



AT HOME WITH THE
Sacraments
by PEG BOWMAN

Baptism

Entry into God's Family

Sample—do not duplicate

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Introduction

Why are you bringing your child to the church to be baptized?

I always ask that question at classes for new parents, and I get a variety of answers!

“My mother wants us to get the baby baptized.”

“Our family is Catholic; it’s what Catholics do.”

“We have a special baptism dress and if we don’t have her baptized now, the dress will be too small.”

“I want to celebrate our family’s faith!”

“I want to get original sin washed from his soul so he won’t go to limbo.”

What about you? Why are you bringing your child to be baptized?

When we bring a beloved child to the church to be baptized, we’re invited on a new journey, a journey of faith. We ask ourselves, how do my beliefs affect these actions I’m taking, these choices I’m making? We ask, where is God in this event? This book has been written to help you answer those questions, as well as make connections between baptism, faith, and your everyday life. It is written for you, as parents, to help you understand what baptism is, what it does, and how the church celebrates the sacrament.

Beyond original sin

George was very angry when I met him after Mass one day. “Father is really out of line!” he exploded. “He’s going to have a lot to answer for—having a child’s immortal soul on his conscience!”

George's daughter had given birth to her first baby, and George had come to speak to our pastor about having the baby baptized. Father had hesitated to make immediate arrangements for the baptism.

"Father wants to know what my daughter plans to do about raising the baby in the faith," George said. "She hasn't gone to church in years, but she wants the baby baptized. I don't see why the baby should be punished just because his mother doesn't go to church!"

I asked George, "If your daughter doesn't go to church, why does she want the baby baptized?"

By this time George was calm enough to think more objectively. He answered thoughtfully, "Well, now that you mention it, I suspect she wants him baptized because she thinks it's the thing to do, and because she knows her mother and I want him baptized. What's all this fuss about raising him in the faith? Doesn't anyone care about this baby's soul? Doesn't he need to be baptized to wash original sin away?"

George was correct that freedom from original sin is an important aspect of baptism, but there is so much more to it than that. The church community's understanding of baptism has grown broader and deeper in recent years. All of us members of the church are invited to grow in our personal knowledge and understanding. This is especially important for those of us who are parents, godparents, or parish ministers concerned with the baptism of infants or young children.

Read what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has to say about infant baptism:

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).

The *Catechism* goes on to say “children are baptized in the faith of the Church. Entry into Christian life gives access to true freedom” (CCC 1282).

Notice how this teaching goes beyond the image of getting a stain washed away. A soul—all souls—need to be “freed from the power of darkness” and brought to true freedom. Each child is given the “priceless grace of becoming a child of God.” Each child is brought into the family of faith—the church—through baptism.

New member of the church

It’s not just a “nice idea” that your child’s baptism is important to your parish and to the whole church. Each person’s spiritual journey really does matter to the entire community. Each new member affects the whole church. Your child, like all who are baptized, will have the power to build up the church in some way or to tear it down. Each person is gifted in ways that can contribute to the life of the whole community. Each baptism is an important event for the entire church. Each new member is another reason to hope in the future. Each person starting on the journey of faith joins us and offers a promise of faithfulness to us as we offer the same promise to them.

Beginning with baptism, all of our children are called to Christian service and ministry. After receiving this first sacrament, your child will be sealed by the Holy Spirit in

confirmation, will eat and drink the Eucharist as spiritual food for life's journey, be able to have sins forgiven in the sacrament of reconciliation, be anointed for healing in times of illness, and perhaps be joined with a spouse in holy matrimony or called to religious service through ordination. Clearly, sacraments are part of life's journey, and baptism marks the beginning of it all.

Every time you and I witness a baptism, whether we have some family connection to the baptized or not, we are connected by the very real ties of our faith. The connections not only lead us with hope into the future, but also reach back to age upon age of faithful people who have gone before us "marked with the sign of faith."

How baptism began

"A sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ," the young man announced at a meeting at our parish with a small group of parents who were bringing their children to be baptized. The man continued, "I remember that one definition from a religion class for some reason. And I know when Christ instituted baptism. He did it when he was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. Jesus was the first person to be baptized, and the church has been baptizing people ever since."

Well, yes and no. A woman in the group raised a provocative question: "If you say Jesus was the first person to be baptized, how do you explain that John was already there by the Jordan baptizing people?"

Sure enough. You'll find clear descriptions in all four gospels that John was baptizing people well before Jesus arrived on the scene (Matthew 3:5-6, Mark 1:5, Luke 3:7, and John 1:25-26). Did this mean that Jesus actually did not institute

baptism as the *Catechism* claims that he did? When and where did baptism begin?

