THE SACRAMENTS OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION: GOD’S INVITATION AND OUR RESPONSE

I. Introduction: God Invites Us to Live a Covenant Relationship

In the beginning God created the world and all that is in it. He created man and woman in his own likeness and related with them personally as indicated by his walking and talking with them in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2-3). God created us to know, love and serve him in this life and to live with him forever in the next life—in heaven, our everlasting home. The Scriptures record the countless times that God has revealed himself to humankind and invited us into a personal relationship with him. God established a covenant relationship with the people of Israel through Abraham, sent prophets to ask his people to be faithful and live their relationship with him fully, and gave them priests and kings to shepherd his people. In the fullness of time God sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, to establish a new and everlasting covenant—a relationship with God open to all peoples. Jesus suffered, died and rose from the dead establishing this relationship (covenant) between God and all people, reconciling us to the Father, providing for us the opportunity of forgiveness of sins and the gift of everlasting life.

With his ascension into heaven and the sending of the gift of the Holy Spirit on that first Pentecost, Jesus entrusted the care of this new covenant to the Church and promised to be with his followers always. One way that Jesus fulfills this promise and makes himself present to us from generation to generation is in the sacraments. The Church, continuing the mission of Jesus to evangelize, preaches the good news that we have salvation in Jesus Christ and invites all people to respond to God and enter into this covenant relationship with him.

God extends this invitation to everyone through the Church and waits for a response. Because he created us with free will, we must hear the invitation and decide if we want to participate in this covenant relationship. This is witnessed in Peter’s preaching to the people and teaching them to repent from their sins and be baptized (Acts 2:14-41).

II. What is Baptism?

Baptism is the first of seven sacraments instituted by Christ through which God’s invisible grace (his participation in our lives) is made present and visible to us. It is one of the three sacraments of Christian Initiation (baptism, confirmation and Eucharist) which incorporates us fully into the life of the Catholic Church. Through baptism we celebrate both God’s invitation to participate in a covenantal relationship and our response to his invitation. Having been called the “door of the church”, baptism celebrates our new life with God and with the Church—both being eternally united in the person of Jesus as the Son of God and the head of the Church. It is the grace of baptism that transforms us into children of God, enables us to grow in holiness as disciples of Jesus Christ and empowers us to give witness to Christ through our words and actions. Finally, baptism – and every sacrament – is a personal encounter with our Risen Lord who reveals the Father to us (John 14:1-6).

III. The Effects of Baptism

To ask what the effects of baptism are is to ask what God does for us when we celebrate this sacrament. “The two principal effects of baptism are purification from sins and new birth in the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:3; John 3:5). (CCC #1262)

A. Purification from sins:

In baptism we are cleansed from sin and united with the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All sins, both original sin and personal sin, which separate us from God, are forgiven in baptism.

Original sin describes the fallen state of human nature flowing from the sin of Adam and Eve; this sin affects every person born into the world even though it is not a result of their personal wrongdoing. Christ, the “new Adam”, redeemed us from the effects of original sin by his passion, death and resurrection.

While infants and young children, under the age of reason, do not have the ability to commit a personal sin, adults know well what personal sin is from their own experiences. We understand that, even with God’s grace, we sometimes choose not to follow Jesus and his teaching and commit sins. Personal sin is the result of our individual and societal choices in disobedience to God’s law. We struggle against that inclination to sin (concupiscence) that is rooted within each of us. St. Paul referred to this inclination in saying I know what is right and what is the will of God and I want to do it in my heart, but in my body I do the opposite (Romans 7:14-23). Through our personal experience and knowledge of sin, we know that it is important to come to God and celebrate his forgiveness. And so – as parents, godparents, and members of the faith community – we bring children to be baptized by a God who lovingly cleanses and frees them from original sin.

