

THE ANCIENT TYPIKON

For An Elephant Funeral

(Slightly edited from "The Form of Holy Baptism")

by Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

And John was also baptizing in Ænon near to Salim, because there was much water there."

(John 3:23)

Immersion By Immersion

In speaking about Baptism, we need to know the exact meaning of the word. This is especially important when we are discussing the correct form of Baptism.

Baptism is a Greek word, and so we have to turn to the Greeks to find out what they meant by this word. As the saying goes, "The Greeks have a word for it." (Here, alas, the bitter truth must be confessed: sometimes, they don't have a word for it. For example, there is no Greek word for "toe." What we call "toes" are known in Greek as "the fingers of the foot," or maybe "little fingers." So, if you look carefully [in a Greek lexicon], you will see that Greeks don't have toes.)

They did have a word for "baptism," however, and that word is *báptisma*; they had a verb too: *baptízein* — "to baptize." What did the ancient Greeks mean when they called something "baptized"? Hippocrates used the word to refer to something that was *drenched*. Eubulus the comedian used the word in reference to drunkards who were "*soaked* in wine." Plato used the term to describe debtors who were "*over their head in debt*." And in regard to someone who was being interrogated, he used it to mean "he was *drowned* with questions; he was getting into deep water." And finally, the historian Polybius refers to ships that were "*baptized*" during a sea battle, that is, they had been sunk right down to the bottom.

At the risk of repeating a good story to an audience that may already have heard it, a few years ago a Roman Catholic priest came by our monastery [before I had been made a bishop], and I happened to be on telephone duty. During our talk he asked, "Is it true that you Orthodox baptize by immersion?" I told him, "Well, you must know that 'baptism' is a Greek word that means 'immersion.'" So, what you're really asking me is if we immerse by immersion, and the answer to that is: "Yes!"

But why is *immersion* so important? Because it is a figure and symbol of Christ's death and burial. As we see in Saint Paul's epistle to the Romans:

Know ye not that as many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death? Therefore, we are buried with Him by baptism into death, so that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of His death, we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection.

Romans 6:3-5

In one of his homilies, Saint John Chrysostom notes that other people fish by pulling the fish out of the water, and they die; whereas we Christians fish by throwing the fish into the water, and they come to life! (*On the Holy Pascha*, Migne, PG 50, 437).

The complete immersion or submersion of a person in Baptism is the figure of the death of the old man, and his emergence from the water as one reborn is a figure of renewal and the consecration of a new life in the figure of the Resurrection. We do not bury people by sprinkling a handful of earth over their heads, or by shaking a little shovel full of dirt over them. No, we bury them completely, deep in the earth. Immersion, that is, Baptism, is one thing and sprinkling is another. They are not the same, and that is why the Holy Scriptures make a point of telling us that Saint John the Forerunner was baptizing at Ænon near Salim, "because there was much water there." Indeed, why should Saint John the Baptist, or our Saviour, take the trouble to go all the way down to the Jordan River if any little washbasin elsewhere would have served the same purpose?

Assuredly, just as sprinkling a little earth over the head of a dead man does not count as burial, even so does sprinkling a little water over one's head not amount to Baptism, neither does it serve as a symbol of the death of our old self, nor even as a "likeness" of the death and burial of our Saviour.

The Elephant Typikon

Even elephants have more sense in this particular regard.

Have any of you ever been to an elephant funeral? Now, there's a funeral for you! Their time-honored observances in this matter are certainly most impressive. First of all, the prescribed *Typikon* calls for the herd to begin a somber procession in a circle around the body of the newly-departed, accompanied by a lot of mournful trumpeting and the solemn stomping of the feet. Then the bereaved elephants go off in different directions and break leafy branches off the trees. They carry these back in their trunks and use them to bury the carcass of the deceased. Note that they don't just sprinkle a few leaves or throw a couple of roses over the body. No indeed. They completely bury it under the branches. So, in this case at least, even the elephants have more sense than some people do. Instinctively, the wise elephant knows that when one is dead, one is dead and buried, not dead and sprinkled.

Returning to our own, too often less circumspect species, we observe that all the ancient authorities, including the Holy Scriptures, bear witness to the Orthodox tradition of *immersion*.

Here is what some ancient canons say about Holy Baptism:

46th Apostolic Canon

We ordain that a bishop or presbyter who has admitted the baptism or sacrifice of heretics be deposed. For what concord hath Christ with Beliar, or what part hath a believer with an infidel?

47th Apostolic Canon

Let a bishop or presbyter who shall baptize again one who has rightly received Baptism, or who shall not baptize one who has been polluted by the ungodly, be deposed, as despising the Cross and death of the Lord, and not making a distinction between the true priests and the false.

68th Apostolic Canon

If any bishop, presbyter, or deacon shall receive from anyone a second ordination, let both the ordained and the ordainer be deposed, unless indeed it be proved that he had his ordination from heretics; for those who have been baptized or ordained by such persons cannot be either of the faithful or of the clergy.

Canon I of the Local Council of Carthage

That those baptized by heretics shall be rebaptized to be admitted to the Church.

Canon 84 of the Sixth Ecumenical Council

Following the canonical institutions of the Fathers, we order that whoever does not know nor can prove by documents that he has been baptized, he must without any hesitation be baptized.

In Church History, of course, we know of many instances that call for the discreet use of *economia* in receiving people into the Church.

Two Coins In The Fountain

But, since the correct faith is so important, what did many early Christians believe about the "baptism" of the non-Orthodox?

On December seventh, we celebrate the memory of a certain Orthodox woman of

Rome. Her name is unknown to us, but we must surely call her blessed. In the year 474, the Arians raised up a terrible persecution against the Orthodox Catholic Christians. Sunilda, the wife of the Arian ruler of Rome, took it upon herself to attempt to force one Orthodox woman to accept the baptism of the Arians. The woman would not consent, so the Arians seized her, took her by force to one of their churches, and immersed her into the water in the presence of the Arian bishop.

As she came out of the water, she turned to her handmaid who was holding a purse. She took two coins out of the purse, handed them to the Arian bishop, and said to him, "Thanks for the bath."

This so enraged the Arians, they dragged her out of their temple, tied her to a post, and burned her alive.

In her, truly, are fulfilled the words of King David the Prophet: "We went through fire and water, and Thou didst bring us out into refreshment" (Psalm 65:12).

By her intercessions, and of those of all the Saints, may we be counted worthy of the Heavenly Kingdom. Amen.