

# Concerning the Sacrament of Baptism –

## By Martin Luther



Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to the riches of His mercy has at least preserved this one sacrament in His Church uninjured and uncontaminated by the devices of men, and has made it free to all nations and to men of every class. He has not suffered it to be overwhelmed with the foul and impious monstrosities of avarice and superstition; doubtless having this purpose, that He would have little children, incapable of avarice and superstition, to be initiated into this sacrament, and to be sanctified by perfectly simple faith in His word. To such, even at the present day, baptism is of the highest advantage. If this sacrament had been intended to be given to adults and those of full age, it seems as if it could have hardly preserved its efficacy and its glory, in the presence of that tyranny of avarice and superstition which has supplanted all divine ordinances among us. In this case too, no doubt, fleshly wisdom would have invented its preparations, its worthinesses, its reservations, its restrictions, and other like nets for catching money; so that the water of baptism would be sold no cheaper than parchments are now.

Yet, though Satan has not been able to extinguish the virtue of baptism in the case of little children, still he has had power to extinguish it in all adults; so that there is scarcely any one nowadays who remembers that he has been baptized, much less glories in it; so many other ways having been found of obtaining remission of sins and going to heaven. Occasion has been afforded to these opinions by that perilous saying of St. Jerome, either misstated or misunderstood, in which he calls penitence the second plank of safety after shipwreck; as if baptism were not penitence. Hence, when men have fallen into sin, they despair of the first plank, or the ship, as being no longer of any use, and begin to trust and depend only on the second plank, that is, on penitence. Thence have sprung those infinite loads of vows, religious dedications, works, satisfactions, pilgrimages, indulgences, and systems; and from them those oceans of books and of human questionings,

opinions, and traditions, which the whole world nowadays cannot contain. Thus this tyranny possesses the Church of God in an incomparably worse form than it ever possessed the synagogue, or any nation under heaven.

It was the duty of Bishops to remove all these abuses, and to make every effort to recall Christians to the simplicity of baptism; that so they might understand their own position, and what as Christians they ought to do. But the one business of Bishops at the present day is to lead the people as far as possible away from baptism and to plunge them all under the deluge of their own tyranny; and thus, as the prophet says, to make the people of Christ forget Him for ever. Oh wretched men who are called by the name of Bishops! they not only do nothing and know nothing which Bishops ought, but they are even ignorant what they ought to know and do. They fulfil the words of Isaiah: "His watchmen are blind; they are all ignorant; they are shepherds that cannot understand; they all look to their own way, every one for his gain, from his quarter." (Is. lvi. 10, 11.)

The first thing then we have to notice in baptism is the divine promise, which says: He who believes and is baptized shall be saved. This promise is to be infinitely preferred to the whole display of works, vows, religious orders, and whatever has been introduced by the invention of man. On this promise depends our whole salvation, and we must take heed to exercise faith in it, not doubting at all that we are saved, since we have been baptized. Unless this faith exists and is applied, baptism profits us nothing; nay, it is hurtful to us, not only at the time when it is received, but in the whole course of our after life. For unbelief of this kind charges the divine promise with falsehood; and to do this is the greatest of all sins. If we attempt this exercise of faith, we shall soon see how difficult a thing it is to believe this divine promise. For human weakness, conscious of its own sinfulness, finds it the most difficult thing in the world to believe that it is saved, or can be saved; and yet, unless it believes this, it cannot be saved, because it does not believe the divine truth which promises salvation.

This doctrine ought to have been studiously inculcated upon the people by preaching; this promise ought to have been perpetually reiterated; men ought to have been constantly reminded of their baptism; faith ought to have been called forth and nourished. When this divine promise has been once conferred upon us, its truth continues even to the hour of our death; and thus our faith in it ought never to be relaxed, but ought to be nourished and strengthened even till we die, by a perpetual recollection of the promise made to us in baptism. Thus, when we rise out of our sins and exercise penitence, we are simply reverting to the efficacy of baptism and to faith in it, whence we had fallen; and we return to the promise then made to us, but which we had abandoned through our sin. For the truth of the promise once made always abides, and is ready to stretch out the hand and receive us when we return. This, unless I mistake, is the meaning of that obscure saying, that baptism is the first of sacraments and the foundation of them all, without which we can possess none of the others.

Thus it will be of no little profit to a penitent, first of all to recall to mind his own baptism, and to remember with confidence that divine promise which he had deserted; rejoicing that he is still in a fortress of safety, in

that he has been baptized; and detesting his own wicked ingratitude in having fallen away from the faith and truth of baptism. His heart will be marvellously comforted, and encouraged to hope for mercy, if he fixes his eyes upon that divine promise once made to him, which could not lie, and which still continues entire, unchanged, and unchangeable by any sins of his; as Paul says: "If we believe not, yet He abideth faithful; He cannot deny Himself." (2 Tim. ii. 13.) This truth of God will preserve him; and even if all other hopes perish, this, if he believes it, will not fail him. Through this truth he will have something to oppose to the insolent adversary; he will have a barrier to throw in the way of the sins which disturb his conscience; he will have an answer to the dread of death and judgment; finally, he will have a consolation under every kind of temptation, in being able to say: God is faithful to His promise; and in baptism I received the sign of that promise. If God is for me, who can be against me?

