



THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

Part 1—What Does It Mean to Be Baptized?

Who signed me up for that?

Tommy was in the first grade. At lunch time on the first day of school, he began to pack up his things to go home. His teacher stopped him and said, "It's time for lunch, Tommy. Why aren't you with the other children?" Tommy said, "I always go home at lunch. I'll be back tomorrow." The teacher realized what was going on and said, "That was last year, Tommy, when you were in kindergarten. This year you stay all day. You get to go to lunch and then you come back to this room to study and do more work. You're only half way through the day; . . . there's a lot more." Tommy thought about that for a moment, then shook his head in frustration and asked, "Who signed me up for that?"

Most Catholics know who signed them up for church membership. There was a time when Catholics brought their newborn children to be baptized without much question. If a child was born into a Catholic family, it was almost automatic that the child would be baptized soon after birth. Few parents questioned the rationale for this practice, and few pastors questioned the parents or their reasons for seeking the baptism of their children.

For most Catholics, the reason for baptizing children was clear. Baptism was the guarantee of salvation. Without baptism, a person could not enter heaven. Thus a child who died in infancy would be unable to enter the heavenly kingdom. This is why children were generally baptized within days of their birth, lest anything happen to them before the water was poured over their foreheads. Most Catholics assumed that unbaptized infants were consigned to limbo, a place of natural happiness but clearly second-best to heaven.

Few pastors in those days required much of the parents of infants. There were no preparation sessions, and pastors could reasonably assume that those who presented their children for baptism would raise them in the faith. In a relatively stable and at least nominally Christian society, such assumptions made sense.

Baptism today

Today, however, things are much different. Many people have drifted away from the church or at least from any active involvement with the Catholic community, yet when their child is born, many of them will seek baptism. Whether this is from concern for the child's eternal destiny or is prompted by grandparents' wishes or is simply seen as the proper thing to do, there is reason to question whether the child will be raised in the faith. Pastors have the responsibility of determining the parents' readiness to celebrate this sacrament, and most parishes offer some form of preparation sessions for the parents to invite them to a deeper commitment.

These changes challenge us to rethink our understanding of this fundamental sacrament. Why should a person be baptized? What does it mean to be baptized? What is the purpose of this sacrament? What does it celebrate? What is required to celebrate it honestly and well?

Another thing that might raise some of these same questions is the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) about what is required for salvation. In their Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the council fathers see the possibility of salvation extending far beyond Catholics and beyond other Christians. They teach that Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, and even agnostics (who aren't sure whether there

is a God) and atheists can get to heaven. “Nor will divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life” (no. 16).

So the Catholic Church teaches that baptism with water is not absolutely necessary to get to heaven. God wills that all people be saved, and all those who respond positively to the gifts they have been given by God will enter heaven.

If baptism, then, is not my "ticket to heaven," what does it mean? Why does God call some people to baptism, while others are not given that gift of faith?

What is the Church for?

The real question here is the purpose of the church. Baptism is the sacrament by which we are initiated into the Christian life and the church community. If we think of the church as simply a means to get to heaven, then baptism appears to be our ticket to get aboard. But if we see the church as established by Christ to carry on his work of redemption, then those who are baptized are those who are called to carry on that work. In the gospels, Jesus describes the church as a light for the world, the leaven in the dough, and the salt of the earth. History suggests that the church will never include all the people on earth, but the church is to be a light to guide all people. The church is to be the yeast that raises up the whole of humanity and the salt that makes life better. In other words, the church has a mission, and those who are called to baptism are called to share in that mission.

Those who are called by God to baptism and given the gift of faith must respond to that call in order to be saved. For those called to it, baptism is necessary for salvation; for such a person to reject baptism is to reject God's will. Those who have not been given faith, however, are not held accountable for what they have not received. As Jesus says in Luke's Gospel: “Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more” (Luke 12:48). Each person is judged on how he or she responds to what God has given.