Of course, Christians point back to the baptism of Jesus as the beginning of the sacrament of baptism. On that day, Jesus took an already existing practice and embraced it as a fitting action for himself and his followers. In fact, the practice of ritual washing or bathing was common in that part of the world long before the coming of Christ. Studies of ancient religions of Mesopotamia and Egypt reveal that they practiced ritual washings for centuries. In the Old Testament, the book of Leviticus includes prescriptions for various purification rites practiced among the Jews, and some of these include ritual washings. It's clear that Jesus or John, for that matter, didn't invent something new when instituting baptism as a sacrament. Both of them used a recognizable ritual that was already at hand.

John the Baptist ascribed one specific meaning to his baptism—repentance. John was a powerful, interesting character who attracted quite a following of people who came out into the desert to see him and hear his challenging message to change their sinful ways. John took those who accepted his challenge to the river and immersed them in the water. (The word baptism comes from the Greek word “bapto,” which means “to dip.”) The action was a sign that they were going to change, to reform their lives.

On the day that Jesus arrived at the Jordan River to be baptized, some new elements were added. John recognized Jesus as the Messiah, and Matthew reports that at first John refused to baptize Jesus, saying, “I should be baptized by you, yet you come to me!” Jesus replied “Give in for now. We must do this if we would fulfill all of God's demands” (Matthew 3:14–15).

Clearly, repentance was not the key element here. Jesus didn't come forward to repent and turn from a life of sin. To

underscore that point, the gospel writers report that as Jesus emerged from the water a dove appeared and a voice was heard to say, “This is my beloved Son. My favor rests on him” (Matthew 3:17).

The evangelists also report a distinction that John himself makes between his baptism and the baptism that Jesus is now bringing. In Matthew 3:11, John says, “I baptize you in water for the sake of reform, but the one who will follow me is more powerful than I. I am not even fit to carry his sandals. He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire!”

John himself proclaims that his baptism is only with water and is a ritual that marks a change of heart, a reform. The baptism that Jesus gives is both in water and the Holy Spirit. John’s baptism, however, was already proclaiming the new way that was coming with Christ. John did more than wash people; he ritually buried them under the water. John’s baptism was a sign that reminded people of two powerful Old Testament stories: the great flood and the Exodus.

Saving waters

Genesis chapters 7–8 describe a great flood that destroyed sinful humanity. Only the just man Noah and his family were spared. Noah passed through the flood waters in an ark and emerged after the flood to begin life anew. Even today the baptismal liturgy mentions the waters of that flood, showing our connection with that Old Testament story.

The Exodus is an even more powerful story for Jewish people—those of John the Baptist’s time and those living today. The great Jewish feast of Passover still remembers and celebrates the Exodus. The baptismal connection comes from the part of the story when the Israelites crossed through the Sea of Reeds on dry land. Pharaoh’s army in pursuit was drowned in

the waters of that sea. The Israelites had escaped from Egypt through the sea to begin their new life, their journey to the Promised Land. These people who had been slaves were now free (Exodus 14:10–31).

John’s baptism and Christ’s baptism, down to this day, link us to these events and remind us that we, too, pass through the waters of baptism into a “new land,” into a community of believers called the church. We, too, are now free from slavery to sin, free to live as children of God.

No salvation without baptism

There is no report in any gospel that the apostles were baptized. It’s also not clear whether Jesus himself ever baptized anyone. However, it is clear that the earliest Christians knew that Jesus intended baptism to be a practice in his new community. John tells the story in his gospel of a meeting between Jesus and the Pharisee Nicodemus during which Jesus says, “I solemnly assure you—no one can enter into God’s kingdom without being born of water and Spirit” (John 3:5).

Matthew ends his gospel by describing a very solemn meeting after the Resurrection between Jesus and his apostles. At this meeting, Jesus steps forward and says:

All authority has been given to me both in heaven and on earth; go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you. And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world” (Matthew 28:18–20).

In a class for parents a new father shook his head and remarked, “How can all of that make any difference to our little baby?”

The answer is, of course, that it doesn't. It makes a difference to the baby's family and to the church community that is welcoming that baby. Remember that when Jesus said to "go and baptize" he did not actually say whom to baptize or when, or how to do it. The early Christians had to grow in their understanding of baptism. They had to develop rituals for it and decide the "who," "when," and even the "why."

Infant baptism

In the early church, the norm was adult conversion and baptism. People seeking church membership went through a process of initiation that took several months or even several years to complete. That process, which grew and evolved and then gradually declined over time, has been restored to the church in recent years. It is now known as the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). Today, as in the early centuries, adults seeking baptism go through a step-by-step process of instruction and liturgical rites that lead up to baptism at the Easter Vigil. However, as far as we can tell, infant baptism seems to have coexisted with adult baptism from the very beginning of the church.

