

**PASTORAL GUIDELINES BY THE BISHOPS OF REGION XII
ON PREPARATION OF PARENTS AND PARISH COMMUNITIES
FOR THE BAPTISM OF INFANTS AND CHILDREN
AS AMENDED BY THE DIOCESE OF SPOKANE**

INTRODUCTION

1. An instruction reaffirming the place of infant baptism in the life of the Church was made public November 21, 1980 by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The document was dated at the Vatican on October 20. Despite the fact that some people in the Church think it would be well to delay baptism until the age when a child is old enough to make a decision to receive the sacrament, the ancient practice of baptizing infants is still valid, the Congregation explains. The Congregation takes up various objections to infant baptism, including that which holds the practice ultimately compromises the freedom of the person baptized as a child. "Even on the natural level," says the Congregation, "parents make choices for their child that are essential for its life and for its orientation toward true values. A so-called neutral attitude on the part of the family with regard to the child's religious life would in fact be a negative choice that would deprive the child of an essential good." The Congregation acknowledges the various difficulties parents face today, including the frustration many experience in seeing their children abandoning the faith. Still, these parents should not feel they erred in following the practice of infant baptism for their children, according to the Doctrinal Congregation. The document reviews the history of the practice of infant baptism and some of the theology of baptism; it discusses reasons for deferring or delaying baptism together with the assurances to be given by parents or guardians; and it analyzes the role of parents, godparents and the community of faith in the baptism of infants. The baptism of infants, it says, is a "serious duty."

The following are excerpts from the Instruction:

2. Although the Church is truly aware of the efficacy of her faith operating in the baptism of children, and aware of the validity of the sacrament that she confers on them, she recognizes limits to her practice, since apart from cases of danger of death, she does not admit a child to baptism without its parent's consent and a serious assurance that after baptism it will be given a Catholic upbringing. This is because she is concerned both for the natural rights of the parents and for the requirements of the development of faith in the child. (#15)
3. 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. As a rule, these assurances are to be given by the parents or close relatives, although various substitutions are possible within the Christian community. But if these assurances are not really serious, there can be grounds for delaying the sacrament; and if they are certainly non-existent, the sacrament should be refused. (#28)
4. In the first place, much importance is given to the presence and active participation of the parents in the celebration. The parents now have priority over the godparents, although the presence of the latter continues to be required, since their assistance in the child's education is valuable and can sometimes be essential. (#29)
5. Second, preparation for the baptism has an important place. The parents must give thought to the baptism; they should inform their pastors of the coming birth and prepare themselves spiritually. The pastors, for their part, will visit the families or gather them together and give them catechesis and appropriate advice. They will also urge the families to pray for the children that they are expecting. (#29)
6. As is clearly indicated in the Ritual, the parish community especially the group of Christians that constitute the family's human environment should play a part in the pastoral practice regarding baptism. Christian instruction and the preparation for baptism are a vital concern of God's people, the Church, which hands on and nourishes the faith it has received from the apostles. (#33)

7. This active participation by the Christian people, which has already come into use in the case of adults, is also required for the baptism of infants, in which "the people of God, that is the Church made present in the local community, has an important part to play." In addition, the community itself will as a rule draw great profit, both spiritual and apostolic, from the baptism ceremony. (#33)

I. VALUES AND GOALS OF A PRE-BAPTISMAL PROGRAM

8. The possibilities for growth in Christ for the Christian are endless. We are constantly being initiated into life, into this world, and into the heart of God. This process of initiation and conversion - Christian baptism lived to its fullest - is something always and vitally in process. We need to catch hold of these moments when this on-going baptism touches our lives in an intimate and personal way.
9. There is a new spirit breathing in the Church's sacramental life. There is a deeper realization that we must prepare ourselves and others for a fruitful experience and grace that comes when one celebrates a sacrament. A good preparation takes time, effort and the Holy Spirit.
10. Infant baptism programs formulated in recent years in this country have usually stressed the need for a three-fold preparation of parents and when possible, sponsors. These include:
 - A. Concern with the actual faith-life of the parents, a growing faith-life which is necessary to support and foster a growing faith-life in the child.
 - B. Planned situations for these parents to meet other people in the parish to help foster feelings of acceptance and thus aid their incorporation into the parish community.
 - C. Informative sessions which explain the meaning of infant baptism.
11. The Introduction to the new Rite of Baptism for Children gives us serious pastoral directives for the preparation of parents and parish communities. The accompanying guidelines are meant to help those ministering and celebrating the sacrament to be more aware of their own faith as well as the needs of parents and sponsors. They will help foster a unity in our region, so that families celebrating the baptism of their infants will benefit from these opportunities to prepare and to grow in faith.

