

THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

The Theological Meaning of Baptism

Every child that comes into this world is a great gift from God. The parish community of Sacred Heart Church in Kitchener thanks you, parents, for accepting this gift from God; you can be assured of your family being remembered in our prayers, as well as of our gratitude for allowing your child to be joined into our parish family. To deepen the salvific value of this most important sacrament, which Baptism is, let us look at the Church's teaching on this subject.

In the Old Testament we find many passages announcing Baptism. From the beginning of humanity **water** is the source of life and fertility. During the Easter Vigil, as the priest is blessing the water, he says the following words: *O God, whose Spirit in the first moments of the world's creation hovered over the waters, so that the very substance of water would even then take to itself the power to sanctify. Noah's Ark* saved humanity from the flood. The Church has always seen Noah's Ark as an image of salvation through Baptism, since in her *only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water...* (1 Peter 3:20). Then **the Crossing of the Red Sea**, which freed Israel from Egyptian slavery, declares a different kind of liberation which also takes place during Baptism and ultimately **the crossing of the Jordan** announces Baptism; after this event took place, Israel entered into the Promised Land, as an image of everlasting life. (Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church 253)

Who brought to fulfillment those prefigurations? All the Old Covenant prefigurations find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. At the beginning of his public life Jesus had himself baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan. On the cross, blood and water, signs of Baptism and the Eucharist, flowed from his pierced side. After his Resurrection he gave to his apostles this mission: "Go forth and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19); (Compendium 254).

What is Baptism?

Baptism is the most beautiful and most amazing gift of God...(Catechism of the Catholic Church 1216), the foundation of the entire Christian life, and the gateway that gives one entry into the other Sacraments. It is the first of the seven Sacraments in the Catholic Church, which takes away original sin, forgives every personal sin, and acquits the punishment due to sin, grants supernatural life (sanctifying grace), bestows the theological virtues (faith, hope, love) and the gifts

of the Holy Spirit; it makes one an adopted child of God, incorporating one into the great Christian family, as well as giving one a share in the priesthood of Christ.

In order to participate in the Sacrament of Baptism, the following conditions are required:

1. *That the parents or at least one of them, or the persons who lawfully hold their place, gives consent to the Baptism;*

2. *That there be a well-founded hope that the child will be brought up in the Catholic religion; if such a hope is truly lacking, the Baptism is to be deferred.* (Catholic Code of Canon Law 868)

How is the ritual of Baptism performed? One is baptized through being immersed in water or by having water poured over the head, pronouncing his or her name with the formula: *I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

Why do we receive the Sacrament of Baptism only once? We only receive Baptism once in our lives because it marks the soul with a permanent seal. Through this mark, we have been made like Christ, the Archpriest, and incorporated into His Church. The sacramental attribute of Baptism is so sacred that it cannot be destroyed even by mortal sin; therefore we can receive Baptism only once in our life.

Who can baptize? The ordinary ministers of the sacrament are the bishop, priest and, in the Catholic Church, also the deacon. In case of necessity (danger of death), any person can baptize provided they have the intention of doing what the Church does, and they pour water on the head while saying the Trinitarian formula (*name*), *I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.* (Compendium 260)

Is Baptism necessary for salvation? Receiving Baptism is something Jesus Himself directed us to do, saying: *Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.* (Mark 16:16). Christ also said: *...no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit.* (John 3:5). Baptism is necessary for those who have heard the Gospel proclaimed and have the ability to ask for the sacrament. But if someone knows very well that Baptism is established by Christ to give grace, then they must receive it or risk losing their salvation. (Compendium 261)

How do we understand the **baptism by blood**? Martyrs of their faith in Christ who die without Baptism by water receive purification from their sins and internal

rebirth, and they can through this attain salvation. Their martyrdom is a Baptism of blood in place of Baptism by water. Suffering for Christ and the giving of one's life for Him declares a deep faith and love. Through their passion and death, martyrs become as Christ crucified, and through Him, they are cleansed and sanctified.