The church does not exist for its own sake; it exists for the sake of the mission. So those who are called to baptism are not called simply for their own salvation but to carry on Christ's work today. An adult who presents himself or herself for baptism must be willing to take on a share of the responsibility for carrying on the mission of the church. Parents who present their children for baptism must recognize that they are asking for their children to be accepted among those who will carry on Christ's work throughout their lifetimes. Baptism leads us to the table of the Eucharist, and those who gather around that table are disciples who carry on the work of Christ.

When the church asks catechumens to prepare for months or years before baptism and asks parents of infants to take part in baptismal preparation programs before celebrating the baptism of their children, such requirements reflect a simple concern that all who celebrate this sacrament be well prepared to take on the responsibilities it entails. Those who recognize the meaning of this sacrament will not see these requirements as burdens but as welcome assistance to celebrate the sacrament meaningfully and to live out its meaning for the rest of their lives.

Questions for reflection

- What does your baptism mean to you? How is your life affected by the fact that you were baptized?
- In what ways do you see yourself carrying on the mission of Christ in the world today?





THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

Part 2—The RCIA: The Key to Understanding Baptism

A speaker once asked a parish group if anybody knew what “the RCIA” was. One man immediately responded, “The Roman Central Intelligence Agency?” It was a good try, but the acronym stands for the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

Many people, when they hear the word baptism, think first of infants. That is a natural reaction, since most Catholics were baptized as infants and the majority of baptisms celebrated in the church today are those of infants or very young children.

To understand the full meaning of baptism, however, it is best to start with the baptism of adults. Adults or children of catechetical age are prepared for baptism through the process called the catechumenate or the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). This rite, issued from Rome in 1972, is really a recovery of the church’s ancient pattern of initiation. While the church has apparently always baptized infants, too, the majority of those baptized in the early church were adults. The catechumenate was developed as a rich and intense process of preparation for initiation into the church community.

Today’s catechumenate follows ancient patterns, though adapted somewhat to contemporary needs and situations. The process has four periods that are linked by various liturgical celebrations that express what is happening in the process as the catechumens progress on their journey toward baptism. (Those baptized in another Christian denomination may take part in some of the catechumenal activities and rituals, but they are not catechumens. They are called candidates for full initiation into the communion of the Catholic Church, and they may be prepared and welcomed separately from the catechumens.)

The stages of the RCIA

1. Evangelization & Precatechumenate

Inquirers share their life stories with the church, a time for their intentions of the inquirers become clear and to mature; a time for the church to share the good news of the gospel with them, introducing them to Christ and to the faith community that carries on his work. Lasts as long as necessary for each person: for some, a few weeks; for others, it may be months or even years. When an inquirer is ready to make the decision to join the church, he or she moves into the period of the catechumenate.

2. The Period of the Catechumenate Proper

The Rite of Acceptance into the order of catechumens celebrated in the midst of the community, marks the beginning of a period of formation and catechesis during which catechumens share in the life of the local faith community for at least a year, learning and praying and serving with those already baptized until they are ready to accept full responsibility for the ongoing work of the church. Sharing in the worship of the community, they are dismissed from the liturgy after the homily, to spend the rest of the time of worship continuing to break open the word of God with their. Further catechesis after Mass or later in the week builds on the word shared each Sunday and includes related

church teachings and practices. Catechumens are a recognized group within the church, having certain rights, including the right to Christian marriage and Christian burial.

3. The period of purification and enlightenment.

When catechumens are ready sent to take on the responsibilities of full membership among the baptized (and their sponsors and catechists and the pastor must agree that they are ready) they are sent participate in the Rite of Election, celebrated by the Bishop at the beginning of Lent. Election does not refer to an election by ballot but to the choice of these catechumens by the church and thus by God. This period of immediate and intensive preparation for the celebration of the sacraments of initiation—baptism, confirmation and eucharist—coincides with the weeks of Lent and is a time when they seek a deeper level of conversion to Christ. The focus is now on prayer and spiritual growth more than on instruction and the community prays over them with special rites called scrutinies on the Third, Fourth and Fifth Sundays of Lent, to encourage them to a deeper conversion by asking God to scrutinize their lives, to strengthen what is upright and holy in their lives and to overcome what is weak and sinful.

