

and spread the gospel, the child, through his parents, is given the candle lighted from the Easter candle (which symbolizes the light of Christ; CCC 1243), for it is in his light that this child must walk if he is to attain the salvation promised.

The parents are at the very heart of things in the new rite (CCC 1251). One of the most positive developments in baptismal practice in the renewal process has been the emphasis on the parents and the assistance given them in baptismal preparation programs. In the "old days" parents were often looked upon as "in the way" at a Baptism (if they were allowed to be present at all). The new rite remedies that deficiency and places the parents at the very heart of things—where they belong. Much of the burden is on the parents at this point. They renounce sin and profess faith; it is their responsibility to see to it that their lives give testimony to the faith they have professed, for they will be the first Christian influence on this child.

The parents also need help. The godparents can be looked upon as a kind of link to the extended family of the Church, which pledges support in bringing the newly baptized to a vigorous life of faith (CCC 1255). Later on, the parents can also seek the Church's help by entrusting their children to a Catholic school, so that the values they have begun to share will be positively and consistently reinforced in the educational environment (CCC 2229).

Although all Christians acknowledge the crucial importance of Baptism, not all interpret its effects in the same way. Some Christians would see this ritual as the

culmination of the conversion experience; we Catholics see it as only the beginning (CCC 1253-54). For us, growth in faith and in our relationship with Christ and his Church is essential, requiring an ongoing daily process of recommitment.

Each time we enter a church building, we bless ourselves with the water that recalls our Baptism, by which we entered the Church, which is the Body of Christ (CCC 1267, 1668). This sign is an indication of our continued willingness to be faithful to our baptismal promises to die to sin and to live only for God; it is a prayer that the Lord, who began this good work of salvation within us on the day of our Baptism, will also bring it to completion in the life of heaven.

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Pamphlet 391

# **Baptism**

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## *Understanding the Significance of Our Rebirth in All Its Beauty*

Eastertide is the season in which we traditionally focus our attention on Baptism, the sacrament of rebirth and new life. Whether one was baptized as an infant or as an adult, the meaning of this first sacrament of initiation needs to be explored again and again to attain a true appreciation of its power. If I were to ask the average parents presenting their child for Baptism why they do so, I can safely say that 95 percent would suggest the removal of original sin as the reason. And they would be right—however, they would not be going far enough. Our goal should be to understand the significance of Baptism in all its beauty.

Everyone who comes into this world possesses a weakened human nature, not a corrupt nature, but one that is inclined to do its own will, rather than God's (CCC 407-9). The original sin of our first parents is washed away in the saving waters of Baptism (CCC 1250). That first, necessary step having been taken, the sacrament then disposes the person to hear and accept God's Word (CCC 1266). It incorporates him into the Church, the community of faith which will provide the environment for living out his baptismal promises (CCC 1267-70).

It is good to recall that the first Christians were adult converts who were able to declare their own intentions. Today, infants are the usual recipients of Baptism, a

phenomenon attacked in some quarters as bad theology or even bad psychology. Such questions lead us to ask ourselves the precise meaning of infant Baptism.

### **The Meaning of Infant Baptism**

This ancient practice of the Church says many things (CCC 1250-52). First and foremost, it reminds us that the gift of faith is just that—a gift on which we can never make a claim. God's love is so great that he offers himself to us before we can ever return his love. Secondly, we learn that the Lord withholds his love from no one. Intelligence is not a prerequisite; only an attitude of openness is. And who is more open or deserving than a child? Surely this was one reason Christ urged the apostles to allow the little ones to come to him (Mk 10:14-16). Interestingly, some exegetes see in this passage Mark's answer to those who questioned the practice of baptizing children when whole households were received into the Church (for example, Acts 16:15). Finally, we know that good parents always wish to provide their children with the best of everything, so that they may experience a full and happy life. If anything is crucial to a life of meaning and value, it is that God be included in that life. Therefore, having already shared the gift of life with their children, parents are then called upon to share the gift of faith.

Infant Baptism is a powerful statement of our belief in divine initiative and divine election. Just as the Jews are born into the Chosen People simply by virtue of their parentage and not due to their own

worthiness, we Christians are born into a family of faith because of God's grace and providence, and never by our own doing—even if one is an adult convert.

Another related question is sometimes raised by parents whose child has died without Baptism: "What will happen to my baby?" The simplest answer might be that the desire of the parents that this infant become a child of God is a type of Baptism in itself. Furthermore, it is important to note that we (or even the Church) cannot limit God's love, mercy, and compassion to human (and even the ecclesiastical) formulations, for God's ways are not our ways (Is 55:8). St. Thomas Aquinas felt compelled to remind his readers that "Deus non alligatur sacramentis [God is not bound to the sacraments]." That is, although the sacraments are surely the ordinary means of grace, they are not the only means by which God can effect our salvation. And so we commend such a child to God's fatherly care (CCC 1261).

The theological principle "legem credendi statuit lex orandi [the rule of prayer determines the rule of faith]" informs us that there is a correlation between Christian prayer and Christian belief (CCC 1124). The liturgy of Baptism provides a full explanation of what the Church understands to be happening in this sacred rite. For this reason, it would be most worthwhile to examine it in some detail.

### **The Sacred Rite of Baptism**

The most obvious symbol is the water (CCC 1238). However, most people have an

impoverished understanding of its meaning. It signifies cleansing from original sin, yes; but it also means much more. Water is an element that can bring death or life. During the Exodus experience the same waters that brought salvation to the Hebrews brought death to the Egyptians. In the early Church, the person to be baptized was plunged into the water to symbolize death to sin and selfishness; when he arose from the water, he emerged a new man in the likeness of Christ. Our Baptism is both the Exodus experience and the Paschal Mystery.

So much of the idea of a new beginning is echoed again and again in the baptismal liturgy. The child is presented with a white garment, which reminds us of a new-found innocence and also of that "new man" with whom St. Paul urged us to clothe ourselves (Eph 4:24; CCC 1243). The priest may touch the ears and lips of the newly baptized in imitation of our Lord, who made the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak. Henceforth, this child will be ready to hear and accept the Word of God and to proclaim it with the aid of the whole Church, the communion of saints. And so, we seek the assistance of all the saints and pray that this child's patron may serve as an example to inspire this new Christian to live totally for God.

The child is anointed with oil, the same sacred chrism with which priests, prophets, and kings were anointed in the Old Testament. This dedicates the child to God and gives him a role in the priestly people formed by Jesus Christ, which is his Church (CCC 1241). Having put on the "new man" and having received the commission to hear