

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says in §1213 that, “Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit (*vitae spiritualis ianua*), and the door which gives access to the other sacraments.”

I would like to take the opportunity of this Pastor's Notes to discuss the sacrament of Baptism here at Sts. Peter and Paul. You may have noticed in our recent renovation of the sanctuary that we moved the Baptismal font to its current location outside the sanctuary, which is delineated by the altar rail. Before, it had been up on the level of the altar on the St. Joseph side. This was good for visibility; however, it was a small space that did not accommodate many people, and more importantly, it was theologically incorrect. Traditionally, the Baptismal font was located even outside the church, to underscore the concept of Baptism as a gateway into the other Mysteries. This is notable in many ancient churches in Rome and Italy, for instance, where you find a standalone baptistry outside the Cathedral. (St. John Lateran in Rome and the Cathedral in Florence are just two prime examples.) Whereas that was not always feasible, in many churches you will find the baptistry near the entrance of the church, either in the vestibule or just inside the main doors: St. Peter's Basilica in Rome is that way. Entering the main doors, you immediately turn left, and you have the chapel of the baptistry. For a more local example, Holy Ghost in Knoxville has the Baptismal font in the vestibule in this way. Even many modern churches have the baptistry relocated appropriately near the entrance of the church. While we did not bring the Baptismal font to the front of the church, we still made an effort to at least put it outside the sanctuary. We used the open space underneath the first Station of the Cross, which allows for many people to stand around it, and accomplishes the theological point that Baptism is the gateway into the sacramental life of the Church.

We as Catholics believe Baptism to be necessary for salvation. This has been the constant belief and teaching of the Catholic Church from Jesus and the Apostles to our own day. During the Easter Vigil, many adults are baptized and washed in the “bath of regeneration.” However, the most common way that Catholics are baptized is as an infant. In our area of the country, occupied by a majority of Protestant Christians, this is a source of contention. Many of our more evangelical brothers and sisters will emphasize the verbal profession of faith and discount the sacramental action that is the more orthodox, traditional, and Catholic understanding of Baptism. To this the Catechism speaks in §1250:

“Born with a fallen human nature and tainted by original sin, children also have need of the new birth in Baptism to be freed from the power of darkness and brought into the realm of the freedom of the children of God, to which all men are called. The sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant Baptism. The Church and the parents would deny a child the priceless grace of becoming a child of God were they not to confer Baptism shortly after birth.” (CCC, §1250)

From this paragraph, we understand the necessity of Baptism and the efficacy of Baptism to mean that parents have a grave duty to have their children baptized soon after birth. In the Code of Canon Law, Canon 867, §1 says:

“Parents are obliged to take care that their infants are baptized in the first few weeks; as soon as possible after the birth, or even before it, they are to go to the pastor to request the sacrament for their child and to be prepared properly for it.”

According to Canon 530, the administration of Baptism is especially entrusted to the pastor of the parish. The parochial vicar shares in this responsibility by office also. To facilitate this sacrament here at the Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul, we have normally offered the sacrament of Baptism individually upon request. That was when we used to have more funerals than baptisms. But we have a much different dynamic now at our parish. We have lots of babies being born, and lots of requests for Baptisms, necessitating us to find a more stable time on a regular basis to offer this sacrament communally. It should be noted that this is the practice that is already in place at our Spanish Mass, where on the third Sunday of every month, we have communal baptisms. It is not unheard of to baptize ten babies at a time! **Starting in August, we will be offering all our Baptisms at a regular time slot, which will normally be on the second Saturday of the month at 10:30 am.**

Quoting from the Catechism, §1267:

“Baptism makes us members of the Body of Christ: ‘Therefore . . . we are members one of another.’ Baptism incorporates us into the Church. From the baptismal fonts is born the one People of God of the New Covenant, which transcends all the natural or human limits of nations, cultures, races, and sexes: ‘For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.’”

This change away from individual Baptisms to communal Baptisms may at first seem like an imposition, but it is a testament to the growth in our parish and the youthfulness of our families. I remind everyone that Baptism incorporates us into the Body of Christ, which is the Church, and that it is not a private matter. There should be no sacrament, except Reconciliation, that should be understood to be a “private” celebration. **Remember, even when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, He was not baptized alone!**

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