A. IMPORTANT VALUES OF AN ADEQUATE PREPARATION PROGRAM

A good beginning in the Church's sacramental life promotes a good follow through in the faith life. If we offer baptism without the adequate preparation of the parents, we foster a viewpoint that is too widely shared by some Catholics: that it is relatively easy to be a Christian and a Catholic. From the very first moment we sacramentalize God's love for us, we should know that belonging to Christ in His Church is a decision of the most serious importance. This decision should not be lightly considered by any person. It involves us in a death to sin and a radical conversion to the folly of being a Christian. Baptism calls us to live a life intimately united to the cross. At the same time, it promises us the great joy and fulfillment of Christ's Easter victory. Pre-baptism programs correspond fully with all the characteristics which Jesus stressed about a loving relationship with the Father: freedom, decision, and personal commitment. Preparation for baptism teaches that the preparation for any sacrament is the normative procedure in the Church.

Preparation of parents helps them to understand their vital contribution to the development of their children's growth in faith. An intrinsic part of preparation sessions is a careful explanation of how parents subtly but powerfully shape - for good or for bad - their children's fundamental attitudes toward God, Christ, Church membership, personal prayer, and participation in the sacramental life of the Church before the children are ever able to learn about their faith in a formal way. Without such explanation, parents could tend to identify the beginning moments of religious education and formation with the school years. This ignores the tremendous formation which should come much earlier.

Initiation of infants into a vital faith community becomes increasingly more important as the culture becomes less Christian. Baptism is a radical decision to respond to the Church's corporate experience of Jesus' paschal mystery. This is as true for infant baptism as it is for adult baptism. For infants, the decision springs from the parents' free choice, a choice they make on behalf of their infant. It must

ultimately be ratified or rejected later on in life by the infant. The purpose of preparing parents and sponsors is to assure the Church that they themselves have understood and accepted Catholic Christian Christianity in terms of a radical free commitment to Christ in His Church. If this is not the ideal, infants would be "initiated" into something other than a full faith community which defeats the full purpose of the sacrament.

Parents, family, and sponsors are brought up-to-date on the Church's best insights concerning infant baptism. Discussion with the parents and sponsors often reveal that many of them approach baptism for inadequate reasons: family custom, pressure from relatives, or fear of limbo. Some parents present their infants for baptism as if the ceremony could magically provide lifetime graces for the infant which only can be experienced through a genuine living of the faith in the home. They fail to appreciate how intrinsically their own adult dispositions and faith life affect the fruitfulness of the rite.

B. PURPOSE OF PASTORAL DIRECTIVES FOR REGION XII

These Regional Guidelines have the following purpose:

To emphasize the responsibility of parish priests, deacons, and catechists to assist parents to share their faith as they prepare to celebrate the baptism of their infant.

To underscore the value of a parish becoming a welcoming community of faith for all new members, at least through parental preparation in solidarity with other parish members.

II. PASTORAL GUIDELINES FOR FAITH FORMATION AND INFORMATION

Priests and pastoral teams preparing for the baptism of infants should be completely familiar with the spirit and directives found in the General Introduction that accompanies the Rite of Baptism for Children and the Introduction to the Rite of Christian Initiation. They should update their understanding of the scriptural, historical, theological, liturgical and pastoral dimensions of infant baptism.

It is the serious duty - as well as great pastoral opportunity - of priests, deacons and pastoral teams to prepare parents and sponsors with appropriate pastoral instruction and guidance before the baptism of infants.

This "instruction" should include a biblical and pastoral understanding of the sacrament, the parental responsibilities in raising the child in the faith, the nature of the Christian community, the meaning of faith, etc.

By "guidance" we mean helping parents clarify their own faith and commitment to live as Christians and to form the kind of Christian community in which their child can develop as a Christian.

An extended preparation of several sessions with parents and sponsors is encouraged.

The whole Christian community should receive regular instruction on the meaning of baptism and the responsibility they have toward the newly baptized infant.

B. ON THE PART OF THE PARENTS, SPONSORS

More is required of parents than merely presenting their infant for baptism. The more essential condition is a "true and living faith by which they adhere to Christ and confirm their commitment to the new covenant." (Rite of Baptism for Children, #3)

Parents should be prepared to take part in the rite with understanding.

C. IF DELAY OF BAPTISM IS DEEMED NECESSARY

In the absence of the reasonable hope that the child will be raised in the Catholic faith, the parents and priest not only may but should postpone the baptism until such time as there is some evidence of living faith.

If there is disagreement about the postponement of baptism, recourse may be made to the local bishop.

Adopted by the Bishops of Region XII, March, 1982