

# BAPTISM



You have been  
enlightened by  
Christ.

Walk always as  
children of light  
and keep the  
flame of faith  
alive in your  
hearts.

~Rite of Baptism

# THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

## *The History*

*In* the Christian era, it was John, the cousin of Jesus, who first preached baptism. His was a baptism in the waters of repentance, but he foretold that “the one who follows me is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to carry his sandals; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Mt 3:11) This prophecy of John the Baptist was fulfilled in the disciples of Jesus on the day of Pentecost, the day on which, inspired by the Spirit, they made public their conversion to Christ and their commitment to spread the good news of the Reign of God. The Scriptures tell us that on that very day “about three thousand were added to their number” (Acts 2:41) through baptism.

In the early Christian community, adults were baptized by immersion, which symbolized death to the candidates’ old life and transformation into new life in Christ. This death/resurrection experience replicated in a symbolic way the pattern of Christ’s death and resurrection, the central mystery of the Christian faith. It was the bishop who presided over these baptisms; he then certified or “confirmed” that they had taken place by laying hands on the newly baptized. Following this, the community shared a fellowship meal of thanksgiving.

During the third and fourth centuries, concern for the integrity of the gospel in a time of persecution led to the development of a lengthy catechumenal process culminating in the celebration of the sacred mysteries during the Easter Vigil. During this vigil, catechumens (those to be baptized) professed their faith and were immersed in the waters of baptism. Clothed in new white garments, they were presented to the bishop who confirmed them with the ritual laying on of hands and anointing. After this they took

their places in the midst of the assembly and completed their initiation by sharing in the Eucharist. During the Easter season, the neophytes spent time together reflecting on the paschal mystery which they had celebrated sacramentally.

The rigors of the catechumenate tested the sincerity of the candidates and, along with the prayers and support of the community, strengthened them in their new faith. The distinctiveness of childhood was not a concern in ancient times. Infants and children were brought to the Easter sacraments by their parents.

With the end of persecution and the growth of the Church, differences developed in the catechumenate process. In the East, the unity of the sacraments was preserved. Presbyters baptized, confirmed and admitted infants to Eucharist. In the West, presbyters baptized infants, but bishops retained their prerogative to confirm. Distance and growing administrative concerns prevented the bishop from getting around his diocese to confirm. Thus, the completion of initiation – Confirmation and Eucharist – was delayed.

Historical and doctrinal development through the centuries caused a shift in the focus of baptism from initiation into the Christian community to salvation from original sin. By the 13th century, in an effort to assure the salvation of the infant, baptisms were routinely celebrated at any time of year. Consequently, this celebration disappeared from the Easter Vigil. Baptisms were celebrated instead in a short service in the presence of a small group rather than the entire faith community. This practice continued until the second half of the 20th century, when the Second Vatican Council emphasized the role of the laity in the work of the Church as a consequence of their baptismal call. The catechumenate was restored for adults and those unbaptized children of catechetical age, but infant baptism remains the norm. The revised Rite of Baptism echoes the vision of Vatican II and recaptures the spirit

of the early Church practice of initiation into the Christian community. The rite is ideally celebrated in the midst of the community where all present promise to support parents and godparents in their duty to “keep the light of faith alive” (Rite of Baptism) in the heart of the child.

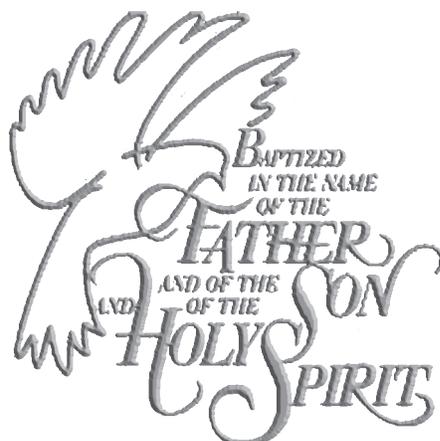
Baptism is a time for evangelization. The RCIA process and preparation for infant baptism provide an opportunity to speak with others about our faith. Pope Francis in his papal exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, invites parishes to consider that their work is to be missionaries:

“The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s Word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration (27) In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers (28) It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey and a center of constant missionary outreach” (29).