If the children of Israel, when returning to God in repentance, first of all called to mind their exodus from Egypt, and in remembrance of this turned back to God, who had brought them out—a remembrance which is so often inculcated on them by Moses, and referred to by David—how much more ought we to remember our exodus from Egypt, and in remembrance of it to return to Him who brought us out through the washing of the new birth. Now this we can do most advantageously of all in the sacrament of the bread and wine. So of old these three sacraments, penitence, baptism, and the bread, were often combined in the same act of worship; and the one added strength to the other. Thus we read of a certain holy virgin who, whenever she was tempted, relied on her baptism only for defence, saying, in the briefest words: "I am a Christian." The enemy forthwith felt the efficacy of baptism, and of the faith which depended on the truth of a promising God, and fled from her.

We see then how rich a Christian, or baptized man, is; since, even if he would, he cannot lose his salvation by any sins however great, unless he refuses to believe; for no sins whatever can condemn him, but unbelief alone. All other sins, if faith in the divine promise made to the baptized man stands firm or is restored, are swallowed up in a moment through that same faith; yea, through the truth of God, because He cannot deny Himself, if thou confess Him, and cleave believingly to His promise. Whereas contrition, and confession of sins, and satisfaction for sins, and every effort that can be devised by men, will desert thee at thy need, and will make thee more miserable than ever, if thou forgettest this divine truth and puffest thyself up with such things as these. For whatever work is wrought apart from faith in the truth of God is vanity and vexation of spirit.

We also see how perilous and false an idea it is that penitence is a second plank of refuge after shipwreck; and how pernicious an error it is to suppose that the virtue of baptism has been brought to an end by sin, and that this ship has been dashed to pieces. That ship remains one, solid, and indestructible, and can never be broken up into different planks. In it all are conveyed who are carried to the port of salvation, since it is the truth of God giving promises in the sacraments. What certainly does happen is that many rashly leap out of the ship into the sea and perish; these are they who abandon faith in the promise and rush headlong into sin. But the ship itself

abides, and passes on safely in its course; and any man who, by the grace of God, returns to the ship, will be borne on to life, not on a plank, but on the solid ship itself. Such a man is he who returns by faith to the fixed and abiding promise of God. Thus Peter charges those who sin with having forgotten that they were purged from their old sins (2 Peter i. 9); doubtless meaning to reprove their ingratitude for the baptism they had received, and the impiety of their unbelief.

What profit then is there in writing so much about baptism, and yet not teaching faith in the promise? All the sacraments were instituted for the purpose of nourishing faith, and yet so far are they from attaining this object, that men are even found impious enough to assert that a man ought not to be sure of the remission of sins, or of the grace of the sacraments. By this impious doctrine they deprive the whole world of its senses, and utterly extinguish, or at least bring into bondage that sacrament of baptism, in which the first glory of our conscience stands. Meanwhile they senselessly persecute wretched souls with their contritions, their anxious confessions, their circumstances, satisfactions, works, and an infinity of such trifles. Let us then read with caution, or rather despise the Master of Sentences (Book iv.) with all his followers; who, when they write their best, write only about the matter and form of the sacraments, and so handle only the dead and perishing letter of those sacraments, while they do not even touch upon their spirit, life, and use; that is, the truth of the divine promise, and faith on our part.

See then that thou be not deceived by the display of works, and by the fallacies of human traditions, and so wrong the truth of God and thy own faith. If thou wilt be saved, thou must begin by faith in the sacraments, without any works. Thy faith will be followed by these very works, but thou must not hold faith cheap, for it is itself the most excellent and most difficult of all works, and by it alone thou wilt be saved, even if thou wert compelled to be destitute of all other works. For it is a work of God, not of man, as Paul teaches. All other works He performs with us, and by us; this one work He performs in us and without us.

From what has been said we may clearly distinguish the difference between man the minister and God the Author of baptism. Man baptizes and does not baptize; he baptizes, because he performs the work of dipping the baptized person; he does not baptize, because in this work he does not act upon his own authority, but in the place of God. Hence we ought to receive baptism from the hand of man just as if Christ Himself, nay, God Himself, were baptizing us with His own hands. For it is not a man's baptism, but that of Christ and God; though we receive it by the hand of a man. Even so any other creature which we enjoy through the hand of another is really only God's. Beware then of making any such distinction in baptism, as to attribute the outward rite to man, and the inward blessing to God. Attribute both of them to God alone, and consider the person of him who confers baptism in no other light than as the vicarious instrument of God, by means of which the Lord sitting in heaven dips thee in the water with His own hands, and promises thee remission of sins upon earth, speaking to thee with the voice of a man through the mouth of His minister.

The very words of the minister tell thee this, when he says: "I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." He does not say: "I baptize thee in my name;" but says, as it were: "What I do, I do not by my own authority, but in the place and in the name of God; and thou must look upon it as if the Lord Himself did it in visible shape. The Author and the minister are different, but the work of both is the same; nay, rather it is that of the Author alone through my ministry." In my judgment the expression, "In the name," relates to the person of the Author, so that not only is the name of the Lord brought forward and invoked in the doing of the work, but the work itself is performed, as being that of another, in the name and in the place of another. By the like figure Christ says: "Many shall come in my name." (Matt. xxiv. 5.) And again: "By whom we have received grace and apostleship, for obedience to the faith among all nations, for his name." (Rom. i. 5.)

