

THE
HARMONY AND
CONSISTENCY
OF THE TEACHING
OF THE
CATHOLIC CHURCH
ON
BAPTISM OF DESIRE

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Introduction

When we consider the teachings of the Catholic Church over the course of nearly 20 centuries, we must admire the wonderful consistency and harmony of the magisterium (teaching authority) established by Jesus Christ. And this could not be otherwise when we reflect on the words of Our Divine Saviour to His Apostles: “He who hears you hears Me.” (Luke 10:16); “Go teach all nations... all things whatsoever I have commanded you... I am with you all days even unto the consummation of the world.” (Matt. 28:19); and “Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven.” (Matt. 16:18). How beautifully Pope Leo XIII expressed this in his encyclical *Satis Cognitum*: “If it (the living magisterium) could in any way be false, an evident contradiction follows, for then God Himself would be the author of error.”

This is especially true in the Catholic Church’s teaching on Baptism of Desire. When we carefully look at the teachings of the Popes, the Council of Trent, the 1917 Code of Canon Law, the Fathers and Doctors of the Church and the consistent and universal teachings of Catholic theologians, we find marvelous harmony.

This compendium of the Catholic Church’s teaching on Baptism of Desire has been compiled for the simple reason that, occasionally and unfortunately, there are small numbers of misguided souls who reject it and tragically place their own personal misinterpretations over the clear and consistent teaching of the Catholic Church in her solemn decrees and in her ordinary universal magisterium.

From the **Council of Trent** (1545-1563) there are two clear references to Baptism of Desire:

Canons on the Sacraments in General: - (Canon 4):

“If anyone shall say that the sacraments of the New Law are not necessary for salvation, but are superfluous, and that although all are not necessary for every individual, without them **or without the desire of them** (*sine eis aut eorum voto*), through faith alone men obtain from God the grace of justification; let him be anathema.”

Decree on Justification: - (Session 6, Chapter 4):

“In these words a description of the justification of a sinner is given as being a translation from that state in which man is born a child of the first Adam to the state of grace and of the ‘adoption of the sons’ (Rom. 8:15) of God through the second Adam, Jesus Christ, our Savior and this translation after the promulgation of the Gospel cannot be effected **except through the laver of regeneration or a desire for it**, (*sine lavacro regenerationis aut eius voto*) as it is written: ‘Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter in the kingdom of God’ (John 3:5).”

And this teaching of the Council of Trent was reiterated and expounded in ***The Catechism of the Council of Trent***: “But the faithful are earnestly to be exhorted, to take care that their children be brought to the church, as soon as it can be done without danger, and solemnly baptized; for as no other means of salvation remains for infant children except baptism,

it is not difficult to comprehend the enormity of their guilt, who suffer them to be deprived of the grace of the sacrament, longer than necessity may require; particularly at an age so tender as to be exposed to numberless dangers of death. With regard to adults who enjoy the perfect use of reason, namely persons born of infidel parents, the practice of the ancient Church points out a different manner of proceeding... On this class of persons, however, the Church was not accustomed to confer this sacrament immediately, but ordained that it should be deferred to a certain time, **nor is the delay attended with the danger already noticed in the case of infants, for, should any unforeseen accident render it impossible for adults to be baptised, their intention of receiving it, and their repentance for past sins, will avail them to grace and righteousness.**”

A parallel to Baptism of Desire is further found in the Council of Trent’s teaching on perfect contrition which reconciles man to God before the Sacrament of Penance is actually received. **“This reconciliation, nevertheless, must not be ascribed to the contrition itself without the desire of the Sacrament which is included in it.”** (Denzinger 898)

Numerous references of Papal teaching on this matter of Baptism of Desire can be cited. As early as the 12th century, we find in the teachings of [Pope Innocent III](#) (*Apostolicam Sedem*):

“To your inquiry we respond thus: We assert

without hesitation (on the authority of the holy Fathers Augustine and Ambrose) that **the priest whom you indicated (in your letter) had died without the water of baptism**, because he persevered in the faith of Holy Mother the Church and in the confession of the name of Christ, was **freed from original sin and attained the joy of the heavenly fatherland**. Read (brother) in the eighth book of Augustine's City of God where among other things it is written, **'Baptism is ministered invisibly to one whom not contempt of religion but death excludes.'** Read again the book also of the blessed Ambrose concerning the death of Valentinian where he says the same thing. **Therefore, to questions concerning the dead, you should hold the opinions of the learned Fathers, and in your church you should join in prayers and you should have sacrifices offered to God for the priest mentioned.**" (Denzinger 388)

In another papal teaching the [same Pope](#) taught (*Debitum pastoralis officii*, August 28, 1206):

"You have, to be sure, intimated that a certain Jew, when at the point of death, since he lived only among Jews, immersed himself in water while saying: 'I baptize myself in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.'