There are also those who are saved through a **baptism of desire**. *Catechumens and all those who, even without knowing Christ and the Church, still (under the impulse of grace) sincerely seek God and strive to do his will can also be saved without Baptism (Baptism of desire).*(Compendium 262)

At this point, a certain question might come to mind - when a child dies without Baptism, can this child be saved? The Church can only, in her continuous prayer before the throne of God, recommend them to the immeasurable Mercy of God. It is difficult to imagine that the loving God, who justifies the worst of sinners, would cast away from Himself children who have never offended Him. (Compendium 262)

What is the meaning of the name that we receive at Baptism? *Parents, sponsors, and parish priests are to take care that a name which is foreign to Christian sentiment is not given. (Canon 855). The name is important because God knows each of us by name, that is, in our uniqueness as persons. In Baptism a Christian receives his or her own name in the Church. It should preferably be the name of a saint who might offer the baptized a model of sanctity and an assurance of his or her intercession before God. Compendium 264)*

However, if the first name is not Christian name, it is practice to choose a second name to reflect the Christian spirit. But let us remember it is better when choosing the name for the child that the name be of a saint or someone declared Blessed by the Church, who can ensure the baptized spiritual care and be a true example of Christian life.

When should Baptism be celebrated? *Parents are obliged to see that their infants are baptized within the first weeks. As soon as possible after birth... .If the child is in danger of death it should be baptized without delay.* The Code of Canon Law (Canon 867)

Why is it so important to baptize the baby? Every child that comes into this world is born with the original sin. The Sacrament of Baptism takes this away, making the baptized a Child of God and incorporates them into the great Christian family. The parents who do not make sure the child is baptized right after birth are depriving them of invaluable graces given to the Children of God.

In the first centuries of Christianity, it was not the custom to baptize infants but adult candidates. *A long period of catechumenate included a series of preparatory rites, which were liturgical landmarks along the path of catechumenal preparation and culminated in the celebration of the sacraments of Christian initiation.* (Catechism of the Roman Church 1230). Ultimately the Church began the custom to baptize infants. However, the practice of baptizing adults, who for one reason or another, did not receive the sacrament, has never really gone away. Adult candidates who are instructed in the truths of the faith, their Christian obligations, and who finish their formation as a Catechumen receive three sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist, on Holy Saturday.

The role of the Godparents

The Code of Canon Law (Canon 867) states, *Parents...even before the child is born should approach the parish priest to ask for the sacrament for their child and to be duly prepared for it.* Sacred Heart Parish in Kitchener requires the parents of the child to meet with the priest two months before the planned Baptism in order to talk over the celebration of the Baptism. We ask the parents not to pick out Godparents for the child until this meeting takes place. Unfortunately, it very often happens that parents pick the Godparents before talking to the priest and then find out that they do not fulfill the requirements of the Church for this very important and honorable role. They mistakenly claim that:

- a. The role of Godparents is reserved only for members of the family, especially siblings.
- b. Anyone can take on this role to be Godparents; it is not relevant whether that person practices the faith or not.
- c. People of different faith can be Godparents.

Let us look at the explanation and reasons why points **a. and b.** are incorrect. With all baptized children and adults after Baptism, their faith should grow and increase. This is why during the Holy Saturday Vigil, the Church renews her baptismal promises. Baptism is the source of new life in Christ; in order for the grace of Baptism to develop, the parents need to help. This is what the Godparents are for, who themselves believe deeply and are ready and able to give help to the child or the adult on their Christian journey. The Code of Canon Law states: *(Godparents should) help them to live a Christian life befitting the baptized and faithfully to fulfill the duties inherent in Baptism.* (Canon 872)

To be chosen as a Godparent is an exceptional distinction. No one else but you has been chosen Godmother/Godfather and has been given a special responsibility in the Christian upbringing of the child. This privilege allows you as parents to build a long-lasting relationship between the Godparents and your baptized child. There are many ways you as Godparents can nurture this connection with the baptized child being for the child a particular guide in their maturation in the Catholic faith. These are a few examples:

- to pray often for the intention of the child.
- celebrating the anniversary of the child's Baptism by participating in Sunday Eucharist together.
- take part in the Sacramental life of the child, especially when the child receives First Communion and Confirmation.
- to accompany the child as it grows and answer any rising questions or addressing doubts on the subject of faith.
- encourage the child to live their life according to their faith offering them: the Bible, the rosary, religious books and films, and so on.
- most importantly, the Godparents need to be an example of Christian living for their Godchild, through the practice of daily prayer, practicing virtues, participation in the Sunday Eucharist and other feast days, as well as participating in the life of the parish.