Bishop Cunningham’s Pastoral Letter on the Year of Faith tells us the parishes who strive to be missionaries need to witness with joy:

“Credible agents of the New Evangelization accept the Gospel and have a personal relationship through prayer and study. Before we can evangelize others we must know and love Him as the true source of enduring happiness. Only then can we proclaim Christ to our family and friends - many whom are hungry for a deeper relationship with God.”

(*Pastoral Letter on the Year of Faith*, p3)



## Theological Understanding

The First Letter of John proclaims, “God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God, and God in them.” (1 John 4:16) In the original Greek, the word which is translated as “love” is agape, which means the pure and perfect gift of self. As Christians, we believe in a God who is Trinity – a communion of love shared eternally among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. St. Augustine, reflecting on God as agape, spoke of the Trinity as the Lover, the Beloved, and the Love eternally shared among them. We know from our experience that love cannot be self-contained. It is expressed “outward”, as it were, as self-gift. So it is with God. The love of God shared within the Trinity is expressed outward...in creation. We are loved into existence by the God who is love.

### In Christian marriage

“Married love is an eminently human love because it is an affection between two persons rooted in the will and it embraces the good of the whole person;... A love like that, bringing together the human and the divine, leads the partners to a free and mutual self-giving, experienced in tenderness and action, and permeating their entire lives; ...”  
(*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* #49)

The married couple may thus become co-creators with God, giving the gift of self to the other, and loving new life into existence. As Catholics, we believe that human life begins at the moment of conception, loved into existence by God.

“To see a child held in the arms of its father or mother is to glimpse what God is like, to see an image of the relationship between the human race and the creator. The infant makes present the reality of who we are before God: creation, radically dependent on our loving Parent...By its very being the infant preaches Good News, telling us of the wonders of God’s love.”  
(*Richstatter, Thomas.OFM, Catholic Update: Infant Baptism: Gift to the Parish*, St. Anthony Messenger Press 1995.)

Therefore, we as church celebrate this new life in the Sacrament of Baptism, by which the newly baptized is welcomed into the community of faith and washed clean of sin. When an adult or a child of catechetical age is baptized, all personal sin is forgiven as well.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that Original Sin is “an essential truth of our faith” (#388), yet it is not a truth which can or should be understood in isolation, apart from other essential truths... As the Catechism explains, “The doctrine of Original Sin is, so to speak, the ‘reverse side’ of the Good News that Jesus is the Savior of all” (#389) ...Original sin is removed when the person is filled with the Holy Spirit, the saving love and grace of Christ.

Consequently when we speak of Original Sin it is important to remember that Catholics baptize infants not primarily for what Baptism takes away but for what it gives!... When parents look into the smiling face of their newborn and feel the love they have for it, they know deep in their hearts that God loves this innocent child and has created it for eternal happiness.

*(Thomas Richstatter, O.F.M., S.T.D. Infant Baptism-Gift to the Parish, St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1995)*

### ***The Universal Call to Holiness***

Baptism carries with it what the Second Vatican Council called “the universal call to holiness.”

...all in the church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness, according to the apostle’s saying: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification.” (1 Th 4:3; see Eph 1:4). This holiness of the church is shown constantly in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful and so it must be; it is expressed in many ways by the individuals who, each in their own state of life, tend to the perfection of charity, and are thus a source of edification for others; ...

*(Dogmatic Constitution on the Church #39)*

Baptism is therefore, above all, the sacrament of that faith by which, enlightened by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we respond to the Gospel of Christ. That is why the church believes that it is its most basic and necessary duty to inspire all, catechumens, parents of children still to be baptized, and godparents, to that true and living faith by which they hold fast to Christ and enter into or confirm their commitment to the New Covenant.

*(Christian Initiation, General Introduction #3)*

### **DISCIPLESHIP**

“Baptism is... the beginning of a ... lifetime journey of commitment and discipleship. Our journey begins with an invitation, a call from God through the Christian community to live the gospel as a committed disciple of Christ. To be a disciple is to be a learner, a journeyer with others who learn along the way. Discipleship is built on the concept of Church as a community of followers who support one another in sharing the Spirit and mission of Christ as found in the New Testament. It suggests that life is not a static condition, but a continual movement toward making real the actions of Jesus in today’s world. That’s what we agree to when we say “yes” to Baptism. When we accept the invitation, that call and response is ritualized and made visual and “real” for us in the celebration of Baptism...

