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Baptism in the Maronite Church

Sacraments of Initiation

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“N. is baptized a lamb in the flock of Christ in the name of the Father, (Amen.) and of the Son, (Amen.) and of the Holy Spirit, for eternal life. (Amen.)”[[1]](#footnote-1) The Maronite rite of Baptism conforms neither to the form prescribed in *Catechism of the Council of Trent*[[2]](#footnote-2) nor to that presented by Thomas Aquinas.[[3]](#footnote-3) Yet rather than being a concern over validity, this is rather an expression of the richness of the Church both theologically and spiritually. The above baptismal formula includes seven elements of importance for understanding the theology and spirituality of Maronite baptism: (1) the name, (2) the form of the verb “is baptized”, the one being baptized is called a (3) lamb, in the (4) flock (5) of Christ, in a particular (6) Trinitarian formula, and (7) for eternal life.

Naming serves two roles in the Initiation Rites. Practically, it re-identifies the person with Christ if they have a given name contrary to the Gospel by giving them an appropriate name. Theologically, naming is a sign of authority and care, Adam’s authority and care over animals (Gen 2:20) and God’s authority and care over Abraham (Gen 17:5). Giving one’s name is a sign of covenant, e.g., God telling Moses his name (Ex 3:14). Finally, the name called was the name written in the Church Baptismal Record which alludes to the names being written in the Book of Life(Dan 12:1; Rev 20:12, 15). Earlier in the initiation process one finds an enrollment ritual at which the chosen name of the candidate is declared to the priest and under that name the priest blesses the candidate.

The current practice in the Roman Rite is “ego te baptizo in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This formula presented in the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*[[5]](#footnote-5) and in the *Summa Theologiae*[[6]](#footnote-6) and was presented to the author as normative to the extent that he held the validity of the Maronite formula was in question. Yet, the sources and the historical circumstances surrounding Trent provide a different story. Not only was the Trinitarian formula of the Syriac Church always different than the Tridentine formula, but the Roman formula and not to mention other Latin rites were different, so that if Trent were not speaking in the order of discipline for the Latin Church only then all baptisms would have been invalid for hundreds of years.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Beautifully, the one being baptized is not a lamb by himself but is put in relationship. The one being baptized is baptized into the flock -that is the Church, and united to the Trinity by means of being incorporated into Christ. The meaning of baptism is most fully expressed when it is in the context of the Qurbono Liturgy in the midst of the faithful. Yet it is not a closed initiation rite, but is rather a rite oriented towards Christ. In baptism one puts on Christ () and becomes a member of the body of Christ, i.e., the Church. The image of the baptized as a lamb calls to mind Jesus as the Good Shepherd who lays down His life (Jn 10:11 NRSVCE), the parable of the righteous sheep and the unrighteous goats (Mt 25:31-46), the parable of the lost sheep (Lk 15:4-10; Mt 18:12-14), et cetera. The image of a lamb is used throughout the text. In the rite of Exorcism the priest prays, “Behold, the Shepherd runs toward his lamb!” and, “I sign and seal this lamb against the army of the devils.” [[8]](#footnote-8) Before the water bath the priest prays, “May N. be signed as an innocent lamb of your flock. With your seal may he/she be numbered among you (sic) spiritual sheepfold, enter into your flock and mingle with your sheep.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Thus through a broader look at the image of the lamb one encounters an emphasis on what Western theology would call an indelible mark, as well as the incorporation into the flock, at the initiative of Jesus who gathers a people to himself.

The Trinitarian formula used follows the Tradition of Ephrem, of the Didascalia, and of Tatian’s Diatesseron. This may or may not go back to an earlier tradition, but in the Diatesseron Jesus is immersed three times by John. The Maronite Rite allows for the triple immersion of children, but forbids baptism of adults by immersion, citing the Synod of Mt. Lebanon. This is in contrast to the original form of baptism continued throughout the early Church. However, this is probably a prudential judgement (due to small baptismal fonts) or a Latinization.

The personal effect of baptism is eternal life. Eternal life cannot be separated from forgiveness of sins, however.[[10]](#footnote-10) Elsewhere in the rite for baptism forgiveness of sins is mentioned explicitly. The deacon proclaims that the baptism is a “forgiving baptism.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Elsewhere, in regards to baptism the priest sings, “she forgives faults and absolves sins.”[[12]](#footnote-12) However, just as one can sin after baptism, one can also lose the eternal life in heaven as the prayer proclaims, “as he made you worthy of this holy birth may he make you worthy of eternal life. Yet, these effects should not be said to be relegated entirely to the bath. The Chrismation is especially important in the Syriac tradition. Thus the Acts of Thomas gives accounts of the Chrismation while neglecting to mention the water bath. For the Syriac words for Chrism and Christ are similar and the title Messiah is merely the anointed one. Ephrem writes of the oil as for the forgiveness of sins.[[13]](#footnote-13) In fact he devotes entire hymns to the importance of the oil.[[14]](#footnote-14) The oil brands one as a lamb is branded,[[15]](#footnote-15) makes one a priest and king.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Baptism and anointing ought to be seen as one reality, and it is only in the west where confirmation is tied to the Bishop in the Middle Ages that Confirmation is delayed. Though the fact that it is *delayed* emphasizes that there is a natural unity in time of the two Sacraments.[[17]](#footnote-17) Furthermore, the newly baptized and chrismated Maronite receives the Eucharist. Baptism and Chrismation are oriented towards full communion with the Flock and with the Shepherd through Communion. The current English rubric reminds us, “Although present practice excludes infant communion, it is to be hoped that we may be able to return to our ancient tradition of giving communion to infants at their baptism.”[[18]](#footnote-18) This is the ancient tradition not only of the Maronite Church, but of the universal Church and results from Latin influences who changed their policy on accident, when through exaggerated reverence the Latin Church banned reception by the laity under the species of wine, which at the time was the species administered to infants out of convenience.[[19]](#footnote-19) One may recall the relationship of a shepherd with his lamb in 2 Samuel, “He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used **to eat** of his meager fare, and **drink from his cup**, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him” (2 Sam 12:3 NRSVCE). Here and elsewhere we see the intimacy of a shared meal as a sign of covenant. Furthermore, Jesus himself commanded us, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6:51) and “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day” (John 6:53-54). While the west emphasizes that only baptism is truly necessary,[[20]](#footnote-20) the East emphasizes the importance of both through administration of Eucharist to infants and not only to adults. Yet, no pastor or individual bishop has the authority to reinstitute the reception of the Eucharist to its proper place in regards to infants, but only the synod as a whole.