The period of purification leads to the celebration of the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil, the premier celebration of the liturgical year, a liturgy of rich symbolism that includes the celebration of baptism, confirmation and First Eucharist, the three sacraments of initiation.

4. Period of Mystagogy

A time for unpacking the experience of receiving the sacraments. The primary mystagogy lasts through the fifty days of Easter, and the bishops require an extended mystagogy for a full year after their baptism. Catechesis during this final period occurs at Sunday Mass, so the whole community shares in it. This is a time for all the baptized to reflect on what it means to die and rise with Christ, what it means to be sealed with the Holy Spirit, and what it means to share in the body and blood of the Lord.

RCIA: model of baptism

The RCIA highlights several important dimensions of baptism. It reminds us that baptism celebrates conversion. It is about dying with Christ and rising with him to new life. Conversion is a process that takes time and is experienced in the midst of the Christian community. With adults and children of catechetical age, the church looks for signs of conversion in order to discern when a candidate is ready for the next stage and when he or she is ready for baptism. When we celebrate the baptism of an infant, that conversion process must follow the celebration but it is no less essential.

The RCIA also reminds us that baptism is part of the larger process of initiation, one of the three initiation sacraments, which are intimately connected to one another. It is about initiation into a community of faith, a community that shares life in Christ and carries on Christ's mission. It is initiation into a life lived under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a life of ongoing conversion that is not completed until our death and final resurrection.

Questions for reflection:

- How has the catechumenate touched your life? Do you know anyone who has joined the church as an adult? What have catechumens taught you about faith and baptism?
- In what ways have you sensed God calling you along the journey of conversion in the past? How is God calling you now?





THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

Part 3—Understanding Infant Baptism

As we're shaped so we grow

A farmer who was walking through his field of pumpkins one day found a discarded gallon jug in the field. On a whim, he pushed a very small pumpkin through the neck of the jug and left it there to grow. When harvest time came, he found that he had a pumpkin shaped just like a gallon jug.

Our environment shapes how we grow, which is why the church has long baptized infants. Since it was issued in 1972, some writers have called the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults the “norm” for baptism. That does not mean that it is the normal way we baptize, because we still baptize many more infants than adults in the Catholic Church. What it does mean is that the adult process of initiation provides the best basis for understanding the meaning and purpose of baptism, both for adults and for infants.

We do not have a lot of historical data on the origins of infant baptism, but it appears that it began very early. Some scripture scholars suggest that New Testament references to the conversion of whole households would have included children. Inscriptions on early Christian tombs also suggest that some people were initiated into the Christian life at a very early age. Whenever it began, the baptism of infants seems to have been readily accepted, for we find almost no opposition to the practice in ancient writings.

A pastor asked the children in a religion class, “Why do you love God?” The answer he liked best was, “I guess it just runs in the family.” The practice of infant baptism no doubt developed from the same instinct that motivates parents today—the desire to share what matters to them with their children.

Delay baptism?

In recent years, some Catholics have been dismayed to learn that pastors sometimes must delay the baptism of a child if the parents are not willing or able to provide reasonable assurance that the child will be raised in the faith. This is not really a new policy, but in earlier generations it was easier to assume that parents who presented their child were active Catholics who would share their faith with their children. Today there are many parents who have drifted away from the practice of their own faith, yet they wish, for various reasons, to have their children baptized. In such cases, the pastor is required to delay the baptism until the parents are ready to accept the responsibility that baptism of their child entails.

Some people see this as a punishment of the child for the faults of their parents, but that misunderstands the meaning of baptism. If we remember that God expects a response from each of us according to what we have received, then God will not expect more from a child than that child has been given. The Catholic Church believes that God can save people in other ways than through the waters of the font, so the child is not excluded from God's care. But to celebrate the sacrament without reasonable hope that the child will be raised in the Christian community makes it an empty ritual that is unlikely to help either the child or the parents. Moreover, it imposes expectations and future requirements on the child (e.g., he or she must be married in the Catholic Church for the marriage to be valid) without giving the child the education and formation necessary to meet those expectations. No pastor wants to refuse a request for baptism, but what he must do sometimes is delay the baptism to allow time for the parents to probe their own commitment and grow into a deeper faith.

