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Sacrament of Baptism

Why is the Sacrament of Baptism important?

Baptism is a precious gift given to us by God. It is through the waters of Baptism that God enables us to participate in the life of Jesus Christ and receive the Holy Spirit. When the sacrament of Baptism is administered, the spiritual vacuum which we call original sin disappears as God becomes present in the soul, and the soul is caught up into that sharing of God's own life which we call sanctifying grace. Thus we become incorporated into the Body of Christ, the Church and thus we share in the Church's mission.

Historical highlights on Baptism

Jesus instituted the sacrament of **Baptism** to apply to each individual soul the atonement which He made on the Cross for original sin. After Jesus was baptized and he emerged from the waters, God's voice acknowledged him saying "this is my beloved son..." (Matthew 3:17, Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22) A dove, a symbol of God's spirit, also appeared to acknowledge the life of the Spirit in Jesus. Later Jesus gave his apostles the mission to teach his Gospel to all nations and to "baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 28:19)

Early Christians baptized with water and the Holy Spirit. Candidates, called catechumens, prepared for up to three years for baptism. Preparation included instruction, prayer and performing good works. When a catechumen was ready for Baptism a sponsor was required to vouch for the person. The ceremony consisted of initial anointing, professing the faith, baptism with water, putting on a white garment and a final anointing by a Bishop to confirm the person's new life.

During the Middle ages infant baptism became common and long preparation for baptism shortened. Eventually the confirmation of the person by the Bishop was separated from the Baptism ceremony and developed into its own rite. Since Vatican

II, the Church has returned to its roots by emphasizing the three sacraments – Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation as integral sacraments of welcome and as moments of celebration into the Catholic Church.

Today people enter the Catholic Church through several paths. Some go through the Rite of Christian Initiation and at the Easter Vigil receive the sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation. Other people are baptized as infants and before reaching adulthood receive the Sacraments of Eucharist and Confirmation. A person is considered fully-initiated into the Catholic Church once all three sacraments are completed.

Meaning of the word “Baptism”

Holy Baptism, “is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit and the door which gives access to the other sacraments.” (Catholic Catechism # 1213)

This sacrament is called *Baptism*, after the central rite by which it is carried out: to baptize means to "plunge" or "immerse"; the "plunge" into the water symbolizes the catechumen's burial into Christ's death, from which he rises up by resurrection with Him, as "a new creature.” (Catholic Catechism # 1214)

Baptism is also called, “the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit,” for it signifies and actually brings about the birth of water and the Spirit without which no one “can enter the kingdom of God.” (Catholic Catechism # 1215)

Symbols used at Baptism

All the sacraments in the Catholic Church are rich in symbols and they invite us to look beyond what we see with our eyes and instead explore and understand in our hearts and minds the meaning of the particular sacrament.

The Catholic Sacrament of Baptism is marked by specific signs and symbols that hold particular meaning for us:

Water – As water brings new life, refreshes us and is essential to our survival, it also signifies the sanctifying washing away of sin and the fostering of the birth of a new life in Christ.

Oils – The Catholic Church makes use of three holy oils: the Oil of the Sick, the Oil of the Catechumens and the Holy Chrism. The first two are blessed and the bishop consecrates the Holy Chrism during the Chrism Mass just before Easter. Each oil has a distinctive purpose in the Church At Baptism two oils are used: Oil of Catechumens is rubbed on the chest to give us strength; Oil of Chrism, (also used at

Confirmation) which is rubbed on the crown or forehead signifying that we are sealed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Oil was used by ancient people to heal, nourish, energize and beautify.

Sign of the Cross - Is the mark of Christians signifying the grace of the redemption Christ won for us on the cross.

Baptismal Candle – Lite from the Easter candle symbolizing that Christ is the Light of the World, the small candle reminds us that the light of Christ has entered our lives and the flame symbolizes the flame of faith which should burn throughout our lives and pass on to the next generation.

Community – The community participates in the baptism by promising to support the child and parents in their journey of faith. Involvement in the parish makes the support stronger and richer by giving families opportunities to serve both the church and the local community.

White Garment - Symbolizes the new dignity of the person as a child of God and signifies that the newly baptized has put on Christ and has risen with Christ.

Understanding the rights, responsibilities and obligations of Baptism

In baptism a child is claimed by Christ and given a pledge in the life of the Kingdom of God. The child is welcomed into the community called Church where he/she will grow in the love of God. This is quite a gift, and for the parents of the child it brings with it serious responsibility.

Baptism is not merely a ritual that marks the birth of the child. It is not merely a celebration to welcome a new family member. Bringing a child to the baptismal font *expresses the commitment of the parents to raise their child in the Catholic faith.*

To present a child for baptism is to accept the responsibility for the growth of his/her faith.

Thus, the decision to baptize a child is a serious one. It should not be done simply because it is a custom or because it is expected. It should be a decision that comes out of the parents' own profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

Godparents – Choosing is no small decision!!

Godparents are a very important part of the Baptismal process. Choosing a godparent is not a decision that you should make lightly. Think about it! The

function of a godparent is to help direct the child in the Catholic faith. It's a promise that they make at the time of baptism. Therefore, you want to choose godparents who can give the proper support to your child in the faith. While the Church does not specifically outline what a godparent must do, it's ideal for a godparent to remain involved. Remaining in contact with the child throughout the years later makes the godparent an easy and natural choice for a sponsor in the Sacrament of Confirmation.

Guidelines for Choosing a Godparent

There must be *at least* one godparent for the child baptized. Those chosen as godparents should be present at the celebration of baptism. If a godparent cannot be present at the baptism, a proxy can stand in for the godparent. If two godparents are selected, ideally, one should be male and the other should be female. Additional persons may be listed as Christian witnesses. To be a godparent a person must:

- Be a fully-initiated Catholic (received the Sacraments of Baptism, First Holy Communion, Confirmation)
- Be at least 16 years old
- Have intention of fulfilling the function
- Be practicing the Catholic faith
- Not be bound by any canonical penalty
- Not be the father or mother of the one to be baptized

Christian Witness - A baptized person who belongs to a non-Catholic ecclesial community can be a witness to the Baptism but only together with a Catholic godparent. **A non-baptized person cannot be a godparent or a witness.**

After the Baptism - Baptism is the *beginning* of the process of passing on the faith of the Church. It is a serious responsibility and it is one that parents do not bear alone. In addition to the parents, the godparents and the parish play an important role as witnesses and models of Christian living.

Tips on passing on the Catholic faith to your child:

- Pray together as a family and separately with your child. For example praying the Rosary together is not only a great way to learn the Our Father, Glory Be, Hail Mary, it's a terrific way to learn who about the life death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. It's an opportunity for every Catholic to understand who Jesus is and why he is our Lord and God.
- Make every effort to involve the godparents in the life and faith development of your child. Godparents can assist the child in knowing God. Godparents can also be terrific sponsors for the child during Confirmation preparation.

- Bring your child to the Mass. Don't worry that your child is 'too young'. Children of all ages are welcomed at the Mass and should be encouraged to participate in Mass at an early age.
- In addition to the Mass, Get involved in parish activities. Parent involvement in parish activities plays a vital role in your child's Catholic faith formation and it helps the child to understand where they 'fit' in the Catholic community.
- Enroll your child in Catholic School or parish-offered Religious Education program.
- Have your child prepare and receive First Penance, First Holy Communion and Confirmation.