

The Voice in the Wilderness

What We Found

- Israel knew ritual washing, and the prophets had taught her to hope for a cleansing from God himself (Ezekiel 36:25–27; Zechariah 13:1); the delegation's question (John 1:25) suggests the expectation that the decisive figures might baptize.
- John appeared in dress evocative of Elijah (2 Kings 1:8; Mark 1:6), at the river of Elijah's story (2 Kings 2): the promised final preparation, where spirit follows water.
- John drew the line himself: *I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit* (Mark 1:8). His water carried half of Ezekiel's promise and pointed at the Carrier of the other half.
- In Ephesus (Acts 19:1–7), the apostolic Church met devout disciples who had only John's baptism, and they received Christian Baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus, and, with Paul's laying on of hands, the Holy Spirit came on them (Acts 19:5–6): the two washings differ in kind, and the difference is the Gift the new one carries.
- In every valid Baptism, whoever's hands pour the water, it is Christ who baptizes: the sacrament's worth never depended on the minister's worthiness.

Voices of the Church

St. John Chrysostom • *Homilies on Matthew*

St. John Chrysostom teaches in substance that John's baptism stood between the Jewish washings and our own: more than ritual purification, for it summoned real repentance; less than the sacrament, for it could not yet confer the Spirit or remission. Its whole office was to lead people by the hand to the One who could, which is why John's constant preaching was not himself but the Coming One.

St. Augustine • *Tractates on the Gospel of John*

St. Augustine, commenting on the Baptist's testimony that the Spirit's descent revealed *he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit*, teaches in substance that this is the standing difference between every minister and the Lord: John baptized in his own baptism, but no Christian minister baptizes in his own; whether Peter baptizes, or Paul, or even Judas, it is Christ who baptizes. The power of the font was never delegated away; the hands change, the Baptizer does not.

St. Thomas Aquinas • *Summa Theologiae III, q. 38*

St. Thomas, treating John's baptism directly, teaches in substance that it was a divinely given preparation rather than a sacrament of grace: it did not itself confer what our Baptism confers, but accustomed Israel to the rite, gathered crowds to hear of Christ, and disposed hearts by repentance, a schoolmaster's washing, walking its pupils to the font it could not itself be.

Live It This Week

- Pray the Benedictus (Luke 1:68–79), Zechariah's canticle over the infant John, once this week, slowly: the Church prays it every single morning.
- Practice one act of decrease: give away credit, yield the last word, or let someone else be preferred, and offer it silently: he must increase.

- If you have never read your own baptismal rite, find the Rite of Baptism text this week and read what was actually said and asked over you.

Memory Verse

I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

Mark 1:8 (RSV2CE)

Before next session: Reread Matthew 3:13–17 slowly, several times.

Catechism references: 523, 720, 1223