

UNDERSTANDING BAPTISM

The Sacrament of Baptism has its root in ancient Jewish purity rite. This rite symbolizes purification: a movement from “unclean” to “clean” and from “profane” to “sacred”. By the time of Jesus, a monastic sect known as the Essenes practiced a daily “baptism” in their waiting for the coming of the Messiah. Perhaps, this was the source of the baptism of John the Baptist since his baptism “demanded” conversion.

In the early Church, the ritual of Baptism involved a person literally walked down into a pool of water, passed through it, and walked up the other side. This ritual definitely served as a reminder for God’s people about the liberation of the exodus when the Israelites passed through the Red Sea. On the shore of Egypt, they were slaves, but after passing through the purification of water they emerged as the Chosen people of God – freed from slavery.

Because of the belief that baptism will effectively change one into a new person – a new creation - and following the development of the Original Sin, new convoluted ideas about infant baptism emerged, that is, babies must be baptized quickly to avoid “eternal damnation.” Also, the concept of Limbo was invented to explain how God would deal with children who died at young age without baptism. *Limbo has never been the official teaching of Catholic Church!*

Original Sin: For many people, Original Sin is a black mark on the soul of each person that needs baptism to remove it. However, this is not how we understand Original Sin. We learn from Scripture, in the story of Adam and Eve, that something did happen between God and humanity from the beginning. We do not know exactly what had happened, but traditionally we are told that they used their freewill to disobey God. Because of this, the relationship between God and humanity was broken, and the consequence of this brokenness is the world of imperfection which we are living in right now: war, famine, crime, hatred, and injustice of every kind. All of which root in sin, in the human freedom of choice. Therefore, being born into this imperfect world – a community of sin or the world of sin – is what we call the original sin.

Original Sin is a condition. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, original sin is “contracted” not “committed”. It is a state not an act (CCC 404).

Community: Once people believe baptism is only about removing the Original Sin, the consequence of this belief is that we do not need community. Baptism is just a personal affair between God the baptized! However, Second Vatican Council rediscovered what we have lost sight of: the body of Christ, the priesthood of all believers, and the living community. Baptism is the primary sacrament which initiates a person into the Christian community – the family of the Church. *This initiation is a process.* Joining anything takes time. One cannot become a “new person” immediately.

Joining this family creates *unity*: unity with the family of God – the Trinity and the family of humanity. Belonging to this family gives us an *identity* because of our Christian vision for the world. Sharing this vision leads to common *purpose*.

Godparents: Contrary to common belief that godparents are people who will become the child’s foster parents in case the real parents die. Once again, this is never the official teaching of the Catholic Church. The responsibilities of godparents are: (1) teaching the faith. Godparents help the child learn the Church’s prayers, rituals, creeds, and dogmas. This teaching does not only give the information but also an explanation of why and how these rituals, creeds, and dogmas were formulated. (2) Witnessing to the Good News in your own life. Children do not have lived experience, so you will be there to help him/her interpret life’s experiences as they happen. They don’t have the sense of good or bad, so you will be there to help him/her discern those differences. They don’t have a “reason” to be Catholic, so you will be there to witness by your very life.

This does not call for perfection, but it calls for faith, for faithfulness, for vision, and for honesty in sharing our joys and struggles with them.

These are some suggestions for parents and godparents:

- Create an environment for the child to grow in faith
 - Pray together as family at home.
 - Attend Sunday Mass
 - Receive other sacraments regularly
 - Teaching your children by learning and growing in faith

Baptism

This is the meaning of baptism. Baptism is the new “rebirth,” new orientation, and new relationship with God because by baptism we choose to pass through this power of darkness to light and from slavery to freedom, to live the way that Jesus has shown us. That is why at baptism each person receives a candle as the symbol of being “the children of light.”

To put it simply, baptism is to “put on Christ” as St. Paul tells us. “To put on Christ” is to put on the mind, the heart, and the deeds of Jesus. Baptism, thus, initiates a person into a new way of life.

This new way of life is IN CHRIST, and to be IN CHRIST is to be In Church since the Church is the Body of Christ. To be In Christ is to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and to share in three (3) offices of Christ: Priest, Prophet, and King, and to be In Church is to enter a community of worship and to carry out the mission of the Church as a disciple of Jesus.

Reflection Questions for Parents and Godparents

Belonging:

- 1) In what way do I express my belonging to the Christian family?
- 2) Do I belong to the Christian community of my parents’ choice or because of a personal choice?
- 3) How is my faith rooted in personal experiences, family experiences, and Church experiences?
- 4) What does Church mean to me?

Relationship with God

- a) How does my faith in God affect my daily life?
- b) How does my faith affect my relationship with my children, my neighbor, and people around the world?
- c) How would I like my children to relate to God?
- d) What do I believe about God?

Prayer Life

- I. In what way do I pray: individually? With my family? With community?
- II. What do I expect from prayer?
- III. What is my hope for my children’s prayer life?

Symbols

What do the symbols of baptism mean (e.g. water, garment, oil, candle)?