

## PREPARING FOR YOUR CHILD'S BAPTISM

*A guide for parents and godparents*

### Introduction

Bringing your child to the Church for baptism is the greatest gift you can give your child. Baptism makes your child a child of God, opens to your child the door to all the other sacraments, makes your child a member of the Church, and prepares him or her for a life of faith, a life of friendship with Jesus Christ, a life of communion with the saints—planting in your child's heart the seed of that abundant life that Jesus speaks about in the Gospel.

Baptism has been celebrated in the Church from the very beginning, from the day of the first Pentecost. After Peter preaches to those gathered, they ask, "What are we to do?" To which Peter responds, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you." And that very same day, Scripture tells us, three thousand persons were baptized and added to the Church (see Acts 2). In the book of Acts, anytime someone believes in the message of the Apostles, believes in Jesus Christ, the believer is baptized. Thus, baptism is the sacrament that connects us to the Church, that makes us members of the Church. It is the gateway to full life of the Church, to communion with the other members of the Church, and to the sacramental life of the Church.

The sacraments are the ordinary means that Jesus Christ established in order to communicate the life of grace, His life, to the Church. The sacraments, DOCUMENT tells us, are visible signs of invisible grace (CITATION), that actually bring about what they signify (see CCC 1234). That is, they are not just external symbols, but effective symbols, making happen what they point to. In Latin, the term is *ex opera operato*, "by the work worked." This means that the grace and the efficacy of the sacraments are present in the sacraments themselves, independent of the holiness of the priest administering them. Or to put it in simple terms that a student recently said, "The sacraments work." They make happen what they signify.

### What is Baptism?

Baptism is the first of these sacraments, the beginning of the life of faith and "the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit . . . , and the door which gives access to the other sacraments" (CCC 1213). It is the ordinary means the Lord uses to communicate His grace, His new life, to our souls. In the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks of Himself as the vine; we are the branches that have been grafted onto the vine. Baptism, therefore, is the sacrament that grafts us onto the vine, that allows the life of Christ to flow into us, that makes it possible for us to be alive spiritually, for that spiritual life to grow, and for us to be fruitful.

The Greek word for baptism, *baptizein*, literally means to plunge, to immerse. When a person is baptized, "plunged" into the water of the baptismal font, he or she is plunged into, immersed in, submerged in the life of Christ Himself. The plunging in the water symbolizes the person's burial into Christ's death and resurrection as a new creature, a new creation. Baptism not only symbolizes, but also

brings about “the birth by water and the spirit without which no one ‘can enter the kingdom of God’” (CCC 125-16).

As a sacrament of Christian initiation, Baptism is one of the essential elements of that initiation, together with “proclamation of the Word, acceptance of the Gospel entailing conversion, profession of faith, Baptism itself, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and admission to Eucharistic communion” (CCC 1229). Although the ways of conducting this initiation have varied throughout time, these elements have always been in common, and are essential both to the Christian initiation of adults and of infants. In the case of infants, the catechetical instruction of the newly baptized takes place *after* the baptism, as the child grows and can understand the faith more.

In infant baptism, the pure gratuitousness of God’s grace is shown forth. We cannot do anything to earn God’s grace, and do not even “earn” that grace through faith. In baptism, God gives us gifts beyond anything we could ever merit, and when He pours that grace out upon a baby who has not been able to do anything on his own yet, the Lord manifests that becoming a child of God is pure gift, pure grace. Baptism frees us from the power of darkness and transfers us into the kingdom of light, into the family of God. The Church practices infant baptism so that each child be able to receive “the priceless grace of becoming a child of God” (CCC 1250).

Baptism requires faith, but not a perfect faith, just the beginning of faith. This faith grows in the community of believers, which is why the catechumen or parent/godparent is asked: “What do you ask of God’s Church?” to which they respond: “Faith!” (CCC 1253). But this faith must continue to grow after baptism, no matter how vibrant or strong before baptism.

### Effects of baptism

Baptismal grace is very rich, as seen in the varied effects it has on the soul. While “the two principal effects are purification from sins and new birth in the Holy Spirit” (CCC 1262), that new birth has several aspects, all of which grow as the baptized person grows in the life of faith.

