us that being young, beautiful, healthy, well-regarded, and if possible, rich, is all that matters. The cross allows us to walk into hospitals, nursing homes, and funeral homes without being overcome with revulsion. It permits us to experience losing our job, losing our health, or losing our spouse without losing Christ. For Christ is present in all our losses until, finally, we lose even life. Through all these divestments, we dive ever more deeply into the grace of baptism: union with Christ in his death and resurrection.

Every day we hear and see terrible events on the news: warfare and the hosts of refugees it produces; earthquakes and airline crashes; domestic violence and abused children; epidemic drug addiction, the human cost of economic downturns; and the public denigration of minorities. Obviously, baptism obliges us to work, as we have opportunity, for justice, human betterment, and the integrity of creation. But baptism gives us something more fundamental than an appropriate sense of moral responsibility: it gives us vision. St. Ambrose (339–397) referred to baptism as an "illumination." In baptism we begin to see things clearly: It is life with the lights on. Above all, the clarity of baptism sheds light on the suffering of the world. Jesus's passion and death become the interpretive key to tragedies that seem otherwise random, meaningless, or just plain evil. Evil may indeed be operative, as it was at Golgotha. But because suffering is of a piece with Christ's own cross, it is invested with immense, though often paradoxical, dignity. Union with Christ in his death, first forged in baptism, inevitably joins us in sympathy with all who suffer, even as it joins us

spiritually with Christ. As we grow into baptismal grace, we find this other dimension lurking just under the surface of ordinary human suffering: We begin to notice the presence of Christ Crucified in our afflicted neighbor, and Christ's quiet companionship in our own trials. If we see the suffering Christ in the suffering "other," moral obligation is transposed into compassionate love: love for the Christ who is present though in disguise.

Suffering serves as a kind of connective tissue for the whole human race, and in his humanity, Jesus embraced every bit of it. As Rowan Williams writes,

> If we ask the question, "Where might you expect to find the baptized?" one answer is, "In the neighborhood of chaos." It means you might expect to find Christian people near to those places where humanity is most at risk, where humanity is most disordered, disfigured and needy. Christians will be found in the neighborhood of Jesus—but Jesus is found in the neighborhood of human suffering, defencelessly alongside those in need.[14]

We experience resurrection, as St. Paul did, embedded in travail itself: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies" (2 Cor. 4:8–10). Without the resurrection to enliven his experience of suffering, Paul would have been both afflicted and crushed, perplexed and driven to despair, persecuted and forsaken, struck down and destroyed. But he is not. The Risen Christ illumines everything. How else could Shūsaku Endō's afflicted Christ speak from the bronze icon? According to the gospel accounts, the risen Jesus repeatedly displays his wounds: they are not left behind. Christ is both crucified and risen, and baptism is immersion into both sides of this paschal mystery. The resurrection irradiates present affliction with hope streaming to us from the glory yet to be revealed.

14. Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), 4.