While adult baptism was the norm in the early church, infant baptism received more and more emphasis as time went on. By the sixth century, adult initiation all but disappeared, except in mission territories, and infant baptism became the usual way of entering the church. One reason for the dramatic rise in infant baptisms was the church's gradually developing understanding of baptism, sin, and forgiveness. The apostolic church believed that baptism forgave sin and was necessary for salvation. As these ideas grew and evolved over centuries, people began to be concerned about their children. At a time when infant and child mortality was high, there was

real danger that children would die before baptism if it was delayed until adulthood. If baptism is necessary for salvation, shouldn't infants be baptized as soon as possible? Why risk waiting? These questions and concerns helped lead to an increase in infant baptisms.

As the belief spread that no one entered heaven without baptism, infant baptisms became not only common, but necessary. In some places it was even mandated that infants be baptized within a few weeks of birth. It was not uncommon for babies born at home in the morning to be carried to the parish church by their fathers or godparents to be baptized that same afternoon. Even today, as you read in the earlier quote from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we are told to baptize our children “shortly after birth.”

Sinful babies?

This new emphasis also led to new problems and questions about baptism and sinful infants. For example, baptism forgives sins, but what kind of sins could a baby commit? For what did a young child need to be forgiven? Deliberations about this question began as early as the third century. A Father of the Church, Cyprian of Carthage, offered an answer: “The infant needs forgiveness for the ‘sin of Adam.’” Cyprian based his answer on Scripture and on the tradition of the church. Such passages as Romans 5:19 supported his position: “Just as through one man’s disobedience all became sinners, so through one man’s obedience all shall become just.”

For another century and more, the Fathers discussed just how this happened. It was St. Augustine in the early fifth century who defined the concept of original sin. Augustine described original sin as a spiritual deformity present in the

soul from birth. It was transmitted to each person through his or her parents just as physical characteristics are transmitted. Only baptism could remove or correct this deformity, or “wash away” original sin.

The logic of this teaching also required an explanation of what happened to babies who died before they could be baptized, or, for that matter, what happened to non-baptized adults who led good lives. If they had not been baptized, they could not be saved since they were born with original sin deforming their souls. But if they had committed no sin of their own would they be punished in hell? Centuries more discussion led to a solution to this “problem.” During the Middle Ages the concept of limbo emerged. Limbo, it was taught, is a place that is neither heaven nor hell where good but non-baptized souls go. They are not punished for serious sin, but they cannot be rewarded with heaven since they are still marred by original sin.

This teaching about limbo has never been considered an official doctrine of the Church and is not included in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, but for a long time and in some places still today, it has been taken quite seriously.

As regards children who have died without Baptism, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus’ tenderness toward children which caused him to say: “Let the children come to me, do not hinder them” (Mark 10:14), allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism. All the more urgent is the Church’s call not to prevent little children coming to Christ through the gift of holy Baptism (CCC 1261).

New emphasis, new prayers and rituals

Until the reforms of Vatican Council II, the same prayers were said for every baptism no matter what the age of the new Christian. Since everyone of any age who came to be baptized was being forgiven for the same original sin, there was no difference in the words and rituals used for baptisms of adults or infants. Babies were forgiven for all the sins of their lives and were called upon to reform.

Church teaching and practice has undergone change since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. Study and reflection about baptism—and all sacraments—continues to this day. We have returned to the scriptural sources to understand baptism. Once more we remember Noah and the escaping Israelites. Once more we remember that baptism calls us to new life and to membership in a community of believers.

Infant baptism no longer dwells upon sin, but upon the future life of this new Christian as he or she grows up in the church. Parents are reminded of their responsibilities for the spiritual welfare of their children for all the years to come. We baptize our children and then we begin their process of instruction. We are their first teachers. The first place of learning is the home. As the process continues, we also bring our children to the parish church for ongoing formation and education.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the church provides two different sets of prayers and rituals, one for the baptism of adults (including the new rite for older children) and a second for the baptism of infants and younger children. No longer are children being called upon to turn away from lives of sin. The Rite of Baptism for Children, promulgated in 1969, is truly a liturgy about children, looking ahead to their futures with hope, and turning to their parents to remind them of

their responsibilities and to promise them the support of the community in carrying them out.

In every case, the ritual includes water, oil, candlelight, and words of faith and commitment. These elements are rich with meaning.

