

Part One: The Beginnings

REQUESTING Baptism is, in fact, requesting rebirth in the Holy Spirit. The goal of Baptism should not be limited merely to the fact of changing one's religion before the civic and religious authorities, on a par with marrying a Christian partner, or gaining a place on the social ladder. The goal of Baptism must be to seek Jesus, meet with Him, and get to know Him as the one who seeks each and every one of us, in order to offer us salvation. This is why we have chosen the theme of new birth in water and the Holy Spirit as the first approach for our catechumens during our first encounter with them.

Elsewhere, we have decided to design this book for the formation of catechumens around the Gospel according to St Matthew, which, according to the witness of our researchers, was the Gospel employed as the basic early Christian catechism given to catechumens in the first centuries AD. St Matthew's Gospel gathered the actual words of Christ in five sermons, with an introduction about His childhood and a conclusion dealing with his passion, death and resurrection. An example of this basic approach is the 1950 study³ which compares the quotations, used by the Church Fathers in the first two centuries of Christianity, taken from the Gospel of Matthew, with those taken from the other books of the New Testament. The conclusion of this study is that Matthew's book was the most read and the most quoted by the Church Fathers of the first two centuries of all the books of the New Testament: no other book is comparable, neither that of John nor those of Paul.

³ E. Masseux, *The Influence of the Gospel of St Matthew on Christian Literature before St Irenaeus* (Beth 75, Leuven 1950).

Furthermore, St Matthew's Gospel is the Gospel of Church and Liturgy, through which we learn how to live among the people of the Kingdom, as brethren who forgive one other (Mt 18), and who worship a God who is always amongst us, Emmanuel – God with us (Mt 1:23; cf. 28:20). He who reads Matthew's Gospel is like someone entering a cathedral, where he smells the scent of incense and hears the prayers of believers.

As for the childhood of Christ, Matthew relates a dramatic story in which an atmosphere of persecution and slaughter at the hands of King Herod dominates, and in which one perceives the prominent figure of St Joseph, who is concerned above all with the protection of the child. In Luke's Gospel, on the other hand, in the story of Christ's childhood, an atmosphere of hymns and joy predominates: the characters are all positive and this helps the reader to become inspired by their example, because they welcome the child Jesus, Son of God, and rejoice at His birth. Since most Arabic-speaking catechumens come from an Islamic background, we have decided to talk of Mary, of her Annunciation and the infancy of Jesus according to Luke, instead of speaking about Joseph according to Matthew's account, since Mary occupies an important place in the Koran. In this way we also hope to avoid errors which can be caused by an inappropriate shifting of information from one religion to another. Following this part on the beginnings in three chapters, we return to St Matthew's Gospel in the fourth chapter of the book, to draw from it the essential teaching that will help the one who seeks to know the divine Master to follow Him in the journey of His new life.

