

# The Baptismal Moment

WILLIAM M. CWIRLA



**B**APTISM IS NOT SIMPLY a once-and-done event of the past, much less a symbolic ritual act on the part of man for Martin Luther, and for Lutherans holding to the catechism. In the Large Catechism, Luther wrote of the proper use of Holy Baptism over and against the trials and tribulations of the believer in this oft-quoted sentence: “To appreciate and use Baptism aright, we must draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us, and we must retort, ‘But I am baptized!’ [*Ich bin dennoch getauft.*] And if I am baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body” (LC IV, 44; Tappert, 442). Luther’s great *dennoch* against the accusations of the law and the pangs of conscience against our sin is faith’s claim to the promise of forgiveness, life, and salvation in baptism. For Luther, and for Lutherans holding to the catechism, baptism is not simply a once-and-done event of the past, much less a symbolic ritual act on the part of man, but a present activity of God bestowing a present identity on the believer with saving consequences for the future.

## BAPTISM AS A SALVIFIC MOMENT

To say with the catechism “I am baptized” is to lay hold of the promises of God’s Name in the baptismal water. There are promised and delivered all that Christ has done for us men and for our salvation: his “victory over death and devil, forgiveness of sin, God’s grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts. In short, the blessings of Baptism are so boundless that if timid nature considers them, it may well doubt whether they all could be true” (LC IV, 41–42; Tappert, 441–42).

Baptism is a singular event in time that embraces all of salvation history from beginning to end, a one-time-for-all-times moment (*kairos*) in which the triune God reaches down from heaven to touch the sinner in his time and place. It is salvation’s “now” and “for you” applied individually and personally, the objective work of Christ as the sacrificial Lamb who takes away the sin of the world offered, delivered, and applied to the individual sinner. What the Father has purposed and willed in his elect Son from before the foundation of the world and what the

Son has accomplished and won for all humankind on the cross is here and now delivered and applied by water and Spirit in the triune Name. Here the Infinite and Holy touches the finite and unholy. The eternal “I AM” for whom “one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Pet 3:8)<sup>1</sup> breaks into the confines of chronological time. The Creator meets his foremost fallen creature, and all that God has done to save the world in his Son’s death and resurrection comes splashing down upon the sinner’s head in the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit in a singular baptismal moment.

This singular, one-time-for-all-times action of God by the word and Holy Spirit makes the baptismal moment a present tense moment (*kairos*) of salvation. “Now is the acceptable moment; now is the time of your salvation” (see 2 Cor 6:2). “Baptism now saves you” (1 Pet 3:20). “I am baptized.” Baptism, though applied once, is always present tense in its efficacy. This comes into liturgical expression most clearly in the Vigil of Easter with its emphasis on baptism and our baptismal burial with Christ.

This is the night when You brought our fathers, the children of Israel, out of bondage in Egypt and led them through the Red Sea on dry ground. This is the night when all who believe in Christ are delivered from bondage to sin and are restored to life and immortality. This is the night when Christ, the Life, arose from the dead. The seal of the grave is broken and the morning of the new creation breaks forth out of night. Oh, how wonderful and beyond all telling is Your mercy toward us, O God, that to redeem a slave You gave Your Son. How holy is this night when all wickedness is put to flight and sin is washed away. How holy is this night when innocence is restored to the fallen and joy is given to those downcast. How blessed is the night when man is reconciled to God in Christ.<sup>2</sup>

The readings for the Vigil emphasize our immersion in salvation history. Everything that the triune God has done from the Creation to Noah and the Flood to Abraham to Moses and the Red Sea now comes to bear on the newly baptized and upon all

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WILLIAM CWIRLA is pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, California. This article is developed from an essay that was delivered to the 2013 National Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod under the title “Baptized for This Moment,” delivered 21 July 2013.

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1. Except where otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the ESV.  
2. “Vigil of Easter,” Lutheran Service Book: Altar Book, prepared by The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 535–36.

who in repentant faith recall their baptism. The One “who is and who was and who is to come” (Rev 1:8) is here present as the “I AM,” offering, delivering, and applying the entire work of redemption from its alpha beginning to its omega ending. “Now, here in Baptism there is brought free to every man’s door just such a priceless medicine which swallows up death and saves the lives of all men” (LC IV, 43; Tappert, 442).

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### *The Divine Coroner has signed and sealed the death certificate.*

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In his explanation to the Third Article of the Creed in the Large Catechism, Luther connects the objective work of Christ completed once for all on the cross with the subjective application of that work through the preached gospel and administered sacraments.

Neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ, or believe in him and take him as our Lord, unless these were first offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the Gospel by the Holy Spirit. The work is finished and completed, Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by his sufferings, death, and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden and no one knew of it, it would have been all in vain, all lost. In order that this treasure might not be buried but put to use and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed, in which he has given the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to us this treasure of salvation. Therefore to sanctify is nothing else than to bring us to the Lord Christ to receive this blessing, which we could not obtain by ourselves. (LC II, 38–39; Tappert, 415–16)

The baptismal moment is a forensic, external, objective act of God’s word. God speaks and so it is. “Be light.” “Be sea and dry land.” “Be fruitful and multiply.” “Be forgiven, justified, sanctified, glorified.” The mouth of the Lord has spoken it, and so it is. The word of baptism declares us to be dead to sin and alive to God in Christ (Rom 6:11). The Divine Coroner has signed and sealed the death certificate. And your birth certificate has already been registered in the heavenly city. Your life is now hidden in Christ (Col 3:3), which means this must be believed. We cannot by our own reason or senses perceive this. We no longer live, but Christ now lives in us, albeit in a body of death predisposed to sin and still under bondage to death. The life we live here and now in baptism we live by faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave himself up for us (Gal 2:20).

Dying and rising is the way of the baptized. The sinner cannot be rehabilitated, whether by Ten Commandments or twelve steps. He can only die, just as the saint, the new man in Christ,

is born anew from above (*ἀνωθεν*) by water and Spirit. Death and resurrection is God’s *modus operandi*. The baptismal life of repentance is a continual metanoia, a change of mind, a “recognizing,” “re-thinking,” “re-newing” of the mind as the mind of Christ, learning to think with the mind of Christ rather than the mind of Adam. It is learning to trust the word put into our ears over and sometimes against what we perceive with our eyes, our reason, and our senses. The baptismal life of faith means being transformed, not by the renovation and rehabilitation of the sinful flesh, but by the renewing of our minds in Christ Jesus.

### BAPTISM AND PRIESTHOOD

Baptism is a priestly moment.<sup>3</sup> To the newly baptized, the apostle Peter writes: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet 2:9–10 RSV). We tend to get “religious” when we hear the word priest. We think priests are guys who do religious things. We hear priest and we think pastor. And some priests are pastors. That’s true. But some are plumbers, electricians, and accountants, too.

Priests offer sacrifices. In the Old Testament, the sacrifices were bloody and burnt. In the New Testament, they are unbloody and living. “I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1). The once-for-all atoning sacrifice has been made on the cross by the High Priest. Now his priests offer their redeemed, blood-bought bodies in service as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable in his sacrifice. So what do these living sacrifices look like? What does it mean to offer up your bodies as a living sacrifice? Priestly sacrifice means this: *martyria* (witness), *diakonia* (service), *koinonia* (life together).

### MARTYRIA

Baptized priests bear witness. They speak to their neighbor about God, declaring the praises of him who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light. They are martyrs engaging in *martyria* often to their own martyrdom. It happens somewhere in this world every day. Don’t think it can’t happen here in our time and place. As soon as the world catches wind of the Christ in your *martyria*, it will want to crucify you, too. “The world will hate you because of me,” Jesus warned his disciples (see Luke 21:17). They don’t give out Nobel Prizes for proclaiming the gospel. Only crosses.

If you want to get a bead on *martyria*, watch John the Baptist in action. When they asked him who he was, John refused even to answer. Are you the Christ? No. Are you Elijah? No.

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3. I am indebted to the Rev. Dr. Kenneth F. Korby for these insights on the priesthood of the baptized, particularly “Baptism: Ordination into the Royal Priesthood of Believers,” Convention Essay for the Montana District of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 4–8 April 1988 (unpublished).

Are you the Prophet? No. Then who are you, John? Tell us. We want to hear your personal testimony, John. John says, “I am a voice calling in the wilderness. That’s all you need to know. Get ready for the Lord!” A voice in the wilderness. The martyr witness is a voice, no more, nothing less. If they forget your name, who cares, so long as they call on the name of Jesus. He must increase, we must decrease. Even if they serve your head up on a silver platter, so what? Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

Priests tell a sharp, two-edged truth. They speak the hard penultimate truth of the law that condemns sin, kills the sinner, shuts every self-justifying mouth before God, and consigns every man, woman, and child to disobedience. They tell the comforting, ultimate truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, who became our sin so that in him, baptized into his death and life, we might become the righteousness of God, covered not with our righteousness but with his perfect righteousness. This is the truth, the whole truth, the only truth, that quiets the accusing/excusing conscience before God. Priests speak the truth in love. Love is the context of our *martyria*; truth is its content. We speak neither a truthless love nor a loveless truth.