The symbol of water

When your baby is baptized, water will be used. Perhaps it will be poured on the baby's forehead. Perhaps in your parish baptisms are performed by immersion. In that case, your baby's whole body will be dipped into a basin of water. What does water say to us? How has it come to be that water is the principal sign of the sacrament of baptism?

The Hebrew Scriptures, the books that Jesus studied and from which he prayed, are filled with reflections about water's power to refresh and to give life. Water is the very first element mentioned in the first creation story in the book of Genesis. In fact, to those people water was so basic that God didn't even create it. It was already there with a mighty wind sweeping over it.

Baptism originated in a land where water was often scarce. Far from being a common element, it was—and still is—a precious treasure in the eyes of thirsty, dusty people. These people could never forget that water is a force for life, a source of life. Their cities and towns grew up near some water source, some lake or river or very deep well. No shallow creek would do, for they knew that such bodies of water would dry up when the rains failed to fall. Their prophets and poets knew rain was so precious that they compared the blessings of God to falling rain, as in the book of the prophet Hosea who writes: "God will come to us like the rain, like spring rain that waters the earth" (Hosea 6:3).

Water is an important part of the promise of a better future. In the twenty-third psalm we read that the Lord is a shepherd who leads the psalmist “beside restful waters” where his soul is refreshed (Psalm 23:2–3). The prophet Isaiah describes the Messiah’s deliverance of Israel in images that depict a wonderful new world. In that world “streams will burst forth in the desert, and rivers in the steppe. The burning sands will become pools and thirsty ground, springs of water” (Isaiah 35:6–7).

In a land where water was treasured, the people could never forget what we today are being called to remember during baptism: water is necessary for life. Without water, or with impure water, we will die. And so, this life-giving liquid is chosen for baptism. It is an “outward sign” of the inner reality that the baptized soul has been given new and eternal life.

Paradoxically, we also remember that water can bring death. Floods, rushing rapids, crashing waves, and torrential rains have all destroyed life. These extreme swings between dry land with people thirsting for life-giving water, and flooded land with drowned people seeking escape from water’s power, describe well the reality of life in Israel. John the Baptist and Jesus lived in a land where life-giving water could quickly change to death-wielding water.

This image is part of baptism, too. Especially when baptism is performed by immersion, we are graphically reminded that just as Christ died and was buried before he rose from the dead, we are to be “buried” in the waters of baptism, dead to sin, so that we can rise to new life in Christ. As your baby is baptized the water is a sign of his or her new life, and—hard as it may be to think of this—the water is also about death.

The symbol of oil

Before and after the water is poured, your baby will be anoint-

ed with oil. There is no mention that John the Baptist or the apostles used oil in the earliest baptisms, but as the community developed its ritual for performing baptisms they looked back to Jewish rituals and saw the significance of incorporating anointing with oil into the baptism liturgy.

Oil was an important part of life in Israel. The oil they used was olive oil extracted by crushing olives with a stone. This oil lit their lamps, protected their skin from the sun, healed wounds, and was a staple in their diets. People saw oil as a sign of health, prosperity, and well-being. Psalm 104 says the abundance of God's creation causes people's "faces to gleam with oil" (Psalm 104:15). In Psalm 133 peace and unity among people is equated with abundant oil: "Precious ointment upon the head runs down over the beard, the beard of Aaron, till it runs down upon the collar of his robe" (Psalm 133:2).

People also recognized the importance of oil because it had been used to anoint the priests and kings of Israel. Oil so permeates that it can leave a permanent mark. Therefore, it was seen as a fitting sign to mark someone as sacred, sealed forever as a leader of God's people.

All of this is part of the church's meaning in using oil at baptism. During baptism, two kinds of oil are used, the *oil of catechumens* and the *oil of chrism*. Both are composed of olive oil or other plant oil, with *oil of chrism* having some added perfume. Though they are similar in composition, they have been blessed by the bishop for two different uses. We can tell what each type of oil signifies by noting what words are said and what parts of the body are touched during each anointing.

In the early part of the baptism liturgy before the water is poured, your child will be anointed on the chest with the oil of catechumens. It is clear that this first anointing is intended for strengthening. We remember the healing, nutritive, and protec-

tive qualities of oil when we hear the words spoken prior to and during this anointing. Immediately before this first anointing we are all reminded of just how much protection is needed. The priest says a “prayer of exorcism” asking that the child be protected from the power of the devil and strengthened to resist temptation all through life. Then he blesses the baby saying:

We anoint you with the oil of salvation in the name of Christ our Savior; may he strengthen you with his power, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen (Rite of Baptism for Children).

