In the Christian tradition, sacraments are external signs that testify to a sacred, mysterious and inward transformation brought about by the grace of God. Of the sacraments that have been variously constituted by the church, the Eucharist and baptism have taken on particular significance as religious themes in the works of writers such as William Shakespeare, Flannery O'Connor, Graham Greene and Fredrick Buechner. In Frederick Buechner's *Godric*, the sacrament of baptism is an anagogical metaphor for the Christian life and functions as a recurring theme that marks transitions in the life of Godric of Finchale, the 12th century saint at the center of this work.

The sacrament of baptism consists of two images, the death of Jesus Christ and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The immersion into the water signifies death and the raising out of the water signifies resurrection. In turn, these images express the inward transformation of spiritual rebirth. As Ronald Grimes remarks, however, the modern reader often neglects the significance of the former image (22). If baptism is about regeneration, renewal and newness of life then it must also be about death, violence and destruction. As Grimes states, "baptism is both a symbolic act of violence and a gesture of grace" (Grimes 13). The seemingly absurd paradox of the Christian faith is present in this sacrament; namely, "those who lose their life . . . will find it" (Mt 10:39). In *Wishful Thinking*, Buechner explains the Christian paradox and its connection with baptism:

> The experience of salvation involves this same paradox . . . You give up your old self-seeking self for somebody you love and thereby become yourself at last. You must die with Christ so that you can rise with him, Paul says. It is what baptism (q.v.) is all about (103).

Without the first, the second is not possible; our death effects our life. If we do not die, we will not live. In an anagogical sense then, baptism is not only a metaphor for salvation but also the entirety of the Christian life. As Paul says, "I die daily" (1 Cor 15:31).

There are three baptismal scenes in *Godric*: the baptism in the river Wash (14-16), the baptism in the river Jordan (103-105) and the baptism in the river Wear (169-171; 95-96). In

each scene, Godric immerses himself in the river waters, resulting in a spiritual experience results. The efficacy of each of the baptisms builds upon the previous one and reveals Godric's growing awareness of the Christian paradox and his need to trust God. These baptisms precede change in Godric's life.

The baptism in the river Wash begins Godric's transition from youth and foreshadows both his damnation and his salvation. For Godric, this baptism is an encounter with physical death and rebirth; it only hints at the spiritual death and rebirth that is the essence of the sacrament. The waters of the river Wash recede in a manner reminiscent of the parting of the Sea of Reeds at the Exodus, allowing Godric to enter the riverbed to collect a fish that will feed his family. When the waters suddenly return, Godric is still in the riverbed and refusing to let go of his prize, Godric is immersed in the rising tide and stops breathing. This experience of physical death amplifies the violence inherent in the sacrament of baptism. Ironically, it is Godric's desire to hold on to his physical, earthly life—symbolized in his struggle to hold on to the fish—that threatens his life. He envisions that his salvation lies in holding onto the fish, yet it is this very thing that dooms him:

> His burden dragged him under, yet he would not let it go, for though the deep churned dark about him, still deeper in his heart he saw that porpoise eye so blithe in death and heard its voice, or so he thought, say, "Take and eat me, Godric, to thy soul's delight. Hold fast to him who gave his life for thee and thine" (15).

Burcwen, Godric's sister, saves him from his death by breathing life into him, recalling how God breathed life into humanity at its creation. In doing so, Burcwen, not God, becomes his saviour and the foundation for Burcwen and Godric's incestuous love is born. The event marks the end of Godric's youth and sets him upon a path of physical, earthly pursuits. Soon after this event, he leaves home and becomes a crook and pirate. It may be argued, therefore, that this event is not a baptism at all because it is not efficacious in Godric's life; in fact, it is destructive. Yet, the destructiveness of this baptism evokes the first half of the paradox; namely, that baptism is an

act of violence before it is anything else. Before Godric can experience rebirth, he must experience death and so, he embarks upon a path of destruction.

The baptism in the river Jordan begins Godric's transition from mid-life and emphasizes his regeneration. Whereas the baptism in the river Wash represents the destructiveness of the sacrament, this baptism evokes the second half of the paradox. The Jordan baptismal scene juxtaposes the Wash baptismal experience. This baptism cleanses Godric of his "untold weight of sin," sets free his soul and gives him peace (104); there is no hint of death and destruction. The river is cool, not rough. Godric does not sink under the crushing return of the tide as in the river Wash but his "hands bob up like corks" (104). The water does not pull him under but he must deliberately duck his head beneath it. Indeed, it is in this baptism that Godric learns the third of the lessons from his experience in Wash (16); it was not the fish that spoke to him nor was it Burcwen that was his savior, it was Jesus:

> I thought I heard that porpoise voice again that spoke to me the day I nearly drowned in Wash. "Take, eat me, Godric, to thy soul's delight. Hold fast to him who gave his life for thee and thine." When I came up again, I cried like one gone daft for joy (104).