The first effect of baptism is the ***forgiveness of sins***. “By Baptism *all sins* are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as all punishment for sin” (CCC 1263). This complete forgiveness removes from the soul everything that would keep them from entering God’s kingdom. The newly baptized person is perfectly pure, holy and blameless in God’s sight. However, there remains in us some temporal consequences of sin, including suffering, death, illness, certain moral weaknesses, and concupiscence, or the inclination to sin (CCC 1264), which is why God in His mercy also provides for us the sacrament of reconciliation.

The second effect of Baptism is that the newly baptized becomes ***a new creature*** in Christ. “Baptism not only purifies from all sins, but also makes the neophyte ‘a new creature,’ an adopted son of God, who has become a ‘partaker in the divine nature,’ member of Christ and co-heir with him, and a temple of the Holy Spirit” (CCC 1265). There is a lot packed into that previous sentence! Baptism makes us new creatures in Christ. The first aspect of being a new creature is being an adopted son or daughter of God—God adopts us as His very own children and participates to us the very same life of Jesus Christ, His

only begotten son. We thus share in the divine nature, that is to say, we have God's very own life within us, and as sons and daughters of God, become 'co-heirs' with Jesus Christ, that is to say, we inherit from God the Father everything! And we become temples of the Holy Spirit, meaning that the Holy Spirit dwells within us from the moment of our baptism.

The third effect of Baptism is that we become **members of the Body of Christ, the Church**. The Church is born from the waters of Baptism, and it is a People of God that "transcends all the natural and human limits of nations, cultures, races and sexes" (CCC 1267). In Baptism, each baptized person becomes a member of Christ's Body, as St. Paul so vividly expresses in 1 Corinthians 12. "As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons." He goes on to say that, just as the different members of a human body have different functions and need each other, because one part cannot do what the other does, so too the Body of Christ, the Church. Thus, in Baptism, we no longer belong to ourselves, but to Christ, and in Christ, to one another, with responsibilities and duties toward the Church, and with rights within the Church (CCC 1269).

The fourth effect of Baptism is that it **seals the baptized person with an indelible spiritual mark**. This spiritual mark can never be erased, but is, at it were, branded onto the soul—it is the mark of belonging to Christ. Not even sin can erase this mark, which is why Baptism cannot be repeated (CCC 1272). This "sacramental character" is a consecration "for Christian religious worship" (CCC 1273), and is a seal for eternal life. Those who remain "faithful to the demands of Baptism" will die with the blessed hope and expectation of seeing God face to face (CCC 1274).

### How to persevere in baptismal grace

For this seal of Baptism to be kept until the end, one must persevere in the grace received in Baptism. Since Baptism imparts the seed of faith, that faith must be nurtured and caused to grow, or else the baptized person will not experience the fullness of life in Christ. The Church provides the baptized with all the necessary means for persevering in baptismal grace throughout their whole lives.

The first important means of persevering in baptismal grace is the sacramental life of the Church. Baptism is the first of the sacraments, but the grace received in Baptism is nourished and sustained by the Holy Mass, the sacrifice of Jesus on the altar, and when one is old enough, receiving His Body and Blood in Holy Communion. Weekly Mass attendance is so important that the Church makes it an "obligation," for without this regular participation in the life of the Church, without being fed by the Word of God and the Body of Christ, the new life that we receive at Baptism cannot grow properly.

The sacrament of reconciliation, or confession, is also an important means for growing our faith life. We are weak, and though baptism removes original sin from us, we still suffer from concupiscence, which is a certain inclination to evil. In the sacrament of confession, the Church provides us with a clear means of being reconciled to God, being healed of the wounds that our sins cause us, and restoring us to full communion with God and with one another. Those who are serious about growing in faith and

persevering in the grace they receive at baptism attend Mass at least every Sunday and go regularly to confession.

Weekly Mass attendance not only nourishes our faith by the Word of God and the Body of Christ, but it also connects us in an experiential way with the Church. In the life of the local church, we discover that we are members of one another, and can find in the community of faith a strong support for our own Christian life. Worshiping together, praying together, learning about our faith together, we grow together in that baptismal grace and help one another persevere when challenges arise.