Immediately after the pouring of the water the second anointing takes place. This anointing has a different purpose. No longer are we praying for strength and protection. This time the oil of chrism is used. This is the same oil that is used during confirmation and at ordinations of deacons, priests, and bishops. This anointing with chrism recalls the anointing of the priests and kings of Israel. Each baptized person is called to share in the kingship and priesthood of Christ. As the priest anoints the baby’s head, he will pray:

God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin, given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and welcomed you into his holy people. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation. As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so truly you live always as a member of his body, sharing everlasting life. Amen (Rite of Baptism for Children).

How will this call to leadership be lived out by your child? Perhaps this child will be a priest, or will enter religious life as a brother or sister, or will serve as a lay minister in the church. Perhaps this child is destined for the equally important and

special role of service and leadership that all Christian laity are to bring to the world. We pray that, above all, this child will be faithful, will choose to continue the journey in the church that begins at baptism. Both anointings hold this hope within them. Spiritually protected and strengthened, marked with the priesthood of Christ, each newly baptized person of any age is ready for life and death in the church.

What baptism does

Do you remember George and his grandson? His daughter Mary Ann came to a baptism class and brought her little son to be baptized. During the class she said with amazement, “I had no idea baptism meant all these things. I thought I was just coming to get original sin washed off my kid’s soul!”

It’s clear that the theology of baptism is so much more than this! The word “theology” sounds imposing to most people. It can put us off and scare us away from some really important and interesting ideas and information. Theology is an aspect of just about every human activity—when the activity is being done with some thought about its meaning. Theology deals with people’s faith, and whether we are aware of it or not, we bring our faith with us into everything we do. Theology simply allows us to express our faith in some way.

So what is the theology of baptism? Of course, baptism calls for turning away from sin, but over the years the church’s understanding of baptism has grown. As the Christian community reflected together about Jesus’ actions and words and its own experiences of receiving the Holy Spirit (especially the Pentecost event experienced by the apostles), it grew to realize that baptism is far more than a turning from sin.

Baptism marks a new beginning. Remember that Matthew,

Mark, and Luke all place the baptism of Jesus at the beginning of his public life. And, like Jesus, the early Christians began their life in the community of believers by being baptized.

Baptism marks a change—from the Old Law to the New, from an old life to a new life. In some cases, people actually felt a powerful change as they were seized by the Holy Spirit in whom they had been baptized, and discovered charismatic gifts for healing or prophesying. But even those who do not feel such radical changes knew that baptism had changed them. They were in a new community now. Life based on love was far different than life based on law. In some way, each new member could truly say that he or she had died to an old self in order to put on a new self. They recognized the connection between the death and Resurrection of Jesus and their own death to sin and rising to a new kind of life in baptism.

Baptism marks membership. The baptized are joined in faith and love. They become members of a community, a spiritual family that will make demands upon them and will bestow blessings and gifts upon them. One reason that promises are recited aloud during each baptism is to underline this community aspect of the sacrament. The promises pronounced are a form of the Creed. In question and answer form they repeat the lines of the profession of faith made by each community at Sunday Mass. They are not only what I believe; they are what we as a community believe.

Baptism gives new life, and that life is a share in God's own divine life. God, who was willing to become human in the person of Jesus Christ, invites us to share in divine life. The church community gradually grew to know more about the nature of

that divine life, to come to a belief that God is a community, a trinity of three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

During baptism either water is poured or the person is immersed three times. At the first pouring or immersion, we invoke the Father, at the second the Son, and at the third the Holy Spirit.

God is virtually poured out onto the child or the child is literally immersed in God. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit now live in this child.

Grace

The word “grace” is often used to refer to the divine life in each baptized person. We also use it to describe a type of appealing, tactful behavior. Grace is such a gentle, short, simple word, but when we use the word to speak of God’s life in the soul, it is mysterious and powerful. It may also be gentle and hidden, but grace is a life force. It is power over evil. It causes things to happen, changes to occur.

Your little baby, your young child, sleeping or crying, smiling or frowning during baptism, will be filled with this divine life, will be washed in water that gives new spiritual life, will be marked with the seal of Christ and signed with the sign of his cross in the name of the divine Trinity.

Baptism day celebrates the beginning. One day cannot hold all these thoughts. One ceremony cannot permit us to reflect enough on everything that is happening, although the one ceremony does contain it all. On baptism day, you may be caught up with how your child looks and is dressed, and how he or she is reacting and feeling. You may focus on many parts of the ritual, of the prayers and actions, but you will probably not hear or notice everything. Everything that it means will unfold before you in the days and years ahead.