The two faces of baptism

Our rites for adult and infant baptism remind us of two basic truths about this sacrament. The infant rite reminds us that God always takes the first step in our salvation. Before we even know how to respond, God calls us and offers us the grace of salvation. This is true for adults as well as for infants, but when an infant is baptized, the primacy of God's action is more evident. The adult rite, on the other hand, reminds us of the importance of our response to God's offer of grace. God calls us to conversion and to mission, which is more evident in the adult process of initiation through the catechumenate.

When an infant is baptized, the church relies on the faith of the parents, godparents, other relatives, friends and the whole local church community to provide the context of faithful living that will nurture a gradual conversion to Christ as the child grows and learns.

Baptized into a community

Recognizing the communal nature of our growth in faith can also help us understand the doctrine of original sin. Some theologians suggest that original sin is like a web of sin into which we are born. A child allowed to grow up without the influence of Christ is almost inevitably shaped by the influence of sin in our world. Baptizing a child inserts that child into the web of the Christian community, which teaches and tries to live by a different set of values, those of the gospel.

This communal dimension of our faith life is also the reason that baptism is best celebrated in the midst of the whole parish community. While this could happen at a celebration of baptism on Sunday afternoon outside of Mass, in practice it is only likely if baptism is celebrated within one of the parish Sunday Masses.

Whether celebrated within Mass or in a separate celebration, the basic pattern of celebration is the same. The rite begins with the welcoming of the family and the signing of the child with the sign of the cross. Then the word of God is proclaimed, with either the readings from the Sunday Mass or special baptismal readings. Intercessions for the child and the family may be included with other intercessions for various needs. The central baptismal rituals follow the intercessions: the water is blessed, the parents and the community profess their faith, and then the child is baptized, anointed with chrism, clothed in a white garment (this is when the baptismal dress or robe should be put on) and given a baptismal candle. The concluding rites include the Lord's Prayer and special blessings for the father and mother of the child.

Because these elements of the celebration are integrated into the Mass and replace some of the usual elements of the Mass, including baptism need not extend the time of the Mass significantly. Parishes that recognize the importance of new members for the ongoing life of the church will welcome the opportunity to celebrate baptism with new parents. Parents who recognize the value of the support and prayers of the parish community will be happy to offer the community the chance to share their joy, and in the process, to renew their own baptismal commitment along with the parents and family members who gather for the celebration.

Questions for reflection:

- How would you explain to a non-Catholic friend why we baptize infants? Can you explain why a priest must sometimes delay the baptism of an infant?
- How do you respond when baptisms are celebrated at Sunday Mass? Do you welcome this opportunity to embrace these new members of the parish?





THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

Part 4—Is There Life After Baptism?

Baptism is a beginning

An old joke tells of three pastors who had problems with bats in their bell towers. The first pastor said he had tried all sorts of remedies, putting up screening, playing taped noise, etc., but to no avail. The second pastor said he had hired professional exterminators, but that didn't work either. The third pastor said he used to have bats but got rid of them all. "How did you do it?" the others asked. "It was simple," he replied. "I baptized them all and they haven't been to church since!"

Many catechumenate teams have voiced similar comments about some newly baptized adults who seem to disappear after receiving the Easter sacraments, and many pastors note with discouragement how many families of newly baptized infants don't come to church after the ceremony.

Many years ago I saw someone wearing a button that asked, "Is there life after baptism?" It is an important question, a take-off on the question of life after death. In baptism we die with Christ to rise with him to a new life. Baptism is a beginning of a new way of living. What happens after the celebration is even more important than what precedes it.

Some catechumens seem to see baptism as the end of their journey. They may prepare for months or even years before they approach the font. Then the Easter Vigil can seem like a graduation, the end of the process. Some parents may take a similar approach, coming to whatever preparation sessions are required and then assuming that the process is finished once the baby leaves the font.