In addition to cleansing from sin, baptism also initiates the process of conversion and discipleship that continues to be part of the Christian’s lifetime commitment. To be a Christian implies first of all a response to Jesus’ challenge: “repent and believe” (Mk 1:14-15). A pattern for ongoing conversion in the life of a Christian is presented in baptism as we die with Christ to our old life and our old ways of sin and, by his grace, rise with him to a new life (Romans 6:1-11). This pattern of dying and rising is the conversion intended to mark the daily life of all the baptized.
B. New birth:

As the old order of sin is washed away, the baptized are born again of water and the Spirit (John 3:5). The newly baptized are “re-created” by God in baptism to become his adopted sons and daughters and be incorporated into the family of God, the Church. As Scripture says, “He predestined us through Christ Jesus to be his adopted sons and daughters.” (Ephesians 1:5). We are called to partake in the Kingdom as the Father’s adopted children. St. Paul writes to the Romans: “All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. You did not celebrate a spirit of slavery leading you back into fear, but a spirit of adoption through which we cry out, Abba, that is, Father” (Romans 8:14-17). When we sin and return to him, God accepts us back and calls us to live as his children. Remember the story of the prodigal son whom the Father accepts back, not as a hired servant, but as his son (Luke 15:12-32). We are made his children in baptism and are invited to live our relationship with God as a family. In our families there are many different relationships held together by the bond of love as each member shares life with the others. As God’s family through baptism we, the Church, are called to relate to one another as brothers and sisters with the same love and dedication we have for our own family members. This love is meant to bind us together in unity as God’s family.

Speaking of the unity of the Christian family, Paul in his letters compares the Church to the body of Christ. Although there are many members and each has a proper function, the Church as the body of Christ is a single body (one) because of the unity that comes from the indwelling of the Spirit of God. John also preaches this same unity. He links Jesus and the members of the Church in the image of the one vine and the many branches (John 15:1-8). Though we are indeed many as sons and daughters, we are one in Christ Jesus. Baptism then celebrates the beginning of our common journey as brothers and sisters toward the eternal kingdom.

IV. Commitment of Parents and Godparents in Baptism: Pastoring the Domestic Church

The Christian family is a domestic church or home church – a community of faith that prays, love, reconciles, evangelizes, and lives the gospel of Jesus. Parents, as heads or pastors of the home church, are called to shepherd the family in the spiritual life. In the celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism the parents of those being baptized will be asked if they accept the responsibility of raising their children in the Catholic faith. Godparents will be asked if they accept the responsibility of helping the parents with their Christian duty. Both questions reflect the Church’s understanding and desire that the life of grace celebrated in baptism by infants and children is intended to develop within them as they grow and mature.

What God has given to these children in baptism is entrusted to their parents and godparents to nurture and develop. Just as God entrusted the very lives of these children to their parents, he is now entrusting the “new life of baptism” to them and their godparents. Together, parents and godparents are called to be stewards of the faith life of the child.

After baptism, the parents and godparents might ask: “What’s next? God, how shall we nurture the life of your grace given to our children so that they will come to know, love and serve you with all their heart, mind, soul and strength and their neighbor as themselves? How can we help our children walk and talk with God?”

A. Nurturing the life of grace in children

Once children have celebrated baptism it is necessary to assist them in their faith walk by deepening their understanding of God and his ways. Parents, as the primary teachers of their child, together with godparents, will evangelize the child – that is to say, share their faith with the child. Three ways to nurture the faith life of children are: (1) providing a healthy spiritual life at home, (2) teaching about God and the Catholic faith, and (3) preparing for and celebrating the other sacraments.

1. Living the spiritual life at home

Cultivating a family prayer life and spiritual practices will be an important part of sharing the faith with children. Just as small children eventually want to eat solid foods from the table like the rest of the family, so too they will gradually desire to eat the more solid foods of faith that are shown to them. Praying together as a family will teach children that the family is holy because God has created and dwells with the family. Establishing a regular pattern of saying meal prayers, night prayers, reading the Bible together (or children’s Bible stories), and any other special spiritual practices of the family will assist in teaching children the importance of “talking” with God daily.

2. Teaching children the faith

Just as we register children for school so they may come to know and understand teachings important for their wellbeing in this world, we also need to do the same for their schooling in the faith. Children will better understand the God who loves them and gives them new life as they participate in catechetical formation. They will need to attend a Catholic school or CCE classes each year. As children grow in knowledge and understanding of God they deepen their “communion and intimacy with Jesus” (GCD, #80-86).