Likewise, everything that your own baptism has meant and now means will unfold before you. We have already seen that parents and godparents are called on during the baptism ceremony to renew their own baptismal promises. It would be difficult to participate in a child's baptism without our thoughts turning at some point to our own baptism. The church wants this to happen and includes words that encourage us to remember that we have been baptized in Christ by water and the Holy Spirit ourselves. Just as we stand holding our children over baptismal fonts today, someone stood holding us, sponsoring us, dreaming dreams for our future, hoping we would stay faithful to the church. Because we have stayed faithful, we are here now with children of our own. The dream lives on. There is hope for the future.

Why we celebrate

Baptism is rich with meaning. The more we know about it the more we can enjoy and appreciate each child's baptism day and find deeper meanings in our own baptisms as well. When my niece Stephanie was baptized, I sat with her five-year-old cousin Christopher. Chris was very excited about the whole affair. "Stephanie's going to become a Christian today," he informed me. There were eight babies baptized in the parish that day, so we could not get seats very close to the front. Chris wriggled up onto his knees so he could see, and he frequently leaned toward me to whisper questions into my ear. This ceremony was clearly interesting to him.

The ceremony began at the doors of the church. When the priest invited the parents and godparents to bring their children forward into the body of the church, Chris whispered, "Is Stephanie a Christian now?"

“Not yet,” I whispered.

The priest anointed each baby with oil and again the little boy asked, “Is she a Christian yet?”

“Not yet.”

He asked again, and this time I held him close and whispered, “She’ll be a Christian when Father pours the water on her forehead.”

Stephanie was the sixth baby to be baptized in the ceremony that day. The priest spoke loudly as he poured the water. “Stephanie, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!”

Christopher was fairly quivering with excitement. As the priest moved on to the next baby, Chris stepped the action for a few moments as he leaped to his feet, stood on the seat of the pew, and shouted, “Hurray! My cousin Stephanie’s a Christian now!”

Before the priest moved on, he remarked, “Now, there’s a young man who really knows how to celebrate!”

In earlier pages we looked at just what it is we are celebrating. Now it’s time to think about how we do it. Often parents are very nervous about their child’s baptism day. What if the baby cries? What if a diaper gets wet during the ceremony? How will we all look when we are in front of other people saying these prayers and doing these ritual actions?

Baptism is not an everyday event. Of course we are going to be a little nervous or anxious.

But, like cousin Christopher, we really are all men and women who know how to celebrate. The church takes its celebrations very seriously, but it is also very flexible about some aspects of liturgical celebration. We have some choices about this baptism ceremony.

When do we celebrate?

The day of the week is a given—Sunday. The church celebrates baptisms on Sunday because Sunday is the day Christ rose from the dead, and the day the Spirit came upon the church. You'll need to check at your parish to find out how often baptisms are celebrated.

What name? What saint?

The very first question the priest will ask you is “What name do you give (or “have you given”) your child?” I don't have to tell you how important that question is or how much debate often goes into its answer. It's possible that you “just knew” what to name your baby, and that everyone concerned agreed upon the name, but it is more probable that the child's name has been the topic of a lot of conversations and maybe even some arguments.

This name is important to the church as well. The child's name will mark him or her as an individual all through life. Parents are aware of this without any reminders from the church, but the naming of the child during the baptism ceremony is important. We recall that God has said, “I have called you by name: you are mine” (Isaiah 43:1).

Often people name children for individuals who are special to them—family members, friends, famous people. The church encourages us to also keep in mind the spiritual significance of children's names. What holy men or women have had the name you now give your child?

We believe in the communion of saints. We proclaim our belief in the saints each time we recite the Creed. We believe that saints live in heaven, and are able to intercede for us there. We believe that they serve as models for holiness, for living faithfully. During the baptism liturgy there will be a reciting

of the litany of saints. Various saints will be called upon to “pray for us” during this recitation. Your child’s patron saint will be one of those named during the baptism liturgy.

“But I don’t want to name my child after a saint!” exclaimed my friend Diane. “We’ve already decided to name the baby after our dads if it’s a boy and our moms if it’s a girl.”

This is not a problem. The church is not trying to take away any other significance a child’s name might have, but to add to it the spiritual dimension that there are saints in heaven who were called by the names, or some variations of the names by which we are called. These saints as “patrons” can be friends for us in heaven.

Godparents

There is one more choice you get to make concerning your child’s baptism—who will be the godparents. Each child is permitted a godfather and a godmother, although both are not required. It is fine to have one godfather or one godmother. At least one godparent must be a practicing Catholic. You are probably going to choose godparents who are close friends or family members, people who will be likely to take a lifelong interest in your child.

At one time, the godparent’s role during the ceremony was so central that parents could even stay at home. Now, you who are the parents of this child play the primary role. The godparent stands with you as a representative of the Christian community.