Our own personal prayer life is another important means for persevering in baptismal grace, as through prayer we learn to communicate heart-to-heart with God. This prayer can include reading Scripture, praying the rosary or other devotionals, a weekly hour of Eucharistic Adoration, and other specific means. But it is important for perseverance that we maintain a sense of being in a living relationship with God through prayer.

And of course, faith formation, continuing to learn about our faith through programs offered at the church, classes, good spiritual books, etc., is another important means for growing and sustaining and strengthening our faith.

### Role of parents

In the rite of Baptism, the parents and godparents of the child are given a candle lit from the Easter Candle. The celebrant tells them, "Parents and godparents, this light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly . . ." The light represents the light of Christ that the child has received in baptism, and the light of faith. It is the role of the parents and godparents to keep the light burning, that is, to raise the child in the faith.

As parents, your primary responsibility toward your child is to prepare him or her for heaven. Just as you nourish and nurture and provide for your child's physical and emotional life and growth, so too must you nourish and nurture and provide for your child's spiritual life and growth. There are many ways to do this; among those, here are some key means.

First, your child's spiritual life depends a lot on your own spiritual life and growth. For the grace of baptism to grow in your child's soul, you have to keep growing in your own baptismal grace, as shown above. Study after study shows that children whose parents do not regularly attend Mass together, go regularly to confession, pray with and for their children, and teach them the faith at home are unlikely to persevere in the faith after high school, if they make it that far. The most important thing you can do for your child is to have your own vibrant life of faith, in connection with the faith community.

It is also essential that you pray daily for your child, and that, as your child grows, you teach him or her to pray, alone and as a family. You should also teach your children the faith, reading and telling them stories from Scripture and from the saints, gradually teaching them how to participate in the Mass, bringing them with you to Church and to faith events. Daily and weekly routines of prayer, family

customs for celebrating the different liturgical feasts and seasons, all these things will help to bring your child up in the faith.

A beautiful way of keeping the light burning and an annual way of reminding your children of the importance of their baptism is to celebrate their “Christian birthday” each year, on the anniversary of their baptism. You can bring out the baptismal garment, photos of that day, and their baptismal candle, telling them the story of their baptism, the meaning of the baptism, and allowing them (as they grow older) to renew their baptismal promises on that day. A small faith-related gift can also help them realize the importance of their baptism.

### Role of godparents

Godparents also play an essential role in raising up children in the faith, in helping to protect and nurture the seed of new life that is sown at the moment of baptism. That is why being a godparent should be taken seriously: parents should prayerfully choose godparents who have a strong and active life of faith and will take seriously their role of helping to nurture and grow the godchild’s faith; godparents should take seriously their own faith lives, so that they can be examples and witnesses to their godchild.

The role of godparents is so important, that it is even spoken of in the Catechism, which says that the godfather and godmother “must be firm believers, able and ready to help the newly baptized – child or adult – on the road of Christian life” (1255). So the godparents need to be firm believers, solid in their faith, which requires both a regular sacramental life (minimally weekly Sunday Mass and regular confession) and a daily prayer life, adherence to the teachings of the Church, and ongoing spiritual growth. The godparents work together with the parents to help bring up their godchildren in the faith.

This role of godparenting should include (but of course is not limited to!) daily prayer for the godchild throughout his or her life, regular contact with the parents and the godchild, remembering the godchild for important dates, such as birthdays and Christmas, and perhaps above all, baptismal anniversary, and being present in the godchild’s life. One’s role, of course, changes as the godchild grows, but it should always be a role of intercessory prayer, witness of truly Christian living, and faithful presence in the godchild’s life.

### Rite of Baptism

All the sacraments of the Church use some earthly matter and some ritual form—both elements are essential, and taken together, compose the sacrament. For baptism, the earthly matter is water, and the ritual form are the words the minister pronounces over the one being baptized: “[Name], I baptize you in the name of the Father” – immersing in water or pouring water over the head— “and of the Son” –another immersion or pouring—“and of the Holy Spirit” –a third immersion or pouring. Through the words of the baptismal formula and the water, the newly baptized person becomes a child of God.

But the form and the water are not the only elements of the baptismal rite. The rite of Baptism begins with the parents and godparents presenting their child for baptism; then the minister, parents and godparents trace the Sign of the Cross on the child, thus marking “with the imprint of Christ the one who

is going to belong to him” and signifying “the grace of the redemption Christ won for us by his cross” (CCC 1235).