### DIAKONIA

Priests are servants of God for their neighbor. They do *diakonia* in the name of God, doing the goodness and mercy of God for those around them.

There was a man who fell among thieves on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho (see Luke 10:25–37). As he lay there in the ditch, bleeding and dying, three men had opportunity to be neighbor, to be *priest*, to the man who fell among the thieves. Ironically, the priest and his deacon, the Levite, decline the call to be priest to this man. They likely had things to do when they got back home. And they had a law. Touch a corpse and you were unclean, which meant a lengthy furlough and a costly sacrifice. Try to explain that to the home congregation. They do the safe, expedient, prudent thing. They walk safely on the other side of the road, averting their eyes, and let someone else deal with the man who fell among thieves.

Then along comes a Samaritan, to whom no pious Jew would give the time of day or a cup of water, much less bend down in the ditch to serve. He is a free man. He is dead to the world. He doesn’t have a care in this world. He’s not debating “Who is my neighbor?” or “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” or “What would Jesus do?” He simply sees a man in need, and stops on the road and gets down in the ditch to help him. He pours oil and wine into his wounds, puts him on his donkey, takes him to the local inn, spends the night caring for him, plunks down a couple of day’s wages at the front desk and leaves his Visa card and signature in case there are more expenses. No “Good Samaritan laws” could ever produce this kind of goodness and mercy. This is a mercy born of freedom.

Who then is neighbor, *who is priest*, to the man who fell among thieves? Why, the Samaritan, of course. The one who is dead to this world. Only one who is free to do the goodness and mercy of God. The law says, “Love God and love your neighbor,” but it cannot produce love of neighbor nor love of God.

In fact, you will resent your neighbor for being in the ditch and hate God for making laws that obligate you to help him.

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### *Who then is neighbor, who is priest, to the man who fell among thieves?*

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In his 1520 writing *On the Liberty of the Christian*, Luther wrote this marvelous insight: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all” (*LW* 31:344). Before God, the baptized priest is free. He lives in Christ by faith. Before his neighbor, he is bound by holy orders to do God’s goodness and mercy. He lives in his neighbor by love. He is as Christ to the man in the ditch, and the man in the ditch, who bears a striking resemblance to the One who was beaten and bloodied and crucified among the thieves, is Christ *incognito* for him to serve. “For as often as you have done it to the least of these, my brothers, you have done it unto me,” says the Lord (see Matt 25:40). And we do it as free men and women in Christ, for “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1).

### KOINONIA

There is no such thing as a solitary priest. Priests are never alone; they are priests in a priesthood, a holy community. They share a common life together. *Koinonia* means to have something in common that binds you together. “None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom 14:7–8). Jesus taught his disciples to pray “our Father,” not “my Father.” There is no notion whatsoever in the New Testament of the isolated, individual believer, the rugged individualist, the priest who pulls himself up by his own sandal straps. The church is always a corporate entity—a people, a body, a nation, a temple. Even the “Bride of Christ” image is a corporate one. We are not individually brides of Christ. The church *corporately* is the Bride and Body of Christ, and he is her Bridegroom and Head. As Christians, we are members of Christ’s body, stones of a temple, citizens of a kingdom, a chosen people, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a *koinonia* of saints.

The Apostle Paul describes our common life together in Romans chapter twelve. It is a body of diverse members all working together in harmony, each doing what is appropriate to his or her vocation as he or she is gifted by God.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body

we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Rom 12:3–8)

This communion of saints loves and honors each other; it strives together in hope and prayer.

Let love be genuine [ἀνυπόκριτος]. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. (Rom 12:9–13)

There is nothing else like this community anywhere else on the earth. It blesses not only the friend but also the enemy. It rejoices and weeps together. It bends down in Christlike humility to serve the least, the lost, the lowly, the despised of this world.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (Rom 12:14–18)

This kind of *koinonia* sounds like an incredibly tall order to fill until we recognize that this is by faith and not by works, a gift of grace from the Father through the Son by the Spirit who baptizes and words and bodies and bloodies us together into a *koinonia* of saints. God creates *koinonia*; we live in the *koinonia* God creates.