The liturgy of baptism

The baptismal liturgy is a ceremony rich with meaning. The signs and symbols are so important that even children who were baptized in an emergency because of life-threatening

problems at birth are brought to church later for a completion of the rituals that were omitted during the emergency baptism.

The minister of baptism may be either a priest or a deacon, depending upon local custom and upon what ministers are available. The liturgy begins with a dialogue between celebrant, parents, and godparents. Parents are asked what name they give the child and what they ask of God's church for the child. The parents are asking for baptism, so the minister in turn asks the parents if they accept the responsibility to raise the child in the faith. He also asks the godparents if they are willing to help the parents with this responsibility.

After this dialogue the minister addresses the child, welcoming him or her in the name of the whole Christian community and claiming the child for Christ. He traces the sign of the cross on the child's forehead and invites parents, godparents, and sometimes other family members to also trace the sign of the cross on the child. Scripture readings and sometimes a short homily follow, ending with prayers of the faithful and a short litany of saints.

Next is the prayer of exorcism which asks that the child be kept free from evil and sin. Then, as we read earlier, the celebrant anoints the child on the chest with the oil of catechumens. It will be a good idea to have your child dressed in something that is easily loosened for this ritual. As the celebrant approaches with this oil, loosen the child's garment in the front so that he can trace the sign of the cross with the oil directly onto the child's skin.

Immediately after this anointing you will be invited to come to the baptismal font. There is a blessing of the water. Then the celebrant will ask you to renew the promises of your own baptism. He will ask you questions—whether you reject

evil, and if you believe in the basic tenets of our faith. To each question, answer “I do.” The renewal of promises ends with the powerful proclamation: “This is our faith. This is the faith of the Church. We are proud to profess it, in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

At last we reach the moment of baptism. You will hold your child over the baptismal font as the celebrant pours water three times on the forehead, or you will assist him by immersing your child three times. At each pouring or immersion a part of the three-fold baptism formula is said: “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

The celebrant now anoints the child on the crown of the head with the oil of chrism, proclaiming that the child has a share in the everlasting life of Christ who was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King.

The white garment

This anointing is followed by the symbolic clothing of the child in a white garment. Wearing white stems back to early Christian times. New Christians were dressed in white after baptism as an outward sign of the inner purity of their souls. We still keep this symbol beyond baptism in several ways: the priest's white alb is the sign of his baptism; white clothes at many first communions and weddings also stem from this origin; and at each Christian funeral, the coffin is covered with a white cloth to remind us that the departed person was baptized in Christ.

Most parishes supply some sort of decorated, white, bib-like garment or a miniature white stole which is laid on the child at this time. Even if the child is already dressed in a white dress or suit, the small decorated cloth is still usually placed on the

child as the celebrant prays that the child will bring his or her “Christian dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven.”

Candle

You'll see the large Easter candle lit and placed near the baptismal font at your child's baptism. We remember that Christ is our light and that each person is to walk always as a child of the light. Usually the child's father or godfather is called upon to light a small candle from the Easter candle. The celebrant says:

“...this light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly. This child of yours has been enlightened by Christ. He (she) is to walk always as a child of the light. May he (she) keep the flame of faith alive in his (her) heart. When the Lord comes, may he (she) go out to meet him with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom” (Rite of Baptism for Children).

As a final ritual at the font, the minister can choose to say a prayer while touching the child's ears and mouth. This prayer asks that the child will soon be able to receive the word of God and to proclaim the faith.

Blessings for parents

There are very beautiful prayers of blessing for the child's parents. The prayer for the child's mother is:

God the Father, through his Son, the Virgin Mary's child, has brought joy to all Christian mothers, as they see the hope of eternal life shine on their children. May he bless the mother of this child. She now thanks God for the gift of her child. May she be one with him (her) in thanking him for ever in heaven, in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The prayer for the child's father is:

God is the giver of all life, human and divine. May he bless the father of this child. He and his wife will be the first teachers of their child in the ways of faith. May they be also the best of teachers, bearing witness to the faith by what they say and do, in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rite of Baptism for Children).

The liturgy ends with a final blessing of all who are present, reminding them of their own baptisms and praying for their fidelity.

Emergencies

Our faith does not frighten us into thinking that God cannot love and receive a baby into heaven if it is not baptized. Our faith impels us to baptize if we can because we need the sign, we need the spiritual link that binds our ill or departed child to our family with the same sign of salvation.