The liturgy of the Word follows, with a reading from the Gospel related to Baptism. This proclamation of the Gospel is meant to “enlighten the candidates and the assembly with the revealed truth and elicit from them the response of faith, which is inseparable from Baptism” (CCC 1236). After the Gospel reading, the saints are invoked, as the one soon to be baptized is called to join their holy company.

The minister then prays the prayers of exorcism, prayers to liberate the child from the powers of evil, then anoints the child with the oil of the catechumens. “Thus prepared, he is able to *confess the faith of the Church*, to which he will be ‘entrusted’ by Baptism” (CCC 1237). The waters of the baptismal font are then consecrated, and the parents and godparents and all present answer a series of questions renouncing sin and Satan and professing the faith of the Church.

Then the essential rite of baptism takes place, the triple immersion (or pouring), together with the words: “[Name], I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” From this moment on, this child is a child of God, adopted by the Father, a temple of the Holy Spirit, and a co-heir with Christ Jesus. There has been an objective change in the child, and it is the duty of the parents and godparents to so raise the child that he or she always knows this deepest identity, and grows in Christian life.

After the essential rite of Baptism, the priest anoints the child with the sacred chrism, which signifies the gift of the Holy Spirit, who has anointed the child. The priest also places on the child the white garment, which is a sign of the child’s Christian dignity, and is to be kept “unstained” the rite says, until the newly baptized reaches heaven. Next, the priest lights the baptismal candle from the Easter candle, giving it to the parents and godparents, and reminding them that it is their duty to keep that light of faith burning and growing in the newly baptized child. Finally, the priest touches the ears and mouth of the child, in what is called the *Ephphetha*, praying that the child be able to receive God’s word and proclaim the faith.

### Responses for the Rite of Baptism

The rite of Baptism has some set questions and responses. We provide them here for you to learn, so that you can both reflect on what you will be saying and thus be able to say it with your whole heart on the day of your child’s baptism, and so that you are less nervous when that day arrives.

At the beginning of the rite, there is the **Reception of the Child**.

Priest: What name do you give your child?

Parents: [Name]

Priest: What do you ask of God’s Church for [Name]?

Parents: Baptism.

Priest: You have asked to have your child baptized. In doing so you are accepting the responsibility of training him (her) in the practice of the faith. It will be your duty to bring him (her) up to keep God's commandments as Christ taught us, by loving God and our neighbor. Do you clearly understand what you are undertaking?

Parents: We do.

Priest: Are you ready to help the parents of this child in their duty as Christian parents?

Godparents: We are.

Priest: [Name], the Christian community welcomes you with great joy. In its name I claim you for Christ our Savior by the sign of his cross. I now trace the cross on your forehead and invite your parents and godparents to do the same.

Later, after the exorcism and the blessing of the baptismal font, there is the **Renunciation of Sin and Profession of Faith**.

Priest: Do you reject Satan?

Parents & Godparents: I do.

Priest: And all his works?

Parents & Godparents: I do.

Priest: And all his empty promises?

Parents & Godparents: I do.

Priest: Do you reject sin, so as to live in the freedom of God's children?

Parents & Godparents: I do.

Priest: Do you reject the glamour of evil, and refuse to be mastered by sin?

Parents & Godparents: I do.

Priest: Do you reject Satan, father of sin and prince of darkness?

Parents & Godparents: I do.

Priest: Do you believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth?

Parents & Godparents: I do.

Priest: Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, died, and was buried, rose from the dead, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father?

Parents & Godparents: I do.

Priest: Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting?

Parents & Godparents: I do.

Priest: This is our faith. This is the faith of the Church. We are proud to profess it, in Christ Jesus our Lord.

All: Amen.

Then, for the essential rite of baptism, the priest asks: Is it your will that [Name] should be baptized in the faith of the Church which we have all professed with you?

Parents & Godparents: It is.

As you prepare for your child's baptism, we invite you to re-read these questions and responses, prayerfully, so that the baptism of your child be for you, also, a time of renewing your own baptismal faith and commitment to growing in that faith.