I most gladly adopt this view; because it is a thing most full of consolation, and an effective aid to faith, to know that we have been baptized, not by a man, but by the very Trinity Itself through a man, who acts towards us in Its name. This brings to an end that idle contention which is carried on about the "form" of baptism—as they call the words themselves—the Greeks saying: "Let the servant of Christ be baptized;" the Latins: "I baptize." Others also, in their pedantic trifling, condemn the use of the expression: "I baptize thee in the name of Jesus Christ"—though it is certain that the Apostles baptized in this form, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles—and will have it that no other form is valid than the following: "I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." But they strive in vain; they prove nothing; they only bring forward their own dreams. In whatever manner baptism is administered, provided it is administered, not in the name of a man, but in the name of the Lord, it truly saves us. Nay, I have no doubt that if a man received baptism in the name of the Lord, even from a wicked minister who did not give it in the name of the Lord, he would still be truly baptized in the name of the Lord. For the efficacy of baptism depends not so much on the faith of him who confers it, as of him who receives it. Thus we read an instance of a certain player who was baptized in jest. These and similar narrow questions and disputes have been raised for us by those who attribute nothing to faith, and everything to works and ceremonies. On the contrary, we owe nothing to ceremonies, and everything to faith alone, which makes us free in spirit from all these scruples and fancies.

Another thing which belongs to baptism is the sign or sacrament, which is that dipping into water whence it takes its name. For in Greek to baptize signifies to dip, and baptism is a dipping. We have said already that, side by side with the divine promises, signs also are given us, to represent by a figure the meaning of the words of the promise; or, as the moderns say, the sacrament has an effectual significance. What that significance is we shall see. Very many have thought that in the word and the water there is some occult spiritual virtue, which works the grace of God in the soul of the recipient. Others deny this, and declare that there is no virtue in the sacraments, but that grace is given by God alone, who, according to His covenant, is present at the sacraments instituted by Himself. All however

agree in this, that the sacraments are effectual signs of grace. They are led to this conclusion by this one argument, that it does not otherwise appear what pre- eminence the sacraments of the new law would have over those of the old, if they were only signs. Hence they have been driven to attribute such efficacy to the sacraments of the new law, that they have stated them to be profitable even to those who are in mortal sin; and have declared that neither faith nor grace are requisite, but that it is sufficient that we do not place any impediment in the way, that is, any actual purpose of sinning afresh.

We must carefully avoid and fly from these doctrines, for they are impious and unbelieving, repugnant to faith and to the nature of the sacraments. It is a mistake to suppose that the sacraments of the new law differ from the sacraments of the old law as regards the efficacy of their significance. Both are on an equality in their significance; for the same God who now saves us by baptism and the bread, saved Abel by his sacrifice, Noah by the Ark, Abraham by circumcision, and all the other Patriarchs by their own proper signs. There is no difference then between a sacrament of the old and of the new law, as regards their significance; provided we understand by the old law all the dealings of God with the Patriarchs and other Fathers in the time of the law. For those signs which were given to the Patriarchs and Fathers are completely distinct from the legal figures which Moses instituted in his law; such as the rites of the priesthood, in relation to vestments, vessels, food, houses, and the like. These are as different as possible, not only from the sacraments of the new law, but also from those signs which God gave from time to time to the Fathers who lived under the law; such as that given to Gideon in the fleece, to Manoah in his sacrifice; such also as that which Isaiah offered to Ahaz. In all these cases alike, some promise was given which required faith in God.

In this then the figures of the law differ from signs new or old, that the figures of the law have no word of promise annexed to them, requiring faith, and therefore are not signs of justification, inasmuch as they are not sacraments of faith, which alone justify, but only sacraments of works. Their whole force and nature lay in works, not in faith; for he who did them fulfilled them, even if his work was without faith. Now our signs or sacraments and those of the Fathers have annexed to them a word of promise, which requires faith, and can be fulfilled by no other work. Thus they are signs or sacraments of justification, because they are sacraments of justifying faith and not of works; so that their whole efficacy lies in faith itself, not in working. He who believes them fulfils them, even though he do no work. Hence the saying: It is not the sacrament, but faith in the sacrament which justifies. Thus circumcision did not justify Abraham and his seed; and yet the Apostle calls it a seal of the righteousness of faith, because faith in that promise with which circumcision was connected did justify, and fulfilled the meaning of circumcision. Faith was that circumcision of the heart in spirit, which was figured by the circumcision of the flesh in the letter. Thus it was evidently not the sacrifice of Abel which justified him, but the faith by which he offered himself entirely to God; of which faith the outward sacrifice was a figure.