“The largest percentage of Baptisms are still infant baptisms, even though the process of faith and conversion is essentially an adult experience. Obviously, infants cannot respond immediately to the call/response aspect of the sacrament. Nor can an infant understand the change of allegiance, the putting off of the old and the putting on of the new, the dying and rising, the new life, or the sharing of the life of Christ. However, the parents of those infants can understand and live those values and pass them on to their children. They can also experience the support of the community in living those ideals, and that is extremely important. In addition to infant baptism, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is now the norm for initiation in the Catholic Church.

“The Rite of Baptism for Children emphasizes the importance of faithfulness on the part of parents when it says to parents: In asking to have your children baptized, you are accepting the responsibility of training them in the practice of the faith. Considering the future orientation of Baptism and the fact that we are marked for a lifelong journey of discipleship, it is important that parents be strong role models and to lead the way. (Godparents) are significant supporters of parents and the ones who first begin to reveal to their godchildren the value of the Christian community. ...” (*DeGidio, Sandra, OSM. Catholic Update: The Sacrament of Baptism-Celebrating the Embrace of God, St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1989.*)

## Signs & Symbols

As the first and primary experience of the Initiation Rite, Baptism invites one into the community of faith on a life long journey following Christ. Rich in tradition and meaning, the symbols of water, oil, and light join us with the communion of saints.

### WATER

Water is like a double-edged sword in that it has the power to take away life and the power to give life. Immersed in the water of baptism, we die to a life of sin. This experience purifies us as we are born into the life of Christ’s resurrection. “By the power of the Holy Spirit give to this water the grace of your Son, so that in the sacrament of baptism all those whom you have created in your likeness may be cleansed from sin and rise to a new birth of innocence by water and the Holy Spirit.” (*Christian Initiation of Adults #222A*)

### OIL

Anointed with the sacred oil of catechumens, which sets us on the journey of initiation and with chrism, which strengthens us as Christians, we are signed and sealed by the Holy Spirit for priestly, prophetic and royal roles.

The healing properties of these oils not only soften, soothe and strengthen our skin, but these sacred oils soak deep within us as we are signed with the cross, signifying that we have been consecrated by God in the very depths of our being – a mark which can never be washed away. “The sign of the cross, on the threshold of the celebration, marks with the imprint of Christ the one who is going to belong to him and signifies the grace of the redemption Christ won for us by his cross.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church #1235*)

### LIGHT

A candle is set alight from the paschal candle and given to the newly baptized (or to the godparent). It symbolizes one’s new life in Christ. This powerful symbol of overcoming the darkness becomes a beacon of faith as we learn to walk in the light of Christ. “You have been enlightened by Christ. Walk always as children of light and keep the flame of faith alive in your hearts.” (*Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults #230*)

### BAPTISMAL GARMENT

The newly baptized is clothed with a white garment, a symbol of purity and new life. This putting on of the new garment is a visual reminder of the Christian’s commitment to turn away from sin to follow Christ as a new creation in this covenant relationship of love and community. “See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity.” (*Rite of Baptism for Children #99*)

## Roles & Responsibilities

Through the sacrament of baptism, we welcome a child into the community of faith. The ceremony is itself an act of faith on the part of the parents and the faith community, a sign of the covenantal relationship of God with the Church. Because the child cannot make this act of faith for him/herself, the responsibility of those involved is significant.

## PARENTS

From the very beginning, parents bear a unique and primary role in the faith formation of the child. Thus, they have the responsibility to:

- celebrate and nurture their own faith as regular participants in the parish community, especially at Sunday Eucharist
- model a life of Christian witness
- continue their faith formation in order to ready themselves to form their children in the faith
- participate in the baptism preparation program offered in the parish.

