



INFANT BAPTISM: GUIDELINES FOR THE PREPARATION AND CELEBRATION

Office for Worship – Archdiocese of Los Angeles

I. IMPORTANCE OF BAPTIZING CHILDREN

Documentation:

From the earliest times, the Church, to which the mission of preaching the Gospel and of baptizing was entrusted, has baptized not only adults but children as well. Our Lord said: “Unless one is reborn in water and the Holy Spirit, one cannot enter the kingdom of God.” The Church has always understood these words to mean that children should not be deprived of Baptism, because they are baptized in the faith of the Church. This faith is proclaimed for them by their parents and godparents, who represent both the local Church and the whole society of saints and believers: “The whole Church is the mother of all and the mother of each” (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, n. 2).

Pastoral practice regarding infant Baptism must be governed by two great principles, the second of which is subordinate to the first: 1) Baptism, which is necessary for salvation, is the sign and the means of God’s prevenient love, which frees us from original sin and communicates to us a share in divine life. Considered in itself, the gift of these blessings to infants must not be delayed. 2) Assurances must be given that the gift thus granted can grow by an authentic education in the faith and Christian life, in order to fulfill the true meaning of the sacrament (*Instruction on Infant Baptism*, n. 28).

For an infant to be baptized licitly, it is necessary that: 1) at least one of the parents consents to it, or the person who lawfully takes their place consents; 2) there is a well founded hope that the child will be brought up in the Catholic religion. If this hope is utterly lacking, the Baptism should be deferred according to the

prescriptions of particular law, explaining the reason to the parents (Can. 868.1).

Rationale:

Because children are not to be deprived of the Sacrament of Baptism, every effort needs to be made to affirm and support parents in their request for Baptism, and to allow them sufficient time to reflect on their own Baptismal commitment and continue their own faith formation.

Baptism is an ecclesial sacrament through which one enters the Body of Christ, the Church. The presentation of infants for Baptism is at once the occasion for the Church as “mother of all and mother of each” to welcome new members into the sacramental life of the Church and to respond to parents with sensitivity to their unique relationship and history with the Church.

The *Rite of Baptism for Children* applies to children who have not reached the age of reason, that is, normally under seven years of age. Children of catechetical age are to be initiated according to the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (cf. RCIA, 306).

For families who enjoy full, conscious, active participation in the life of the Church, the celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism expresses and strengthens the bonds of unity between the domestic Church and the Church universal.

For families in which one parent is of another Christian community, the presentation of infants for Baptism can be a nourishing and supportive experience.

For alienated and marginalized Catholic parents, the presentation of infants for Baptism can be the moment for the Church to touch them with her ministries of hospitality and healing.

For the parent who is not of the Christian faith, the presentation of the infant for

Baptism becomes an occasion for evangelization.

In cases where they are not ready to claim responsibility for the continued faith formation of their child, parents may need to be challenged to delay Baptism. Some parents may need a period of time to tend to their own faith formation and commitment to the Church before being willing to accept their role as first models and teachers of the faith for their children.

The parish needs to provide support and opportunities for adult faith development for these parents.

Guidelines:

Care must be taken not to impose too many conditions on receiving a child for Baptism; sensitivity to individual circumstances challenge the priest and the Baptismal Preparation Team to neither create impediments for the parents nor discount the privileges and responsibility of Baptism for their child.

The Sacrament of Baptism may never be repeated once it has been validly celebrated (cf. Can. 845.1).

Although the first consideration is always for the welfare of the child, Baptism may be delayed for pastoral reasons, such as to allow sufficient time to prepare the parents. Baptism is not to be refused solely on the basis of the parents’ marital status or religious practice.

Special pastoral concern for parents in irregular marital situations (e.g., invalid marriages, single parents, etc.) is the responsibility of all who work with them in preparing for the Baptism of their children.

Non-traditional families challenge pastors and Baptism Preparation Teams to special pastoral sensitivity as they present their infants for Baptism.

Insofar as possible, living, aborted fetuses should be baptized (cf. Can. 871).

II. ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY

Documentation:

The people of God, that is, the Church made present by the local community, has an important part to play in the Baptism of both children and adults (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, n. 4).

Rationale:

Baptism is not a private matter; faith is not the private possession of the individual family. For this reason the preparation and celebration of the sacrament should involve members of the community exercising their appropriate roles and responsibilities. This ecclesial or community context provides a sense of hospitality, common prayer, shared faith and mission, and identification with the whole church.

The primary roles in baptismal preparation and celebration are those of the parents, the first to form their children in the faith within the larger family unit, and the godparents who support the parents and represent the Church.

Guidelines:

In mixed marriages, the non-Catholic parent is encouraged to participate in the program of preparation for Baptism and to be supportive of the Catholic parent in raising the child as a Catholic Christian.

One godparent, not the parent of the one to be baptized, is required. The godparent must be a fully initiated Catholic adult (at least 16 years of age) who serves as both model and nurturer of the Christian life.

A baptized person from another Christian community may serve as Christian Witness to the Baptism. However, having this Christian Witness does not meet the

requirement for a fully initiated Catholic as Godparent.

Since parents are encouraged to be actively involved in a local parish community, it follows that the Baptism of their child normally should be celebrated in their parish church.