3. Celebrating other sacraments
Children will also deepen their relationship with God by preparing to celebrate other sacraments (first reconciliation, first Holy Communion and confirmation) where they will encounter the risen Lord. Celebrating the other sacraments, we are strengthened even more by God so that we can truly walk with him and live our lives the way he has taught us. In the sacraments God continues to offer us his Son to help us mature in our relationship with him. When we sin he offers us a way back to him so that we are not lost forever. His spiritual food – the Body and Blood of Christ – strengthens us each time we receive him. And God blesses us with the gift of his Spirit to guide our lives and give us courage to be his witnesses before others.

B. Giving good example of a “living faith” to children

The way parents and godparents live their relationship with God, with their family, and with the Church are critical for children. Children will follow this example even more than they will follow an instruction of words. “Living faith” challenges us to ask how we, as adults, are nurturing the life of grace that was given to us when we were baptized. How are we living our faith in our homes, at work in society and in the Church? Three areas to consider in giving a good example of a living faith to the children are worship, wisdom and works.

1. Worship

Baptized adults are called by God to worship him privately and publicly – individually and with the community, the church. It is important for the development of a person’s relationship with God that one attends Mass on Sundays, prays at home and at work, and celebrates the Sacraments. Have we celebrated all the sacraments available to us - first confession, first communion, confirmation and holy matrimony? Do we celebrate confession and Holy Communion regularly? If not, what could we do to worship God more fully?

Do we live the sacraments at home? For example, do we ask forgiveness and repent when we wrong a family member? When children see us worship God by praying and celebrating the sacraments, this will increase their desire to do the same. Yet the greater gift to children will be the manner in which God deepens our relationship with him as we worship him.

2. Wisdom

Baptized adults are also called to grow deeper in their faith through an increasing knowledge and understanding of God and the life of grace given to them. As adults we are invited to study our faith in order to broaden our awareness and understanding of God. We need to look for adult classes and workshops on the Catholic faith and Bible study to deepen our relationship with Jesus. We can pray together as a family for the gift of wisdom and right judgment in our decision making (i.e., before tests, try-outs, job choices, etc.). Again, giving attention to this area of our faith life will set an example for children to do the same and strengthen the family’s walk with the Lord.

3. Works

Along with prayers and study, God also invites us to know and serve Him in our works – the actions of our lives. The moral life, values we choose to live by, is itself an offering of the work of our life to God. Still there are other works that Jesus asks us to do: feed the hungry, care for the sick, visit the imprisoned, evangelize —share our faith with all people. These are just a few of the works Jesus asks of us so that we may put into action the commandment to love God and our neighbor.

Keep in mind that our first neighbor is our family. These works begin at home by feeding our families nutritious meals, caring for them with love and affection even when we are tired, and all the other daily “works” Jesus gives us in the home. Tending to and nurturing a strong marriage is primary among the works given to parents in shepherding the family. Children need their parents’ love for one another as a foundation that enables them to grow and understand a God who is love. Note too that the way parents care for their marriage is a type of early pre-marriage instruction offered to the children. If God calls these children to marry, the way their parents have lived their marriage will be a preparation for them.

Finally, just as a new carpenter becomes more proficient at this trade by repeatedly doing his work, so a baptized Christian will understand and live the life of grace more intimately by engaging in the works of Jesus. Our living the faith by caring for our own family members and our participation in other ministries (liturgical, social justice, youth) is a participation in the mission, the works, of Jesus. As we do His works, we grow in our relationship to Him.

V. Conclusion

In closing, we must remember that the precious gift of participation in a covenantal relationship with God, the life of grace, will be shared with our children in this first of three sacraments of Christian Initiation. Through baptism God will cleanse them of sin and make them His adopted children and members of His family, the Church. Parents and godparents must do everything in their power to nurture well the new life that God gives the child. It should be remembered too that this precious gift and new life are already ours and nurture our faith life with God. God desires to walk and talk with each one of us – to share his love and life more fully.
A SHORT HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION
(BAPTISM, CONFIRMATION, EUCHARIST)

When we participate in the celebration of Christian Initiation, we join in a heritage that has been passed down to us from generation to generation for over 2,000 years.

Our understanding of the first of the three Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism) can be enriched by reflecting on the various changes in the way in which it has been celebrated and on the Church’s developing theology of this sacrament.