Thus it is not baptism which justifies any man, or is of any advantage; but faith in that word of promise to which baptism is added; for this justifies, and fulfils the meaning of baptism. For faith is the submerging of the old man, and the emerging of the new man. Hence it cannot be that the new sacraments differ from the ancient sacraments, for they both alike have divine promises and the same spirit of faith; but they differ incomparably from the ancient figures, on account of the word of promise, which is the sole and most effective means of difference. Thus at the present day the pomp of vestments, localities, meats, and an infinite variety of ceremonies, doubtless figure excellent works to be fulfilled in the spirit; and yet, since no word of divine promise is connected with them, they can in no way be compared with the signs of baptism and the bread. Nor can they justify men nor profit them in any way, since their fulfilment lies in the very practice or performance of them without faith; for when they are done or performed, they are fulfilled. Thus the Apostle speaks of those things, "which all are to perish with the using; after the commandments and doctrines of men." (Col. ii. 22.) Now the sacraments are not fulfilled by being done, but by being believed.

Thus it cannot be true that there is inherent in the Sacraments a power effectual to produce justification, or that they are efficacious signs of grace. These things are said in ignorance of the divine promise and to the great detriment of faith; unless indeed we call them efficacious in this sense, that, if along with them there be unhesitating faith, they do confer grace most certainly and most effectually. But that it is not this kind of efficacy which those writers attribute to them is evident from this, that they assert them to be profitable to all men, even the wicked and unbelieving, provided they put no obstacle in the way; as if unbelief itself were not the most persistent of all obstacles, and the most hostile to grace. Thus they have endeavoured to make out of the sacrament a precept, and out of faith a work. For if a sacrament confers grace on me, merely because I receive it, then it is certainly by my own work and not by faith that I obtain grace; nor do I apprehend any promise in the sacrament, but only a sign instituted and commanded by God. It is evident from this how utterly the sacraments are misunderstood by these theologians of the Sentences, inasmuch as they make no account either of faith or of the promise in the sacraments, but cleave only to the sign and the use of the sign, and carry us away from faith to works, from the word to the sign. Thus, as I have said, they have not only brought the sacraments into bondage, but, as far as in them lay, have entirely done away with them.

Let us then open our eyes, and learn to look more to the word than the sign, more to faith than to the work or use of the sign; and let us understand that wherever there is a divine promise, there faith is required; and that both of these are so necessary that neither can be of any effect without the other. We can neither believe unless we have a promise, nor is the promise effectual unless it is believed; while if these two act reciprocally, they produce a real and sure efficacy in the sacraments. Hence to seek efficacy in the sacrament independently of the promise and of faith is to strive in vain and to fall into condemnation. Thus Christ says: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned." (Mark

xvi. 16.) Thus He shows that in the sacrament faith is so necessary that it can save us even without the sacrament; and on this account when He says: "He that believeth not," He does not add: "and is not baptized."

Baptism then signifies two things, death and resurrection; that is, full and complete justification. When the minister dips the child into the water, this signifies death; when he draws him out again, this signifies life. Thus Paul explains the matter: "Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death; 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." (Rom. vi. 4.) This death and resurrection we call a new creation, a regeneration, and a spiritual birth; and these words are not only to be understood allegorically, as they are by many, of the death of sin and the life of grace, but of a real death and resurrection. For baptism has no fictitious meaning, nor does sin die or grace rise fully within us, until the body of sin which we bear in this life is destroyed; for, as the Apostle says, as long as we are in the flesh, the desires of the flesh work in us and are worked upon. Hence when we begin to believe, we begin at the same time to die to this world, and to live to God in a future life; so that faith is truly a death and resurrection; that is, that spiritual baptism in which we are submerged and emerge.

When then the washing away of sins is attributed to baptism, it is rightly so attributed; but the meaning of the phrase is too slight and weak to fully express baptism, which is rather a symbol of death and resurrection. For this reason I could wish that the baptized should be totally immersed, according to the meaning of the word and the signification of the mystery; not that I think it necessary to do so, but that it would be well that so complete and perfect a thing as baptism should have its sign also in completeness and perfection, even as it was doubtless instituted by Christ. For a sinner needs not so much to be washed as to die, that he may be altogether renewed into another creature, and that there may thus be a correspondence in him to the death and resurrection of Christ along with whom he dies and rises again in baptism. For though we may say that Christ was washed from His mortality when He died and rose again, yet it is a weaker expression than if we said that He was totally changed and renewed; and so there is more intensity in saying that death and resurrection to eternal life are signified to us by baptism, than that we are washed from sin.

Here again we see that the sacrament of baptism, even in respect to the sign, is not the mere business of a moment, but has a lasting character. For though the transaction itself passes quickly, the thing signified by it lasts even until death, yea, till the resurrection at the last day. For as long as we live we are always doing that which is signified by baptism; that is, we are dying and rising again. We are dying, I say, not only in our affections and spiritually, by renouncing the sins and vanities of the world, but in very deed we are beginning to leave this bodily life and to apprehend the future life, so that there is a real (as they call it) and also a bodily passing out of this world to the Father.