But Baptism is not an ending; it is a beginning, the first sacrament, the first part of initiation into the Christian community and its life of faith. One who is baptized is claimed by Christ and is given responsibility for carrying on Christ's mission in the world today. If there is no life in Christ after baptism, then baptism has become an empty gesture.

Helping the baptized to grow

One way that the Christian community has sought to assist the newly baptized is through the assignment of a sponsor for each candidate for baptism. In the catechumenate, that sponsor walks with the catechumen through their conversion journey. The sponsor may also serve as godparent; if a different person is chosen as godparent, that person takes over from the Rite of Election onward. The relationship between the candidate and the godparent lasts a lifetime.

The recovery of the role of the sponsor/godparent in adult initiation reminds us that the godparents of an infant who is baptized are also intended to take an active role in the faith journey of that infant. Too often in the recent past, godparents have been chosen simply because of family relationships (e.g., which aunt or uncle hasn't been a godparent yet?). Parents need to ask deeper questions when choosing godparents: Who can serve as a model of the Christian life for this child as he or she grows up? Who is likely to remain involved in the child's life in the years ahead? How committed to the church is a prospective godparent?

Church law (canons 872-874) requires that a godparent be at least sixteen (exceptions can be made), be a Catholic who has been confirmed and received the Eucharist and who leads "a life in harmony with the faith and the role to be undertaken." A baptized Christian in another denomination may be a Christian witness to the baptism, but is not a godparent in the strict sense. In this case, the child must have a Catholic sponsor as

well. Though it is common to have two godparents (only one of each sex may be chosen), the law only requires one godparent.

Another part of church law reminds us that parents and godparents take on serious responsibility for the faith development of the child. “Parents above others are obliged to form their children in the faith and practice of the Christian life by word and example; godparents and those who take the place of parents are bound by an equivalent obligation” (canon 774).

Obviously, the role of the parents is more central than that of godparents, and godparents do not automatically assume the full responsibility for the children if something happens to the parents. That is a separate decision parents should make. But godparents are expected to be actively involved in the life of their godchildren, offering support and good examples of faithful living for the children to imitate.

The responsibilities taken on by parents and godparents are not theirs alone, however. The whole Christian community has a responsibility to support and nurture those who join the church. The same part of church law that speaks of the obligations of parents and godparents begins by noting that all the members of the church should be concerned about catechesis and formation of the baptized.

The larger community seeks to help parents first by providing formation before the celebration of the sacrament. The Rite of Baptism for Children insists that parents should be provided with suitable materials, instruction, and visits to prepare them for the baptism. Some parishes provide this through formal sessions with parents, while others may do it through home visits and printed materials. Godparents are usually welcome to take part in these preparation sessions as well.

Part of the role of the sponsor in the catechumenate is to serve as a bridge to the larger community. The sponsor helps the catechumen to get to know other members of the parish and to take part in the various activities of the parish. But the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is clear that the responsibility for initiating new members belongs to all the baptized. The sponsor and godparent for an adult and the parents and godparents of a child have a primary role, but all the members of the church have a vested interest in whether the church adds members to its ranks and whether those new members are well formed to carry on the work of the church.

That’s why it is best to celebrate baptism in the midst of the whole parish community, or at least that portion of the community that gathers for a particular Sunday Mass. Baptism is a celebration that belongs to the whole church; it is not a private family affair. The birth of the child into the family is celebrated by relatives and friends; the birth of the child into the family of the church should be celebrated by the whole church.

After the celebration, the nurturing and formation of the newly baptized should also be the concern of all the members of the church community. We are all on the same journey of ongoing conversion, step by step growing in faith together and giving our lives more and more completely to Christ.

The catechesis and formation of children is but one part of the catechesis and formation that should take place in a parish. It is just as important to educate and inspire adults to live their faith more fully. Growth in faith is a lifelong task for everyone. Baptism is but the beginning of a wondrous journey that will lead us eventually to the everlasting life of heaven.

Questions for reflection:

- Can you think of three ways that you live out the meaning of your baptism?
- If you are a godparent, are you actively involved with your godchild? How else have you helped to nurture others in their faith?