III. THE PREPARATION FOR THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

Documentation:

Before the celebration of the sacrament it is of great importance that parents, moved by their own faith or with the help of friends or other members of the community, should prepare to take part in the rite with understanding. . . . [T]he pastor should make it his duty to visit them or see that they are visited; he should try to gather a group of families together and prepare them for the coming celebration by pastoral counsel and common prayer (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, n. 5.1).

Christian instruction and the preparation for Baptism are a vital concern of God's people, the Church (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, General Introduction, n. 7, p. 9).

Priests must give this apostolate an important place in their ministry (*Instruction on Infant Baptism*, n. 32).

To fulfill the true meaning of the sacrament, children must later be formed in the faith in which they have been baptized. The foundation of this formation will be the sacrament itself, which they have already received. Christian formation, which is their due, seeks to lead them gradually to learn God's plan in Christ, so that they may ultimately accept for themselves the faith in which they have been baptized (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, n. 3).

Rationale:

The initiation of children is the responsibility of the local Church, involving

members of the faithful in the preparation and celebration of the sacrament.

The pastor's/parish priest's involvement in the preparation of families is essential, especially through pastoral counsel and prayer.

In the ministry of Baptism preparation, the priest is assisted by the Baptism Preparation Team which is the model and initial representative of the welcoming community. Team members provide spiritual and practical support to parents, the primary ministers of Christian formation, assist in the program of preparation for parents and godparents, and represent the local church during the liturgical celebration of the sacrament.

Baptism does not conclude Christian life; it is its beginning. Parents, therefore, have the responsibility for providing the example and environment for ongoing Christian formation. It is they who gradually lead the children from the foundation of Baptism to the completion of initiation through Confirmation and at the table of the Eucharist and to ultimately accept for themselves the faith in which they have been baptized.

Guidelines:

Parents and godparents should be provided the experience of community, prayer, and pastoral involvement as well as information and resources so as to enter into the celebration of the sacrament to the fullest extent possible.

To express the ecclesial nature of Baptism, parishes need to form Baptism Preparation Teams. These teams facilitate the parents' and godparents' participation in the communal preparation for and celebration of infant Baptism.

Any Baptism preparation program needs to include:

1. the fundamentals of living the Catholic life;
2. the theology and history of the sacraments of initiation, primarily Baptism;
3. an explanation of the Rite of Baptism with special attention to the signs and symbols of the sacrament;
4. an explanation of the spiritual formational role of the parents and godparents in the upbringing of the child.

Parents need to understand the practical aspects of raising their child in a Catholic environment. This means acceptance of their responsibility to lead the child to the fullness of initiation and participation in the Life of the Church through Confirmation and Eucharist.

Parish Baptismal Preparation Teams are encouraged to provide some type of follow up for parents after the Baptism. Similar to the mystagogical period of the RCIA, this might include a community gathering to reflect on the Rite of Baptism that has been celebrated, or at least some form of personal or written communication from the parish to the family of the newly baptized.

Presentation of the newly baptized and their families to the parish community at a Sunday mass is encouraged, as is inclusion of the names of the infants and their parents during the General Intercessions, and in the parish bulletin.

IV. CELEBRATION OF THE RITE

Documentation:

If possible, Baptism should take place on Sunday, the day on which the Church celebrates the paschal mystery. It should be conferred in a communal celebration for all the recently born children, and in the presence of the faithful, or at least of

relatives, friends, and neighbors, who are all to take an active part in the rite (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, n. 32).

Rationale:

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is normative for the theological understanding of all sacramental initiation, including infant Baptism.

Certain principles of adult initiation are foundational to the celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism for infants:

- a. Baptism celebrates and makes present the Lord's Saving Mystery, initiating one into the paschal life of Jesus Christ. This paschal character is expressed through celebrations of Baptism at Easter or on Sunday, the day which commemorates the Lord's resurrection.
- b. The community's role and responsibility in the initiation of children needs to be evident. Baptism should clearly appear as the sacrament of the Church's faith and incorporation into the people of God, and therefore be celebrated in the parish church with a community of the faithful present.

The name given at Baptism, although not required to be a saint's name, should be one that is appropriate to membership in the Body of Christ and is not offensive to Christians (cf. Can. 855).

- c. Baptismal grace is mediated through sacramental symbols. The sacramental celebration should include the full rich, and

visible use of the symbols of water, anointing, and signation. Symbolic minimalism is to be avoided. The sacrament itself consists of the washing in water preferably by way of immersion, or by pouring, and the invocation of the Blessed Trinity.

Guidelines:

Occasional celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism during Sunday Eucharist in the parish is encouraged.

In keeping with the paschal character of the sacrament, the Baptism of infants is most appropriately celebrated during the Easter Season and on Sundays.

As far as possible, Baptisms during Lent should be limited. During Holy Week they should be avoided.

The communal celebration of Baptism is always preferred over individual or "private" Baptism, so as to express the ecclesial nature of the sacrament. Normally, Baptism should not be celebrated more than once on the same day in the same church (cf. IGIC n. 27).

Baptisms are to be celebrated only in the parish church (or properly established chapel), the building which symbolizes the living church of God's family into which the baptized are born. ■