We must therefore keep clear of the error of those who have reduced the effect of baptism to such small and slender dimensions that, while they say that grace is infused by it, they assert that this grace is afterwards, so to



speak, effused by sin; and that we must then go to heaven by some other way, as if baptism had now become absolutely useless. Do not thou judge thus, but understand that the significance of baptism is such that thou mayest live and die in it; and that neither by penitence nor by any other way canst thou do aught but return to the effect of baptism, and do afresh what thou wert baptized in order to do, and what thy baptism signified. Baptism never loses its effect, unless in desperation thou refuse to return to salvation. Thou mayst wander away for a time from the sign, but the sign does not on that account lose its effect. Thus thou hast been baptized once for all sacramentally, but thou needest continually to be baptized by faith, and must continually die and continually live. Baptism hath swallowed up thy whole body and given it forth again; and so the substance of baptism ought to swallow up thy whole life, in body and in soul, and to give it back in the last day, clothed in the robe of brightness and immortality. Thus we are never without the sign as well as the substance of baptism; nay, we ought to be continually baptized more and more, until we fulfil the whole meaning of the sign at the last day.

We see then that whatever we do in this life tending to the mortifying of the flesh and the vivifying of the spirit is connected with baptism; and that the sooner we are set free from this life, the more speedily we fulfil the meaning of our baptism; and the greater the sufferings we endure, the more happily do we answer the purpose of baptism. The Church was at its happiest in those days when martyrs were daily put to death and counted as sheep for the slaughter; for then the virtue of baptism reigned in the Church with full power, though now we have quite lost sight of it for the multitude of human works and doctrine. The whole life which we live ought to be a baptism, and to fulfil the sign or sacrament of baptism; since we have been set free from all other things and given up to baptism alone, that is, to death and resurrection.

To whom can we assign the blame that this glorious liberty of ours and this knowledge of baptism are nowadays in bondage, except only to the tyranny of the Roman Pontiff? He most of all men, as becomes a chief shepherd, ought to have been the preacher and the asserter of this liberty and this knowledge; as Paul says: "Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God." (1 Cor. iv. 1.) But his sole object is to oppress us by his decrees and laws, and to ensnare us into bondage to his tyrannical power. Not to speak of the impious and damnable way in which the Pope fails to teach these mysteries, by what right, I ask, has he established laws over us? Who has given him authority to bring into bondage this liberty of ours, given us by baptism? One purpose, as I have said, we ought to carry out in our whole lives, namely, to be baptized, that is, to be mortified, and to live by faith in Christ. This faith alone ought to have been taught, above all by the chief shepherd. But now not a word is said about faith, but the Church is crushed by an infinite number of laws concerning works and ceremonies; the virtue and knowledge of baptism are taken away; the faith of Christ is hindered.

I say then, neither Pope, nor bishop, nor any man whatever has the right of making one syllable binding on a Christian man, unless it is done with his

own consent. Whatever is done otherwise is done in a spirit of tyranny; and thus the prayers, fastings, almsgiving, and whatever else the Pope ordains and requires in the whole body of his decrees, which are as many as they are iniquitous, he has absolutely no right to require and ordain; and he sins against the liberty of the Church as often as he attempts anything of the kind. Hence it has come to pass that while the churchmen of the present day are strenuous defenders of church liberty, that is, of wood, stone, fields, and money (for in this day things ecclesiastical are synonymous with things spiritual), they yet, by their false teaching, not only bring into bondage the true liberty of the Church, but utterly destroy it; yea, more than the Turk himself could; contrary to the mind of the Apostle, who says: "Be not ye the servants of men." (1 Cor. vii. 23.) We are indeed made servants of men, when we are subjected to their tyrannical ordinances and laws.

This wicked and flagitious tyranny is aided by the disciples of the Pope, who distort and pervert to this end the saying of Christ: "He who heareth you heareth me." They swell out these words into a support for their own traditions; whereas this saying was addressed by Christ to the Apostles when they were going forth to preach the gospel, and therefore ought to be understood as referring to the gospel alone. These men, however, leave the gospel out of sight, and make this saying fit in with their own inventions. Christ says: "My sheep hear my voice, but they know not the voice of strangers." For this cause the gospel was bequeathed to us, that the pontiffs might utter the voice of Christ; but they utter their own voice, and are determined to be heard. The Apostle also says of himself that he was not sent to baptize, but to preach the gospel; and thus no man is bound to receive the traditions of the pontiff, or to listen to him, except when he teaches the gospel and Christ; and he himself ought to teach nothing but the freest faith. Since, however, Christ says: "he who hears you hears me," why does not the Pope also hear others? Christ did not say to Peter alone: "he who hears thee." Lastly, where there is true faith, there must also of necessity be the word of faith. Why then does not the unbelieving Pope listen to his believing servant who has the word of faith? Blindness, blindness reigns among the pontiffs.

Others however, far more shamelessly, arrogate to the Pope the power of making laws; arguing from the words: "Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matt. xvi. 19.) Christ is speaking there of the binding and loosing of sins, not of bringing the whole Church into bondage and making laws to oppress it. Thus the papal tyranny acts in all things on its own false maxims; while it forcibly wrests and perverts the words of God. I admit indeed that Christians must endure this accursed tyranny, as they would any other violence inflicted on them by the world, according to the saying of Christ: "Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." (Matt. v. 39.) But I complain of this, that wicked pontiffs boast that they have a rightful power to act thus, and pretend that in this Babylon of theirs they are providing for the interests of Christendom; an idea which they have persuaded all men to adopt. If they did these things in conscious and avowed impiety and tyranny, or if it were simple violence that we endured, we might meanwhile quietly reckon up the advantages thus afforded us

for the mortification of this life and the fulfilment of baptism, and should retain the full right of glorying in conscience at the wrong done us. As it is, they desire so to ensnare our consciences in the matter of liberty that we should believe all that they do to be well done, and should think it unlawful to blame or complain of their iniquitous actions. Being wolves, they wish to appear shepherds; being antichrists, they wish to be honoured like Christ.