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***Sinner and saint are not side by side, or one in the process of becoming another, but one hidden inside the other.***

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God's *koinonia* is not some idyllic fairy tale utopia where all the men are strong, the women are good looking, the children are above average, and everyone brings just the right hot dish to the potluck. It wasn't rainbows and unicorns in the first cen-

tury, and it isn't in our day. The New Testament tells of palpable tensions between Hebraic and Hellenistic Jews, between Jew and Gentile converts, between Paul and Barnabas, Paul and James, Paul and Peter, Peter and John, the Philippian women Euodia and Syntyche. But the power of the cross of Jesus works in, with, and under our weakness, division, error, faithlessness, and even our stubborn stupidity. One of the ongoing wonders (if not miracles) of history is that the church has survived nearly two thousand years of what can only be described as gross mismanagement on our part.

The priesthood of Christ must daily pray with and for one another, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." To live together in *koinonia* is to have Christ stand between us. We poor, miserable sinners dare not deal directly with one another or we will be at each other's throats and destroy one another. Christ must be mediator not only between God and man, but between us. The church is to be a "mouth-house of forgiveness," as Luther once said, where 200-proof forgiveness is poured out generously not just once, or three times, or seven times, but seventy times seven for the very same thing. And when that inner bookkeeper starts to lose count, then you get a glimpse of what living grace-fully means: Forgiving one another as you yourself have been forgiven, putting up with one another as God in Christ puts up with you.

#### SIMUL: THE BAPTISMAL PARADOX

The baptismal moment is a paradoxical moment of law and gospel. A sinner is declared dead to sin in Adam; a saint is declared alive to God in Christ. God has spoken and so it is, yet we wait for something to happen. It is both "now" and "not yet," an eschatological paradox as the word has its way with us in time. The little child goes kicking and screaming to his baptism, and he continues kicking and screaming long after the baptismal water dries. Did something go wrong, we wonder? Didn't his baptism take? Do we need to do it all over again?

This is the baptismal paradox of being *simul justus et peccator*, sinful and righteous at one and the same time. A baptized believer is two completely different people at one and the same time. One is a total, dyed-in-the-wool sinner, born of the flesh of Adam; the other a completely righteous and holy saint, born from above by water and Spirit, a child of God. Of the sinner, we can have no doubt; we see that with our own eyes and hear it with our ears. Of the saint? Well, that's quite another matter. We must take God at his word on that, which is precisely the point.

An oft-overlooked aspect of our being *simul* is that sinner and saint are not side by side, or one in the process of becoming another, but one hidden inside the other. "Christians are divided into two parts—an inward nature, which is faith, and an outward nature, which is the flesh" (see *LW* 30:68). A new "inner man" hidden in, with, and under the old "outer man." "I no longer live, but Christ who is in me lives" (see Gal 2:20). The baptized believer is Christ wearing an Adam suit that doesn't quite fit and whose sinful reflexes aren't up to the business of holiness. Outwardly we are wasting away, sinful, dying. Inwardly, we are being renewed day by day. Inwardly, we have the mind,

the will, and the Spirit of Christ. God is actively at work in us both to will and to do according to his good pleasure. But this new man in Christ is buried in, with, and under an outwardly uncooperative body of death. The Spirit of Christ is willing; the flesh of Adam is weak. Not only weak; dead.

“I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Rom 7:18–19 RSV). What a mess! Oh, “Wretched man that I am!” (Rom 7:24). The priestly work of *simul* priests isn’t pretty or glorious. Our simul sacrifices have good and evil inextricably bound together. Our most compassionate works of mercy, our most compelling words of witness, our most selfless acts of fellowship, are all hopelessly marred by the greasy fingerprints of old Adam’s sin. For this reason, our works cannot justify us, no matter how good they are. We may hold none of these things before God. We may boast in none of them. At the close of the day and at the end of our days, we can only pray: “We are unworthy servants. We have only done what was our duty. Lord, have mercy upon us” (see Luke 17:10; Matt 20:30).

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*The old recalcitrant ass must be curbed, coerced, cajoled, and kicked to go along with the Christ-program.*

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Here is where the law kicks in for the baptized believer. The outer man, the old Adam, must be curbed, mirrored, and instructed to his death. Though he was declared legally dead in the baptismal moment, he isn’t actually dead yet, chronologically speaking. He lives catching up with his baptismal death sentence. He may be forensically drowned in baptism, but he must daily be returned to the drowning water by contrition and die in this blessed flood of baptismal forgiveness. The sixth article of the Formula of Concord teaches:

For the Old Adam, like an unmanageable and recalcitrant donkey, is still a part of [baptized believers] and must be coerced into the obedience of Christ, not only with the instruction, admonition, urging, and threatening of the law, but frequently also with the club of punishments and miseries, until the flesh of sin is put off entirely and man is completely renewed in the resurrection. (FC SD VI, 24; Tappert, 568)

The phrase “in the resurrection” reminds us that the Christian must hear the law until his death, when and only when the baptismal moment will find its fulfillment and completion.

