

Is it missing the point to take offense at Sarah Palin's reference to baptism?

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So, Sarah Palin said this thing the other day about waterboarding and baptism. I wouldn't bother bringing it up just to say that I, like so many others, find this disgusting.

What's more interesting to me is the diversity of people who are similarly appalled. Lots of right-of-center commentators have called Palin out, [Andrew Sullivan](#) and [Rod Dreher](#) of course but also [Mollie Hemingway](#), [Edward Peters](#), [Patrick Brennan](#), [Joe Carter](#), and others. Good for them.

Some of these folks focus more on Palin's flippant attitude toward baptism than on her enthusiasm for torture, and some more liberal commentators see this as misplaced. "We [Christians] seemed more upset about the *imagined* abuse of a religious ritual than the *actual* abuse of a human," writes [CCblogger](#) David Henson.

Mark Silk [calls it](#) "a distraction from the obscenity of waterboarding," adding that "English is filled with locutions that derive from Christianity but which have become, at most, mild metaphors."

But Palin didn't use baptism metaphorically, the way I might refer to an inaugural prayer as a baptism of a civil event. She brought it up as a direct distortion—a perversion—of the thing itself.

Waterboarding involves actually pouring water over a person, but for death-dealing rather than life-giving purposes. As for baptism, it is irreducibly about water itself—the power of the sacraments comes in part from their stake in the everyday things of the physical world, things that can give both health and life on the one hand and suffering and death on the other. If baptism is water and grace, waterboarding is water and the opposite of grace.

So I don't think much is gained by parsing which half of Palin's comment is more offensive. It's deeply offensive precisely because of the two things it juxtaposes: a primary symbol of divine grace and a primary symbol of American immorality, each involving both the image of God and the water of life. Jokes about sacraments might

not be offensive at the same level actual torture is. But turning from this heinous sin against our fellow humans may require a sacramental vision of the world.