I cry aloud on behalf of liberty and conscience, and I proclaim with confidence that no kind of law can with any justice be imposed on Christians, whether by men or by angels, except so far as they themselves will; for we are free from all. If such laws are imposed on us, we ought so to endure them as still to preserve the consciousness of our liberty. We ought to know and stedfastly to protest that a wrong is being done to that liberty, though we may bear and even glory in that wrong; taking care neither to justify the tyrant nor to murmur against the tyranny. "Who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good?" (1 Peter iii. 13.) All things work together for good to the elect of God. Since, however, there are but few who understand the glory of baptism and the happiness of Christian liberty, or who can understand them for the tyranny of the Pope—I for my part will set free my own mind and deliver my conscience, by declaring aloud to the Pope and to all papists, that, unless they shall throw aside all their laws and traditions, and restore liberty to the churches of Christ, and cause that liberty to be taught, they are guilty of the death of all the souls which are perishing in this wretched bondage, and that the papacy is in truth nothing else than the kingdom of Babylon and of very Antichrist. For who is the man of sin and the son of perdition, but he who by his teaching and his ordinances increases the sin and perdition of souls in the Church; while he yet sits in the Church as if he were God? All these conditions have now for many ages been fulfilled by the papal tyranny. It has extinguished faith, darkened the sacraments, crushed the gospel; while it has enjoined and multiplied without end its own laws, which are not only wicked and sacrilegious, but also most unlearned and barbarous.

Behold then the wretchedness of our bondage. "How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! How is she become as a widow! She that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces, how is she become tributary! Among all her lovers she hath none to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her." (Lam. i. 1, 2.) There are at this day so many ordinances, so many rites, so many parties, so many professions, so many works to occupy the minds of Christians, that they forget their baptism. For this multitude of locusts, caterpillars, and cankerworms, no man is able to remember that he was baptized, or what it was that he obtained in baptism. We ought to have been like babes when they are baptized, who, being preoccupied by no zeal and by no works, are free for all things, at rest and safe in the glory of their baptism alone. We also ourselves are babes in Christ, unremittingly baptized.

In opposition to what I have said, an argument will perhaps be drawn from the baptism of infants, who cannot receive the promise of God, or have faith in their baptism; and it will be said that therefore either faith is not

requisite, or infants are baptized in vain. To this I reply, what all men say, that infants are aided by the faith of others, namely, that of those who bring them to baptism. For as the word of God, when it is preached, is powerful enough to change the heart of a wicked man, which is not less devoid of sense and feeling than any infant, so through the prayers of the Church which brings the child in faith, to which prayers all things are possible, the infant is changed, cleansed, and renewed by faith infused into it. Nor should I doubt that even a wicked adult, if the Church were to bring him forward and pray for him, might undergo a change in any of the sacraments; just as we read in the gospel that the paralytic man was healed by the faith of others. In this sense too I should readily admit that the sacraments of the new law are effectual for the bestowal of grace, not only on those who do not place any obstacle in the way, but on the most obstinate of those who do. What difficulty cannot the faith of the Church and the prayer of faith remove, when Stephen is believed to have converted the Apostle Paul by this power? But in these cases the sacraments do what they do, not by their own virtue, but by that of faith; without which, as I have said, they have no effect at all.

A question has been raised whether a child yet unborn, but of which only a hand or a foot appears, can be baptized. On this point I would give no hasty judgment, and I confess my own ignorance. Nor do I know whether the reason on which they base their opinion is sufficient, namely, that the whole soul exists in every part of the body; for it is not the soul, but the body, which is outwardly baptized. On the other hand, I cannot pronounce that, as some assert, he who has not yet been born, cannot be born again; though it is a very strong argument. I leave this question to the decision of the Spirit, and meanwhile would have every man to be fully persuaded in his own mind.

I will add one thing, of which I wish I could persuade every one; that is, that all vows, whether those of religious orders, or of pilgrimages, or of works of any kind, should be entirely done away with, or at least avoided, and that we should remain in the liberty of baptism, full as it is of religious observances and of good works. It is impossible to express to what an extent this far too much extolled belief in vows detracts from baptism, and obscures the knowledge of Christian liberty; not to mention the unspeakable and infinite danger to souls which is daily increased by this immoderate passion for vows, and thoughtless rashness in making them. Oh ye most wicked Bishops and most unhappy pastors, who slumber at your ease and disport yourselves with your own desires, while ye have no pity for the grievous and perilous affliction of Joseph!