"We respond that, since there should be a distinction between the one baptizing and the one baptized, as is clearly gathered from the words of the Lord, when He says to the Apostles: 'Go baptize all nations in the name etc.' (cf. Matt. 28:19), the Jew mentioned

must be baptized again by another, that it may be shown that he who is baptized is one person, and he who baptizes another . . . **If, however, such a one had died immediately, he would have rushed to his heavenly home without delay because of the faith of the sacrament, although not because of the sacrament of faith.**” (Denzinger 413)

On October 1, 1567, [Pope St. Pius V](#) condemned the errors of Michael du Bay who claimed, “Perfect and sincere charity, which is from a ‘pure heart and good conscience and a faith not feigned’ (I Tim. 1:5), can be in catechumens as well as in penitents without the remission of sins.” (Denzinger 1031) Catechumens can obtain the remission of sins before baptism.

[Pope Pius XI](#) approved of the latest edition of the *Rituale Romanum*, which contains the ceremonies for the Sacraments, Blessings and Consecrations. In the general instructions given before the rite of Baptism, it states “That holy baptism, the gateway to the Christian religion and to eternal life, holding as it does the first place among the sacraments instituted by Christ for the New Covenant, **is necessary unto salvation for all, either in act or desire.**”

[Pope Pius XII](#), on July 28, 1949, approved the [instructions of the Holy Office](#), which dealt with the Catholic Church’s teaching on Baptism of Desire (*Canon Law Digest*—Bouscaren/O’Connor). The Holy Office explicitly referred to the Council of Trent

and also to the encyclical of Pope Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*, to insist on Baptism of Desire as a clear teaching of the Catholic Church.

Furthermore, [Pope Pius XII on October 29, 1951](#), addressed the urgent necessity of Baptism of infants and indirectly referred to what the Catholic Church has consistently taught about the desire for Baptism in adults:

“If what We have said up to now deals with the protection and the care of natural life, it should hold all the more in regard to the supernatural life which the newly born infant receives with Baptism. In the present economy there is no other way of communicating this life to the child who has not yet the use of reason. But, nevertheless, the state of grace at the moment of death is absolutely necessary for salvation. Without it, it is not possible to attain supernatural happiness, the beatific vision of God. **An act of love can suffice for an adult to obtain sanctifying grace and supply for the absence of Baptism**; for the unborn child or for the newly born this way is not open. . . . It is, therefore, easy to understand the importance of giving Baptism to the infant completely without the use of reason when it is in serious danger of facing certain death.”

Now when we study the [1917 Code of Canon Law](#), compiled under the authority of Pope St. Pius X and promulgated by Pope Benedict XV, we find reference to the Council of Trent teaching on Baptism of Desire.

Canon 737 states that Baptism is **“necessary for salvation in fact or at least in desire.”** The footnote in the Latin text of the Code of Canon Law for Canon 737 directly refers to the Council of Trent’s chapters on the Sacraments in general and justification as the source of this Canon. Then, in regard to Catholic burial, Canon 1239 declares that **“Catechumens who, through no fault of their own, die without baptism are to be treated as baptized.”** Although the 1917 Code was promulgated for the Latin Rite of the Catholic Church, it is clear that those Canons which pertain to Divine Law bind both the Latin and Eastern Rites. Canonists state that where the 1917 Code reiterates Divine Law, it pertains to all Catholics and they explicitly give Canon 737 on Baptism as an example.

The Doctors of the Church—St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Alphonsus Liguori, St. Robert Bellarmine—all taught that men can be saved by Baptism of Desire if through no fault of their own they die without baptism.

In the early Church, [St. Ambrose](#) (d. 397) declared: “I hear you express grief because he [Valentinian] did not receive the Sacrament of Baptism. Tell me, what else is there in us except the will and petition? **But he had long desired to be initiated . . . and expressed his intention to be baptized . . . Surely, he received [it] because he asked [for it].”**

Following St. Ambrose in this matter, [St. Augustine](#) taught: “Baptism is administered invisibly to one whom not contempt of religion but death excludes.”