Moreover, the efficacy of this baptism is confirmed by Godric's own declaration: "But this I know. The Godric that waded out of Jordan soaked and dripping wet that day was not the Godric that went wading in" (105). Between his baptism in the river Wash and this baptism, every event has been a part of the act of violence in baptism. It is as if Buechner is saying that Godric's life up until this point is the thing signified in the immersion process and the raising up is Godric's life from this point forward. The life of sin is the death signified; the life after is the resurrection signified. Therefore, having faced the death, Godric must face the new life. Indeed, Godric strives from this point forward to live after spiritual pursuits. He travels unshod in honor of Jesus (106). He renounces the person he was in Deric and gives up his worldly treasures (106-107). Yet,

despite his best intentions, Godric still needs to learn the lessons that Elric[1] seeks to teach him. Filled with the joy and "holy mirth" (104), Godric cannot see "the shadows" (114).

The baptism in the river Wear begins Godric's transition from life to death and it is the moment that he learns the final mystery. In everything that Godric has done since his baptism in the river Jordan, he has sought to control his desire through a life of mortification and asceticism. Yet, he fails. His lust, in particular, continues to haunt him:

> Oh what a crop of sons the seed I've spilled in dreams would raise! How many silken coverlets I'd need to cover all the naked flesh I've dallied with in lust though lying all alone the while in rags with calluses thick as cobbles on my knees from prayer. Sometimes maids whom, in the daylight world, I held in such esteem I wouldn't have so much as thought to kiss them save in greeting or farewell, in sleep I've sported with so shamelessly that when I waked, I wept to think on what I'd done (140).

This lust comes to its fullest expression in his incestuous affair with Burcwen. Despite all his prayers and all his mortifications, Godric's "hot striving to be pure" (143) does not deliver him from his temptation. And, having committed this sin, Godric continues to strive for purity but finds no absolution. In the few moments before his death, however, he finally receives the answer to the great mystery of salvation. The discovery comes as Reginald reads to Godric a portion of his biography that ends with that declaration that he was a saint. How could Reginald, having heard all his sins, still declare him a saint? He begs Perkin to bring him once more into the river Wear for his final baptism and there, the answer, the mystery is right before him. In this baptism, the river is both "rough" and "soft" (170). It "falls about [his] shoulders like a silver shawl" yet "chills [him] to the marrow of [his] bones" (170). The mystery lies in the dialectical

[1] Buechner employs an interesting play on names with the characters of Elric and Godric. "El" is a Hebrew term for God. The names "El"ric and "God"ric are, therefore, identical. Perhaps then, Elric should be regarded as another alias for Godric, just as Deric had been so used. The interaction between Elric and Godric is mostly isolated from other people and may therefore represent Godric's internal struggle to come to terms with his demons: "It seemed to me the two of us made one" (111). Such an interpretation would certainly bring an interesting dynamic to the scenes with Elric and Godric.

tension between the two images of baptism, between death and new life. How can a sinner be a saint? By the grace of God. It is in dying that we find life:

> . . . if it is by grace we are saved, it is by grace too that we are lost—or lost, at least, in the sense of losing ourselves, our lives, our all . . . death is not merely a biological necessity but a necessity too in terms of the mystery of salvation. We find by losing. We hold fast by letting go . . . Out of selfness we grow, by his grace, toward selflessness, and out of that final selflessness . . . what new marvels he will bring to pass next. All's lost. All's found" (Buechner, *All's Lost, All's Found* 284-285).

The act of violence then is no less important than the gesture of grace for each makes the other possible. It is a lesson that Godric finally learns, for just before he passes from life into death, he signs the biography that makes him a saint and thinks, "All's lost. All's found. Farewell" (171).

Salvation "is an experience first and a doctrine second" (Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* 102). To hear the story of Godric is to partake, in some sense, in that experience. By connecting that experience to the sacrament of baptism, Buechner demonstrates that the sacrament is much more than a simple symbol but it is an anagogical metaphor for the entire Christian life and being so, it reveals the mystery of our life:

> Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness (Rom 6:4, 13).

If we accept the threat of destruction, and entrust our lives to God, we find peace and freedom. This is the dialectical tension of salvation that explains the whole purpose of our life in Christ.

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