It would be well either to do away by a general edict with all vows, especially those which are perpetual, and to recall all men to their baptismal vows, or at least to admonish all to take no vow rashly; and not only to invite no vows, but to place delays and difficulties in the way of their being taken. We make an ample vow at baptism, a greater one than we can fulfil; and we shall have enough to do if we give all our efforts to this alone. But now we compass sea and land to make many proselytes; we fill the world with priests, monks, and nuns; and we imprison all these in perpetual vows. We shall find those who will argue on this point, and lay it down that

works performed under the sanction of a vow are better than those performed independently of vows, and will be preferred in heaven and meet with far higher reward. Blind and impious Pharisees! who measure righteousness and holiness by the greatness and number of works, or by some other quality in them; while in God's sight they are measured by faith alone; since in His sight there is no difference between works, except so far as there is a difference in faith.

By this inflated talk wicked men create a great opinion of their own inventions, and puff up human works, in order to allure the senseless multitude, who are easily led by a specious show of works; to the great ruin of faith, forgetfulness of baptism, and injury to Christian liberty. As a vow is a sort of law and requires a work, it follows that, as vows are multiplied, so laws and works are multiplied; and by the multiplication of these, faith is extinguished, and the liberty of baptism is brought into bondage. Not content with these impious allurements, others go further, and assert that entrance into a religious order is like a new baptism, which may be successively renewed, as often as the purpose of a religious life is renewed. Thus these devotees attribute to themselves alone righteousness, salvation, and glory, and leave to the baptized absolutely no room for comparison with them. The Roman pontiff, that fountain and author of all superstitions, confirms, approves, and embellishes these ideas by grandly worded bulls and indulgences; while no one thinks baptism worthy even of mention. By these showy displays they drive the easily led people of Christ into whatever whirlpools of error they will; so that, unthankful for their baptism, they imagine that they can do better by their works than others by their faith.

Wherefore God also, who is froward with the froward, resolving to avenge Himself on the pride and unthankfulness of these devotees, causes them either to fail in keeping their vows, or to keep them with great labour and to continue immersed in them, never becoming acquainted with the grace of faith and of baptism. As their spirit is not right with God, He permits them to continue to the end in their hypocrisy, and to become at length a laughing-stock to the whole world, always following after righteousness, and never attaining to it; so that they fulfil that saying: "Their land also is full of idols." (Is. ii. 8.)

I should certainly not forbid or object to any vow which a man may make of his own private choice. I do not wish altogether to condemn or depreciate vows; but my advice would be altogether against the public establishment or confirmation of any such mode of life. It is enough that every man should be at liberty to make private vows at his own peril; but that a public system of living under the constraint of vows should be inculcated, I consider to be a thing pernicious to the Church and to all simple souls. In the first place, it is not a little repugnant to the Christian life, inasmuch as a vow is a kind of ceremonial law, and a matter of human tradition or invention; from all which the Church has been set free by baptism, since the Christian is bound by no law, except that of God. Moreover there is no example of it in the Scriptures, especially of the vow of perpetual chastity, obedience, and poverty. Now a vow of which we have no example in the Scriptures is a

perilous one, which ought to be urged upon no man, much less be established as a common and public mode of life; even if every individual must be allowed to venture upon it at his own peril, if he will. There are some works which are wrought by the Spirit in but few, and these ought by no means to be brought forward as an example, or as a manner of life.

I greatly fear, however, that these systems of living under vows in the religious, are of the number of those things of which the Apostle foretold: "Speaking lies in hypocrisy; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving." (1 Tim. iv. 2, 3.) Let no one cite against me the example of St. Bernard, St. Francis, St. Dominic, and such like authors or supporters of religious orders. God is terrible and wonderful in His dealings with the children of men. He could preserve Daniel, Ananias, Azarias, and Misael holy, even as ministers of the kingdom of Babylon, that is, in the very midst of wickedness; He may also have sanctified the men of whom I have spoken in their perilous mode of life, and have guided them by the special working of His Spirit; while yet He would not have this made an example for other men. It is certain that not one of these men was saved by his vows or his religious order, but by faith alone, by which all men are saved, but to which these showy servitudes of vows are especially hostile.

In this matter let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. I shall carry out my undertaking, and speak on behalf of the liberty of the Church and of the glory of baptism; and I shall state for the general benefit what I have learnt under the teaching of the Spirit. And first I counsel those who are in high places in the Church to do away with all those vows and the practice of living under vows, or, at the least, not to approve or extol them. If they will not do this, then I earnestly advise all who desire to make their salvation the safer—particularly growing youths and young men—to keep aloof from all vows, especially from such as are extensive and life-long. I give this advice in the first place because this mode of life, as I have already said, has no evidence or example in the Scriptures, but rests only on the bulls of the pontiffs, who are but men; and secondly, because it tends to lead men into hypocrisy through its singularity and showy appearance, whence arise pride and contempt of the ordinary Christian life. If there were no other cause for doing away with these vows, this one by itself would have weight enough, that by them faith and baptism are depreciated, and works are magnified. Now these cannot be magnified without ruinous consequences, for among many thousands there is scarcely one who does not look more to his works as a member of a religious order, than to faith; and under this delusion they claim superiority over each other as being stricter or laxer, as they call it.