Appendix

The Maronite Rite has been conflated from the ancient norm due to the adaptation to mostly infant baptisms, but the rites have not been confused and can still be identified with the traditional ordering. The ordinary form of Initiation by which one is to understand initiation in general is that of adults converting to Christianity. The fullest adult form will be outlined with two notes for infant initiation. (i) The priest visits the mother and infant at the hospital.[[21]](#footnote-21) (ii) The priest welcomes the mother to the Church for the first time since the birth with a prayer for the Mother .[[22]](#footnote-22) (1) “The Priest should properly investigate the candidate.”[[23]](#footnote-23) (2) The first time someone enters the Church as candidate they are prayed over that they may be brought safely to baptism.[[24]](#footnote-24) (3) The candidate is processed to the altar.[[25]](#footnote-25) (4)The Candidate is given a name[[26]](#footnote-26) which is (5) inscribed in the baptismal register.[[27]](#footnote-27) After (6) the service of the Word, (7-11) the rite of the catechumenate[[28]](#footnote-28) begins with a (7) prayer over the candidate[[29]](#footnote-29) followed by an (8) exorcism.[[30]](#footnote-30) This exorcism is both an actual casting away of attachments to Satanic forces and a demonstration/ test that the person no longer has these attachments. Empowered by the exorcism, the candidate is then able (9) to renounce Satan[[31]](#footnote-31) and (10) profess faith personally[[32]](#footnote-32) and (11) then communally recite the creed.[[33]](#footnote-33) The Baptismal water is consecrated ending with a (12) communal recitation of the Our Father.[[34]](#footnote-34) Then (13-18) the Mysteries of initiation begin with (13) a prayer over the catechumen[[35]](#footnote-35) followed by an (14) anointing with the oil of the Catechumenate.[[36]](#footnote-36) A (15)baptism by triple infusion occurs[[37]](#footnote-37) followed by a vesting in a white garment.[[38]](#footnote-38) (16)Chrismation on the forehead with Myron follows.[[39]](#footnote-39) (17) The celebration continues with the neophyte receiving Eucharist[[40]](#footnote-40) or attending the Qurbono Liturgy where he will receive the Eucharist with the community.[[41]](#footnote-41) After Receiving communion alone or before the preanaphora the neophyte is lead in (18) procession around the Church[[42]](#footnote-42) and end with (19) concluding prayers[[43]](#footnote-43) (unless there is to be an anaphora).

1. Diocese of St. Maron- USA *Mysteries of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, Communion, According to the Maronite Antiochene Church. (*Diocesan Office of Liturgy: Washington, DC, 1987), 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In “Baptism.” In “The Sacraments.” In *Catechism of the Council of Trent*. As available on http://www.catholicapologetics.info/thechurch/catechism/Holy7Sacraments-Baptism.shtml. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*. Vol. 4. Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981, III Q66 a5, 2377f. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* Par. 1240 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In “Baptism.” In “The Sacraments.” In *Catechism of the Council of Trent*. As available on http://www.catholicapologetics.info/thechurch/catechism/Holy7Sacraments-Baptism.shtml. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III Q66 a5, 2377f. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See the *Apostolic Tradition*. Chapter 21. Three questions in the form of “Do you believe in God the Father?” are asked during the water bath with the one being baptized responding “I believe”. This was standard practice in ancient Roman Liturgy. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 24. Page 26 also refers to Christ as “a shepherd who gathered us” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 44. The image of mingling with the flock is repeated again on 49. Page 8 speaks of entering and joining the spiritual flock at baptism. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This is not to say that hell is not a persistent state, but the life of the unjust corresponds at most to the Greek concept of bios and not zoe. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation, 51.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity 4*. In *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*. Translated by Kathleen McVey. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989) 275-280. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity 4-7*, 275-296. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity 7*, 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity 7*, 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. ICEL. *The Rites of the Catholic Church*. Vol. 1. New York: Pueblo Publishing Company,1990. The structure of the book puts forward adult initiation as the norm and baptism of children as a particular circumstance. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Fisher, J.D.C. “The Separation of Communion from Initiation.” In *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval West*, 101-108. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Thomas Aquinas writes, “this sacrament (Eucharist) is not necessary for salvation in the same way as Baptism is.” Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III Q73 3, 2429f. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 3-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 21-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 23-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 24-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 45. This anointing is a vestigial transformation of the ancient Syriac practice of the prebaptismal anointing [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 46f. Adults are not allowed to be baptized by immersion, this is a loss see 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 47. This vestment seems to represent the full body anointing which is no longer performed, though it also alludes to Revelation 22:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 50f. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Diocese of St. Maron- U.S.A. *Mysteries of Initiation*, 52f. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)