The Gospel of Mark opens with John baptizing at the Jordan River and ends with the baptism inaugurated by Jesus. Baptisms performed by John (drawing upon the Jewish purification bath) represented repentance from sin and preparation for the reign of God with the coming of the Messiah: Jesus’ was a rite of entry into the reign of God. John the Baptist summed up the difference: “I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:8)

It was not until after the resurrection of Jesus that the disciples began to baptize. As Jesus had promised, the Holy Spirit was given to others to “complete his work on earth and bring us the fullness of grace.” (John 14: 12, 26) Little is known about the rites of baptism of that time, but there was an immersion in water and “a form of words.” (Eph. 5:26) The process of initiation occurred within small communities who took adults into their company and introduced them to their way of life. Baptism marked a total conversion in a person’s life.

The DIDACHE, an ancient Judeo-Christian collection of teachings written close to the same time as the later New Testament writings, reveals some of the instructions concerning baptism. No one except the baptized were to take part in the celebration of the Eucharist, baptism was to be preceded by fasting and done in living water using the Trinitarian formula: “in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

By the second century a more formal process began to take shape with specific requirements for those gentile adults who sought initiation into the Church (the beginnings of a “Catechumenate” as we know it). In 160 A.D., Justin Martyr, a Palestinian living in Rome, described that after lessons, prayer and fasting by the community and candidate, the person was baptized in water using the Trinitarian formula. The neophytes (new members) were then given the sign of peace and shared in the Eucharist.

Fifty years later, in 210, a North African priest named Tertullian described a much more developed ritual in his writing On Baptism. Candidates were baptized at Easter by the Bishop or a priest and deacons who assisted. There was emphasis on instruction before baptism and preparation included prayer, fasting, night vigils, and confession of sins. A public renunciation of sin occurred before and also during baptism. They stood in water, renounced Satan, made a profession of faith, and were immersed three times in the name of the Trinity. After coming out of the water, they were anointed with oil and the priest imposed hands on them inviting and welcoming the Holy Spirit. There is evidence that during this time infants were being baptized (usually those belonging to the same household/family as the adult(s) being initiated.) Tertullian argued against this practice of baptizing infants saying that they should become Christian when they were old enough to know Christ. Despite his argument, the practice of baptizing infants continued and increased.

Hippolytus, a bishop of Rome, wrote that a candidate would present him/herself to the Christian community and was enrolled as a catechumen beginning a three year process of instruction, prayer and formation in the Christian lifestyle. A sponsor was given to act as a friend to the catechumen and a guide to this new way of life.

Thus, there was a gradual development of the rites of initiation over the first three centuries. In the different regions of the Church, various liturgical rites developed reflective of the culture. What began as a simple and informal ritual developed into a well developed communal process of preparation and celebration which included various ritual steps leading to full initiation at the Easter Vigil. The baptismal bath, symbolizing participation in the Lord’s death and resurrection, was central to this Easter celebration. The role of the Holy Spirit was intimately connected with the anointing with Chrism consecrated oil. Sharing in the Eucharist proclaimed a new oneness. Christian Initiation meant conversion into the life of Jesus and his community.

In 312 A.D., the Emperor Constantine of Rome lifted the state ban against practicing Christianity. By the end of the century it was even made the official religion of the Roman Empire. The commitment to Christianity no longer carried a threat of execution but, in fact, incorporation into mainstream society. Thus, even people with little or no faith were eager to become members. Church leaders made valiant attempts to impress on followers that initiation into the Church should mark a radical change in lifestyle. In spite of these attempts, large numbers flocked to the Church with minimum commitment to the Christian lifestyle. By the end of the fourth century, the Catechumenate began to dissolve. Many adults would become Catechumens (unbaptized members of the Church), but few would follow through with the initiation process. At the same time, baptizing infants became the common practice. In this format all the ritual steps which had preceded the Baptism were now celebrated in the one ceremony.
In the fifth century, St. Augustine stressed the danger of children dying unbaptized. He had argued that infants and children who died before being baptized, though not guilty of any personal sin, were, because of Original Sin (a belief developed by Augustine), excluded forever from eternal happiness although allowed to be in a place of natural happiness. In time this place became known as limbo (from the Latin limbus, meaning “border”). This thinking caused a large increase of infants being baptized immediately following birth. A consequence of this thinking (which was maintained through the Middle Ages into the Twentieth Century) was a shift in the understanding of what the Church was doing with these sacramental rites: from formation and initiation into the Christian lifestyle to saving children from dying unbaptized and being deprived of life in heaven.