Hence I advise no man, yea, I dissuade every man from entering into the priesthood or any religious order, unless he be so fortified with knowledge as to understand that, however sacred and lofty may be the works of priests or of the religious orders, they differ not at all in the sight of God from the works of a husbandman labouring in his field, or of a woman attending to her household affairs, but that in His eyes all things are measured by faith alone; as it is written: "In all thy work believe with the faith of thy soul,

for this is the keeping of the commandments of God." (Eccles. xxxii. 23.)  
Nay, it very often happens that the common work of a servant or a handmaiden is more acceptable to God than all the fastings and works of a monk or a priest, when they are done without faith. Since, then, it is likely that at the present day vows only tend to increase men's pride and presumption in their own works, it is to be feared that there is nowhere less of faith and of the Church than in priests, monks, and bishops; and that these very men are really Gentiles and hypocrites, who consider themselves to be the Church, or the very heart of the Church, spiritual persons, and rulers of the Church, when they are very far indeed from being so. These are really the people of the captivity, among whom all the free gifts bestowed in baptism have been brought into bondage; while the poor and slender remnant of the people of the land appear vile in their eyes.

From this we perceive two conspicuous errors on the part of the Roman Pontiff. The first is, that he gives dispensations in the matter of vows, and does this as if he alone possessed authority beyond all other Christians. So far does the rashness and audacity of wicked men extend. If a vow can be dispensed with, any brother can dispense for his neighbour, or even for himself. If he cannot grant such dispensations, neither has the Pope any right to do so. Whence has he this authority? From the keys? They are common to all, and only have power over sins. But since the Pope himself confesses that vows have a divine right, why does he cheat and ruin wretched souls by giving dispensations in a matter of divine right, which admits of no dispensation? He prates of the redemption of vows, and declares that he has power to change vows, just as under the law of old the first-born of an ass was exchanged for a lamb; as if a vow, which requires to be fulfilled everywhere and constantly, were the same thing with the first-born of an ass; or as if, because God in His own law ordered an ass to be exchanged for a lamb, therefore the Pope, who is but a man, had the same power with respect to a law which is not his, but God's. It was not a pope who made this decretal, but an ass which had been exchanged for a pope, so utterly mad and impious was he.

The Pope commits a second great error again, in decreeing that the bond of marriage may be broken through, if one of the parties, even against the will of the other, desires to enter a monastery, provided the marriage has not yet been consummated. What devil inspires this portentous decree of the Pope? God commands men to keep faith and observe truth towards one another, and that every man should bring gifts out of his own substance; for He hates robbery for burnt-offering, as He declares by the mouth of Isaiah. Now husband and wife owe fidelity to each other by their compact, a fidelity which can be dissolved by no law. Neither can say: "I belong to myself," or can do without robbery whatever is done against the will of the other. Else why not also have a rule that a man who is in debt, if he enter into a religious order, shall be freed from his debts, and be at liberty to deny his bond? Ye blind! ye blind! Which is greater—good faith, which is a command of God, or a vow, invented and chosen by men? Art thou a shepherd of souls, O Pope? Are ye doctors of sacred theology, who teach in this way? Why do ye teach thus? Because ye extol a vow as being a better work than marriage; but it is not faith, which itself alone can magnify anything, that ye magnify, but works,

which in the sight of God are nothing, or at least all equal as concerns their merit.

I cannot doubt then that from such vows as it is right to make, neither men nor angels can give a dispensation. But I have not been able to convince myself that all the vows made in these days fall under the head of rightful vows; such as that ridiculous piece of folly, when parents devote their child yet unborn, or an infant, to a life of religion or to perpetual chastity. Nay it is certain that this is no rightful vow; it appears to be a mockery of God, since the parents vow what it is in no wise in their power to perform. I come now to members of the religious orders. The more I think of their three vows, the less I understand them, and the more I wonder how the exaction of such vows has grown upon us. Still less do I understand at what period of life such vows can be taken, so as to be legitimate and valid. In this all are agreed, that such vows, taken before the age of puberty, are not valid. And yet in this matter they deceive a great number of youths, who know as little of their own age as of what it is they are vowing. The age of puberty is not looked to when the vows are taken, but consent is supposed to follow afterwards, and the professed are held in bondage and devoured by dreadful scruples of conscience; as if a vow in itself void could become valid by the progress of time.

To me it seems folly that any limit to a legitimate vow should be laid down by others, who cannot lay one down in their own case. Nor do I see why a vow made in a man's eighteenth year should be valid, but not if made in his tenth or twelfth year. It is not enough to say that in his eighteenth year a man feels the impulses of the flesh. What if he scarcely feels them in his twentieth or thirtieth year; or feels them more strongly in his thirtieth year than in his twentieth? Why, again, is not a similar limitation placed on the vows of poverty and obedience? What time shall we assign for a man to feel himself avaricious or proud, when even the most spiritually minded men have a difficulty in detecting these affections in themselves? There will never be any sure and legitimate vow, until we shall have become thoroughly spiritual, and so have no need of vows. We see then that vows are most uncertain and perilous things. It would be a salutary course to leave this lofty manner of living under vows free to the spirit alone, as it was of old, and by no means to convert it into a perpetual mode of life. We have now, however, said enough on the subject of baptism and liberty. The time will perhaps come for treating more fully of vows, and in truth they greatly need to be treated of.

[ Next: [Concerning the Sacrament of Penance](#) ]