## GODPARENTS

Throughout the history of the Church, those presented for baptism were accompanied by sponsors who represented the Christian community in supporting the faith development of the candidate for baptism. In our times, the sponsor or godparent of an infant presented for baptism pledges to help the parent(s) to keep the light of faith alive in the heart of the child and, if necessary, to assume primary responsibility for his/her faith formation. The person chosen for this responsibility:

- is a fully initiated Catholic who has received all three sacraments of initiation.
- A baptized person who belongs to a non-catholic ecclesial community may be admitted only in company with a catholic sponsor, and then simply as a witness to the baptism (*Canon 874.2*)
- practices the Catholic faith and is a model of living the Christian life
- is willing and able to undertake the stated responsibilities of the role
- participates in the baptism preparation program offered in the parish to the best of their ability.

## THE PARISH COMMUNITY

“The people of God, that is the Church, made present in the local community, has an important part to play in the baptism of both children and adults. Before and after the celebration of the sacrament, the child has a right to the love and help of the community.” (*Rite of Baptism #4*)

A welcoming parish community is at the heart of the faith life for families who bring their children to be baptized, as well as for adults who are journeying through the

catechumenate process. Those who have already been baptized celebrate the new life in faith of infants and adults, supporting the families by their prayers and their presence. Celebrating baptism within the Sunday Eucharist strengthens that support and the connection with the Eucharist, which, with Confirmation, will complete the initiation journey. It underscores the role of the community in its ongoing relationship with the family.

Some suggestions which may assist those who are planning a celebration of infant baptism during the weekend liturgies are:

- have greeters welcome the family and their friends and show them to their seats, where they can leave diaper bags, bottles, etc.
- include parents, godparents and infants in the entrance procession
- invite the assembly to respond to the baptismal promises along with the parents and godparents
- present the child with a baptismal garment made by, or personalized by a member of the parish
- include the newly baptized and their families in the prayer of the faithful
- introduce the newly baptized to the parish at the end of the liturgy and hold the child(ren) so that all may see and welcome them
- congratulate the newly baptized and their families in the parish bulletin
- encourage the parishioners to keep the family in prayer
- send a card to the family on the anniversary of the baptism.

## *The Parish-Sacrament of Welcome:*

The parish may still benefit when baptism is held outside of Sunday Eucharist if the parish is made aware of the new member of the community. Here are some effective methods of communicating this information to the parish:

- Welcoming bulletin announcements that encourage the community to keep the family in prayer,
- Including the family names in the prayer of the faithful
- An annual parish ceremony in which all the newly baptized are introduced to the community and given a blessing

## THE MINISTER

The ordinary ministers of the Sacrament of Baptism are the bishop, priest or deacon. In case of emergency, anyone, even a non-baptized person who has the proper intention, may baptize with water, saying, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Irregularities: Baptism may be postponed or delayed, but not refused if these conditions are not met:

- 1.) At least one parent, or the person who lawfully holds their place, must request Baptism for their child
- 2.) There must be a hope, however remote, that the child will be raised in the Catholic faith
- 3.) Parents & godparents must be prepared for their role as teachers of the faith.

## BAPTISMAL TEAMS

In addition to meeting with the minister of baptism, it is recommended that parishes specifically train baptism teams who will meet with the parents of the children to be baptized. Team members welcome the parents—it gives them a chance to ask questions and get to know members of the parish community.

The people who greet and who meet with the parents should be trained to be welcoming, non-judgmental and hospitable. And most importantly, they should be credible witnesses to the Gospel.

The location for Baptismal preparation may be either the new parent's home or at the parish. The candidates' training for their role on the baptismal team might include:

- a.) The receptionist who will receive the request.
- b.) Selected parishioners (lay ministers) who welcome the couple and represent the community. These may be couples who meet with the parents of the children to be baptized, inviting them to attend a gathering where they can meet other new parents. This helps build community and may keep these families more connected to the parish. Team members welcome and give information about baptismal preparation, offer an opportunity for questions, arrange meetings with sponsor couples/catechists, mingle informally with one another, and send them forth with a blessing.

- c.) Clergy or deacon who will clarify any irregularities and who will perform the rite of baptism.

The Diocesan Family Life Education Office offers a Baptismal Preparation Manual with guidance on how to train baptism team members. The binder has many handouts that can be reproduced as well as lesson plans and ideas for use by Baptism teams. The Regional Diocesan Resource Centers at the Faith Formation Offices provide resources that includes Baptism resources and websites that can be used to enhance Baptism Preparation sessions & follow-up.