In the 1200’s, the great Angelic Doctor, [St. Thomas Aquinas](#), in his *Summa* expounded: “Secondly, the sacrament of Baptism may be wanting to anyone in reality but not in desire: for instance, **when a man wishes to be baptized, but by some ill-chance he is forestalled by death before receiving Baptism. And such a man can obtain salvation without being actually baptized, on account of his desire for Baptism**, which desire is the outcome of *faith that worketh by charity*, whereby God, Whose power is not tied to visible sacraments, sanctifies man inwardly. **Hence Ambrose says of Valentinian, who died while yet a catechumen: ‘I lost him whom I was to regenerate: but he did not lose the grace he prayed for.’”**

Another Doctor of the Church, [St. Robert Bellarmine](#) (1542-1621) in his *Opera (Liber II, Caput XXX)* reiterated: “Boni Cathecumeni sunt de Ecclesia, interna unione tantum, non autem externa.” (Good catechumens are of the Church, by internal union only, not however, by external union.)

After the Council of Trent and the Catechism issued by order of the Council, [St. Alphonsus Liguori](#) (1691-1787), the great Doctor of the Church, firmly held: “**Now it is *de fide* that men are also saved**

by Baptism of desire, by virtue of the Canon *'Apostolicam De Presbytero Non Baptizato'* and the Council of Trent, Session 6, Chapter 4 where it is said that no one can be saved 'without the laver of regeneration or the desire for it.' ”

On this point it is most pertinent to consider [Pope Pius IX's address to Archbishop Scherr of Munich](#); the Pope clearly stated **that the obligation of faith for Catholics extends “to those things which, through the ordinary teaching of the whole Church throughout the world, are proposed as divinely revealed and, as a result, by universal and constant consent of Catholic theologians are held to be matters of faith.”** (Denzinger 1683)

One year later, this [same Pope, in his *Syllabus of Errors*](#) (Denzinger 1722) condemned those who had denied this obligation. Condemned proposition #22: “The obligation by which Catholic teachers and writers are absolutely bound is restricted to those matters only which are proposed by the infallible judgment of the Church, to be believed by all as dogmas of faith.”

Lastly, Vatican Council I, in 1870, solemnly taught: “By divine and Catholic faith everything must be believed that is contained in the written word of God or in tradition, and that is proposed by the Church as a divinely revealed object of belief either in a solemn decree **or in her ordinary, universal teaching.**” (Denzinger 1792)

Baptism of Desire has been consistently and unanimously taught by bishops and theologians for many centuries. This teaching is contained in the ordinary universal teachings of the Catholic Church. In *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, by Dr. Ludwig Ott, we find: “The Bishops exercise their infallible teaching power in an ordinary manner when they, in their dioceses, in moral unity with the Pope, unanimously promulgate the same teachings on Faith and Morals. The Vatican Council expressly declared that also the truths of Revelation proposed by the ordinary and general teaching office of the Church are to be firmly held with Divine and Catholic Faith (Denzinger 1792). But the incumbents of the ordinary and general teaching office of the Church are the members of the whole episcopate scattered over the whole earth. The agreement of the Bishops in doctrine may be determined from the catechisms issued by them, from their pastoral letters, from the prayer books approved by them, and from the resolutions of Particular Synods. A morally general agreement suffices, but in this the express or tacit assent of the Pope, as the supreme head of the Episcopate, is essential.”

Examples of the harmony and consistency of the Catholic Faith on Baptism of Desire can be witnessed by the following well known theologians of the 20th century:

Fr. A. Tanquary

Dogmatic Brevior; ART. IV, (Section I, II): - 1945

The Baptism of Desire. *Contrition, or perfect charity, with at least an implicit desire for Baptism, supplies in adults the place of the baptism of water as respects the forgiveness of sins.*

This is certain.

Explanation. a) **An implicit desire for Baptism, that is, one that is included in a general purpose of keeping all the commandments of God is, as all agree, sufficient in one who is invincibly ignorant of the law of Baptism;** likewise, according to the more common opinion, in one who knows the necessity of Baptism.

b) Perfect charity, with a desire for Baptism, forgives original sin and actual sins, and therefore infuses sanctifying grace; but it does not imprint the Baptismal character and does not of itself remit the whole temporal punishment due for sin; whence, when opportunity offers, the obligation remains on one who was sanctified in this manner of receiving the Baptism of water.

Fr. Prummer, O.P.

Moral Theology: - 1949

- “Baptism of Desire which is a perfect act of charity that includes at least implicitly the desire for Baptism by water;”

- “Baptism of Blood which signifies martyrdom endured for Christ prior to the reception of Baptism by water.”

- **“Regarding the effects of Baptism of Blood and**

Baptism of Desire . . . both cause sanctifying grace. . . . Baptism of blood usually remits all venial sin and temporal punishment . . .”