(It should be noted here, that the idea of limbo was never a Church teaching, but only a theory attempting to answer the question of what happens to infants and children who die before being baptized. With the Second Vatican Council’s understanding of the universality of grace from the very beginning of each person’s existence, the notion of limbo is no longer put forth by the Church even as a theoretical answer. Instead, the Church entrusts unbaptized infants and children to the mercy of God, who desires that all persons should be saved, and proclaims this in the funeral rites developed specifically for them.)

As the Church grew in its numbers and moved into rural areas, bishops were unable to be present in all the communities to celebrate the initiation rites. Priests and deacons were thus delegated to do the water rite of Baptism but not the anointing with Chrism after the water bath. These newly baptized would then be taken, at a later time, to the Bishop for this anointing which had come to be called Confirmation. Thus, what had begun as two actions within one ritual ceremony became two distinct actions separated by months, and later, by years.

By the middle of the sixth century any liturgical creativity in the celebration had ceased. A set of traditional rites and prayers were preserved and the texts of the initiation liturgy, though designed for adults, were used for infants. The instruction and formation of those to be baptized were dropped and during the ritual itself, parents and godparents made responses and baptismal promises for the infants. Any connection with Easter and Pentecost (a second time when initiation was celebrated as the community grew in numbers) was gradually lost, as was the community aspect. There was little change from that time until the twentieth century.

In 1963, during the Second Vatican Council, the bishops of the world called for a reform of the rites of Baptism. Two commissions were established to address two different tasks. The first commission was to work towards a return to the traditional celebration of initiation as an adult process of formation and conversion. At the heart of this task was the restoration of the Catechumenate with its various periods of catechetical formation and ritual steps.

The second commission was to develop an entirely new liturgy for infant and children (up to seven years old) suitable for use with several families at one time. A key element was to be a clearer description of the role and responsibilities of parents and godparents. After trial use in various places and several revisions, the Rite of Baptism for Children was published in 1969. It includes an emphasis on pre-baptismal instruction for parents and godparents (helping them to be the primary educators in the faith for their children). It also called for discerning whether or not there is a true likelihood that the child would be raised in the faith by their parents, if not, the Baptism is to be delayed. The new ritual calls for the parents to play a primary role (presenting the child to the community and holding the child during the ritual) and the godparents a supporting role in the celebration which itself emphasizes the faith of the community into which the child is to be initiated. The new ritual also includes a linking with the other Sacraments of Initiation (Confirmation and Eucharist) acknowledging their future celebration.

In 1972, the ancient Catechumenate was restored to the Church when the work of the first commission was published: Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. With its restoration, adult baptism was reestablished as the norm of initiation. This caused some confusion as to the Church’s intent concerning continuing to baptize infants and children. In response to this confusion, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith wrote an instruction on infant baptism which clarified the Church’s intention. She does wish to continue to baptize infants consistent with her practice through the centuries and offered positive guidelines for this pastoral practice.

In 1983, the revised Code of Canon Law (laws governing the Church and her practices) supported the recommendations in the Rite of Baptism for Children. It stresses that there must be “founded hope” that the child will be brought up in the Catholic faith. If such hope is altogether lacking, Baptism may be “put off” and the parents are to be informed of the reason. Specific criteria for godparents are given and it emphasizes their participation in the preparatory catechesis along with the parents.

With the restoration of the Catechumenate and the revision of the rites for infant baptism, the whole community once again has the opportunity to participate fully in the preparation for and celebration of the sacrament. Adults are initiated into Christ through the prayer, support, guidance and witness of the faith community as they proceed through the various periods of formation and ritual steps leading to Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. Infants are baptized into a community of believers who promise their support, prayer, guidance and witness to these children as they move along their journey of faith toward full Christian initiation in Confirmation and Eucharist.

Guidelines for Baptism Preparation, Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, 2001