## BAPTISMAL PREPARATION

Each parish regularly schedules baptism preparation programs for those desiring to have a child baptized and for those who will act as godparents to that child. This preparation may be accomplished in different ways, e.g. home visits by baptism team members, instructional sessions at parish facilities, a retreat for expectant parents and their chosen godparents. Whatever the format, the Baptismal Preparation process is a moment of encounter; each contact with new parents is a welcoming opportunity. Baptismal Preparation includes the following:

- welcome to the Parish Community
- explanation of God's unconditional love for all persons and the role of baptism in salvation from sin & death
- the signs and symbols in the Rite of Baptism
- theological understanding of family as domestic church and faith practices within the family setting
- the call to discipleship and the responsibility to live the Christian life stages of faith development and how to nurture faith in the life of a child
- guidance on ways to strengthen a marriage.

Godparents are encouraged to attend parish baptismal preparation along with new parents. If this is not possible, several solutions are possible:

- 1.) Godparents can be encouraged to seek out a baptismal preparation program at their home parish.
- 2.) They can be encouraged to join the class via a video phone call.
- 3.) Handouts can be offered that will explain the importance of their role in supporting the faith of the child.

## AFTER THE BAPTISM

A question that communities must continue to ask themselves if they wish to remain vibrant is this: are we a welcoming and supportive community in which to raise a child? Are there opportunities to grow and learn about the Catholic faith? Some tried & true ways to encourage and promote faith and a connection with the parish community are:

- offering mentors: personal witness from other parents about which activities helped them to pass on their faith to their children
- teaching parents to view ordinary things as sacred so they will speak of their family life this way
- special events or bulletin helps that support the concept of their family as “the domestic church”, the church of the home

- provide opportunities in the parish to educate parishioners about keeping marriages strong
- set up a “parents’ corner in the gathering space that provides helpful information on children & church
- have a Mom’s group or other parent support group that keeps new parents connected with the parish.
- invite new parents to parish-wide faith formation events focused on the needs of new families.

*Suggestions taken from A Holistic Approach to Infant Baptism, pg 142. More suggestions can be found in Part IV of this resource, Keep the Faith Journey Going.*



# *Baptismal Guidelines: An Overview*

“Baptism is therefore, above all, the sacrament of that faith by which, enlightened by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we respond to the Gospel of Christ.”

*(Christian Initiation, General Introduction #3)*

Baptism celebrates our universal call to holiness and is the beginning of a lifelong journey of commitment and discipleship. The rite is ideally celebrated in the midst of the community where all present promise to support parents and godparents in their duty to “keep the light of faith alive” (Rite of Baptism) in the heart of the child.

## **PARENT(S)**

From the very beginning, parents bear a unique and primary role in the faith formation of the child. Thus, they have the delight and the responsibility to:

- celebrate and nurture their own faith as regular participants in the parish community, especially in the Sunday Eucharist
- model a life of Christian witness
- continue their own faith formation in order to ready themselves to form their children in the faith
- participate in the baptismal preparation program offered in the parish.

## **GODPARENTS**

The Godparent is a sponsor who represents the parish community and who assists the parent in the faith development of the child. The person chosen for this responsibility:

- is a fully initiated Catholic who has received all three sacraments of initiation. A baptized person who belongs to a non-catholic ecclesial community may be admitted only in company with a catholic sponsor, and then simply as a witness to the baptism.
- practices the Catholic faith and is a model of living the Christian life.
- is willing and able to undertake the stated responsibilities of the role.
- participates in the baptismal preparation program offered in the parish to the best of their ability.

## **BAPTISMAL PREPARATION**

Preparation for the sacrament may be provided by a trained baptismal team, priest, deacon. It may be held in the home of the parent(s) seeking baptism or at the parish. It may include an instructional session(s) and or a retreat. It would include the following:

- welcome to the parish community
- explanation of God’s unconditional love for all persons and the role of baptism in salvation from sin and death
- the signs and symbols in the Rite of Baptism
- theological understanding of family as domestic church and faith practices within the family setting
- the call to discipleship and the responsibility to live the Christian life.