However, much as we hate to think about it, birth has many hazards. A child who is in danger of death at birth can and should be baptized right away. In such an event, anyone is permitted to baptize the baby. It isn't necessary to find a deacon or priest. Women have baptized their own dying babies right in the delivery room, and fathers have leaned over nursery cribs to say good-bye to a fragile son or daughter while pouring the water of baptism and sending the child into the arms of God. Hospital chaplains, doctors and nurses, too, perform emergency baptisms.

An emergency baptism is performed by pouring water on the child's head while saying, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." If there is time, those present can be called together to say a short prayer

and to attend to what is being done. If a priest is present he may anoint the child and even celebrate confirmation.

Happily, not every child in danger of death actually dies. After the emergency is over, when everyone is safely at home, parents are encouraged to bring the baptized child to church. The ceremony is adapted to these special circumstances. For example, the celebrant asks, "What do you ask of God's Church, now that your child has been baptized?"

The parents answer, "We ask that the whole community will know that he (she) has been received in the Church."

Each part of the original ceremony is included, with the exception of the pouring of the water. All throughout the ceremony the emergency baptism is mentioned, its validity assured. After the ceremony, the certificate will usually mention both the emergency baptism and the completed rituals at the parish church.

Celebrating at home

Water, oil, candles, white garments, and words of great beauty and power all provide a lot of the texture and depth of meaning to the liturgy of baptism. Because there are so many things happening, and so many words said, and because you will be busy with your small guest of honor, it will not be easy to take everything in on your baby's baptism day. You can enrich the experience by taking time to reflect upon the actions and words of the ceremony now before it takes place and then again later after you have celebrated this special event with your child.

Local, ethnic, and family customs add to this meaning, too. How will you celebrate with your child? What customs from your family or families will you incorporate into your own celebration? Everything from the baptismal garment to the

kind of food served at dinner after the ceremony can speak to all of you about the importance and loveliness of this day.

Time and time again I meet parents of older children who tell me that they wish they could get their family started praying together. Many people have lost sight of simple family rituals or have even rejected such rituals from their own childhoods only to wish they could have them back again later. There are young couples who begin a practice of family prayer and shared rituals even before they have children, but such couples are the exception. Perhaps you are one of those exceptions, but if you are like most people, your opportunity to start some religious practices in your home comes with the baptism of a child.

Here are some examples of what I mean.

The baptism candle is a special reminder that can be used for years to come for family prayer and celebration. Find out if your parish provides a candle that you can take home. If it doesn't, purchase a decorated candle from any religious goods store or get a medium-length white taper and decorate it yourself. Many families put the child's name, birth date, and baptism date on the candle. It can be lit each year on the child's birthday or the anniversary of baptism. It can also be lit when the child receives penance and the Eucharist for the first time and on confirmation day.

Your child's baptism dress might be a family treasure already. I have seen dresses four generations old on babies at baptisms. I know a family with a dress made from their grandmother's wedding dress that is worn by all cousins and siblings. What if your family does not have such an old treasure? Well, someone had to start those traditions years ago; why can't you start one now? The new dress or suit you make or purchase can be worn by each of your children and saved for their children after them.

The custom of entering a child's name in the family Bible is simple yet very meaningful. First of all, it is an encouragement to get a nice Bible if you do not have one yet. Be sure to get one with a place for registering the names of family members and the dates of births, all sacraments, and deaths. Plan a way to make the writing of additions to this book—new babies or new events—into a little ceremony. A simple prayer and then the solemn and careful writing of the new information is all that is needed, but it speaks to everyone of family ties that reach even into the future. You can also plan to read and pray together from the Bible. It will be another way to start and continue family prayer.

At this baptism you will promise to raise this child in the faith, to help this child keep the light of Christ shining all through life. Getting off to a good start with the very rituals of baptism is a wonderful way to begin to learn together as a family how to do this. Waiting until the child is in kindergarten or first grade to pay attention to these things, to encourage family and personal prayer, to provide family religious experiences, is almost too late. By then, parents can feel more awkward than they may have felt when they began at the birth of their first child. Don't be afraid! With God, there are no mistakes when we are approaching the church for a sacrament or a blessing. The only mistake is to fail to do it.

A sign of hope

The life of a child—and that includes the eternal life of a child—is a miraculous, wonderful event. No one has to tell you that! What you might not realize is that the church shares your amazement and your joy. As you read and hear the prayers of the baptism liturgy and as you see the beauty of its symbols, you can know how important your child is to

the church and what a solemn and wonderful occasion this baptism is. Each birth is a sign of hope for the future, a sign of God's power to renew our world. Each rebirth in the waters of baptism is the church's act of hope for the future.

We are the church, and each baptism we perform or witness is a sign of our faith in Christ's power to renew the face of the earth.

Sample—do not duplicate