This is precisely why we have the Table of Duties in the Catechism reminding us of our vocational duties and responsibilities as Christians under the Fourth Commandment. This is

why we teach the Ten Commandments not only as mirror of sin and a curb for sinners but also as rule and guide. This is why we need authority structures and oversight in home and society and church. This is why we have constitutions and bylaws and legislatures and judicial benches. This is why a group of baptized believers must have *Robert’s Rules of Order* when they hold a meeting. The old recalcitrant ass must be curbed, coerced, cajoled, and kicked to go along with the Christ-program. Were we nothing but saints in Christ, we wouldn’t need Ten Commandments or Robert’s Rules of Order; we would always be in order! And that we will be on the Last Day, but not one day sooner.

#### BAPTISM AS DAILY MOMENT

Every moment of the believer’s life is lived within his or her baptismal union with Christ in his death and life. “Therefore let everybody regard his Baptism as the daily garment which he is to wear all the time” (LC IV, 84; Tappert, 446). Every evening the baptized believer goes to sleep under the baptismal sign of the cross and the Name, and every morning he or she awakens and arises under the same sign and Name as one redeemed by Christ the Crucified. Daily, the old Adam must be drowned and die with all his sins and evil desires and a new man rise to live before God clothed in the righteousness and purity of Christ. Baptism is a daily moment, to which the believer returns constantly in repentance.

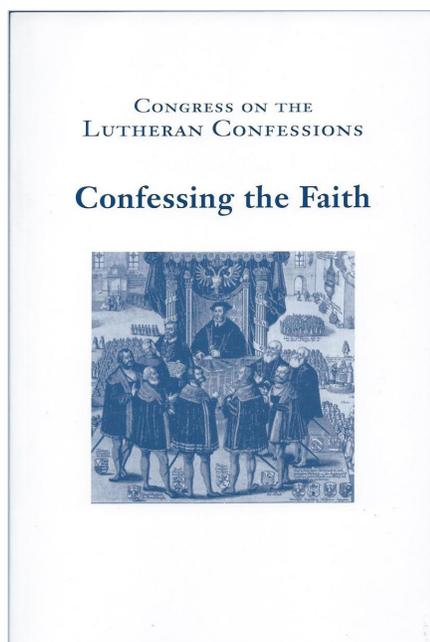
Therefore Baptism remains forever. Even though we fall from it and sin, nevertheless we always have access to it so that we may again subdue the old man. But we need not again have the water poured over us. Even if we were immersed in water a hundred times, it would nevertheless be only one Baptism, and the effect and signification of Baptism would continue and remain. Repentance, therefore, is nothing else than a return and approach to Baptism, to resume and practice what had earlier been begun but abandoned. (LC IV, 77–79; Tappert, 446)

Baptism remains because the word of the Lord endures forever. It is this creative, redeeming, and sanctifying word that gives baptism its power and makes every moment in the life of the believer a baptismal moment. Luther’s baptismal dennoch rings out over and against the devil’s accusations, the world’s deceits, and the old Adam’s vain attempts to justify himself under the law. This is not a license for sin but a declaration of freedom from the dominion of sin as one who has been taken captive by Christ Jesus. Only captive to Christ, buried with him in his death and raised and glorified with him, are we truly free to stand before God as sinners justified for Jesus’ sake and to serve the neighbor in love within the context of our priestly vocations.

The baptismal moment is finally a moment of rejoicing in the grace of God in Christ. To confess “I am baptized” is to say, “Christ is mine and I am his. He has become my sin, and I, baptized into him, have become the righteousness of God.” This is our identity until our life’s end when the sinner will at last catch

up with his baptismal death and the saint will rise to receive the life into which he was born forensically by water and Spirit. To confess “I am baptized” is to say that here and now “I am God’s child in Christ Jesus, my Lord.”

God’s own child, I gladly say it:  
I am baptized into Christ!  
He, because I could not pay it,  
Gave my full redemption price.  
Do I need earth’s treasures many?  
I have one worth more than any  
That brought me salvation free  
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