Fr. Francis O’Connell

Outlines of Moral Theology - 1953:

- “Baptism of Desire . . . is an act of divine charity or perfect contrition . . .”

- **“These means (i.e. Baptism of Blood & Desire) presuppose in the recipient at least the implicit will to receive the sacrament.”**

“. . . Even if an infant can gain the benefit of the Baptism of Blood if he is put to death by a person actuated by hatred for the Christian faith . . .”

Mgr. J. H. Hervé

Manuale Theologiae Dogmaticae (Vol. III: chap. IV)

- 1931

II. *On those for whom Baptism of water can be supplied:*

The various baptisms: from the Council of Trent itself and from the things stated, it stands firm that Baptism is necessary, yet in fact or in desire; therefore in an extraordinary case it can be supplied. Further, according to the Catholic doctrine, there are two things by which the sacrament of Baptism can be supplied, namely an act of perfect charity with the desire of Baptism and the death as martyr. Since these two are a compensation for Baptism of water, they themselves are called Baptism, too, in order that they may be comprehended with it under one as it were generic name; **so the act of love with desire for**

Baptism is called *Baptismus flaminis* (Baptism of the Spirit) and the martyrrium (Baptism of Blood).

Fr. H. Noldin, S.J. - Fr. A. Schmit, S.J.

Summa theologiae moralis (Vol. III de Sacramentis);
Bk 2 *Quaestio prima* - 1921:

Baptism of spirit (*flaminis*) is perfect charity or contrition, in which the desire in fact to receive the sacrament of Baptism is included; perfect charity and perfect contrition however have the power to confer sanctifying grace.

Fr. Arthur Vermeersch, S.J.

Theologiae Moralis (Vol III, Tractatus II) - 1948:

The Baptism of spirit (*flaminis*) is an act of perfect charity or contrition, in so far as it contains at least a tacit desire of the Sacrament. Therefore it can be had only in adults. It does not imprint a character; . . . but it takes away all mortal sin together with the sentence of eternal penalty, according to: “He who loves me, is loved by my Father.” (John 14:21)

Fr. Ludovico Billot, S.J.

De Ecclesiae Sacramentis (Vol. I); *Quaestio LXVI*;
Thesis XXIV - 1931:

Baptism of spirit (*flaminis*), which is also called of repentance or of desire is nothing else than an act of charity or perfect contrition including a desire of the Sacrament, according to what has been said above, namely that, the heart of everyone is moved by the Holy Ghost to believe, and to love God, and to be sorry for his sins.

Fr. Eduardus Genicot, S.J.

Theologiae Moralis Institutiones (Vol II); Tractatus XII - 1902:

Baptism of the Spirit (flaminis) consists in an act of perfect charity or contrition, with which there is always an infusion of sanctifying grace connected . . .

Both are called “of desire” (in voto) . . . ; perfect charity, because it has always connected the desire, at least the implicit one of receiving this sacrament, absolutely necessary for salvation.”

Fr. Aloysia Sabetti, S.J. - Fr. Timotheo Barrett, S.J.

Compendium Theologiae Moralis; Tractatus XII De Baptismo (Chap. 1) - 1926:

Baptism, the gate and foundation of the Sacraments in fact or at least in desire, is necessary for all unto salvation . . .

From the Baptism of water, which is called of river (Baptismus fluminis), is from Baptism of the Spirit (Baptismus flaminis) and Baptism of Blood, by which Baptism properly speaking can be supplied, if this be impossible. The first one is a full conversion to God through perfect contrition or charity, in so far as it contains an either explicit or at least implicit will to receive Baptism of water . . . Baptism of Spirit (flaminis) and Baptism of blood are called Baptism of desire (in voto).

Roman Martyrology

January 23 - At Rome, **St. Emerentiana**, Virgin and Martyr, who was stoned by the heathen **while still a catechumen**, when she was praying at the tomb of St.

Agnes, whose foster-sister she was.

April 12 - At Braga, in Portugal, **St. Victor**, Martyr, who, **while still a catechumen**, refused to worship an idol, and confessed Christ Jesus with great constancy; and so after many torments, he **merited to be baptized in his own blood**, his head being cut off.

August 25 - At Arles in France, another **Blessed Genesisius**, who undertook the office copyist, when he refused to transcribe the impious edicts whereby the Christians were ordered to be punished and, casting away his registers, in public he proclaimed himself a Christian, was arrested and beheaded and received the glory of martyrdom, being **baptized in his own blood**.