Let us go back to considering our next point **c.** - an important issue. More and more Catholics these days, after receiving the proper dispensation, are marrying a spouse from a different religion. A situation like this has an enormous effect on the religious life and the religious practice of the couple and their children; this especially concerns the celebration of Baptism. Considering the above, could not the Godparents belong to another faith? In this matter, Canon Law is very precise and says: *A baptized person who belongs to a non-Catholic ecclesial community is not to participate except together with a Catholic sponsor and only as a witness of the Baptism.* (Canon 874)

In other words, the Godmother or Godfather must always be Catholic. People of other faiths cannot be Godparents; - they can only be a witness of the Baptism and under the condition that one of the Godparents will always remain Catholic.

Furthermore, if the proposed Catholic Godparent does not worship in the Catholic Church, but rather attends other religious services, such a person cannot be allowed to be a Godparent in the Catholic Church. Why? – Because they do not practice the Catholic faith.

The one exception from this rule is someone chosen from the Orthodox Church. Due to the fact that the Catholic Church is in communion with the Orthodox Church, an Orthodox member is able to be a Godparent alongside the Catholic Godparent.

The converse of this is also true; a Catholic may only act as witness at a non-Catholic Baptism, but not as a godparent. The only situation in which a Catholic may be a godparent in *another ecclesial Community* is in an Eastern Orthodox Church if he/she is so invited.

There are many frequently asked questions regarding Baptism:

Is a godparent necessary to be present at the Baptism?

In the circumstance that a godparent cannot physically attend the ceremony, it is possible for them to be represented at the Baptism by a ‘proxy’.

Can the child be baptized in a parish if parents do not live within the parish boundaries?

Baptism, like all of the sacraments, is a celebration of a living relationship with God and with the local believing community, the parish. The sacraments are celebrations of our Church and, as such, are normally celebrated in the parish where the family resides or is registered and usually worships.

How do parents arrange to baptize their child in a parish other than the one where they normally worship?

Parents, with a sufficient reason, need to approach the pastor of that parish to ask if he is willing to baptize their child. A letter of permission to have the baby baptized elsewhere must be obtained from the pastor of the parish where the family usually worships.

Can a parent serve as a godparent?

A parent may not serve as a godparent because the parent already has a distinct role and relationship with the child. A godparent's role is separate from that of a parent or legal guardian.

May parents change the Baptismal sponsors in the future?

On occasion, one or both of the people who served as godparents are no longer a part of the child's life or they have moved a great distance, and the possibility of an ongoing relationship is compromised. In this type of a situation, parents may wish to change the Baptismal record and add the name of a new godparent. Although a new person may now hold a place of prominence in the faith life of the child it is not possible to alter the Baptismal register. The register is a legal record and the original godparents were a witness to the event. It would be untruthful to remove the name of the original witness and replace it with a new name, perhaps someone who was not even present at the Baptism.

May a priest or a deacon serve as a godparent and also preside at the baptism?

Clergy may serve as godparents (sponsors) but are asked not to be the minister of Baptism if serving as a godparent (sponsor) so that the roles are not confused.

Sunday (the Day of the Lord) - Celebration of Baptism

The Code of Canon Law of the Catholic Church says: *Although Baptism can be celebrated on any day, it is nevertheless recommended that it be celebrated ordinarily on Sunday or if possible at the Easter Vigil.* (Canon 856)

At Sacred Heart Church in Kitchener, the Sacrament of Baptism is celebrated on the third Saturday / Sunday of every month in English and on the second Saturday / Sunday of the month in Polish at 12:45, right after the finishing of the noonday Mass. Because the Liturgy of Baptism is celebrated in our Church without the Mass, parents and Godparents, as well as their invited guests, are expected to participate in the Sunday Eucharist, to the extent they are able. Parents are encouraged to extend an invitation to guests to participate in Mass in our church prior to the Baptism. This could fittingly be included in invitations sent to guests.

Dear Parents! Calling upon this great joy that your child will be joined to the great Christian family and will become a new member of our faith community, I want to congratulate your reception of *God's gift of life* in the person of this little child, and assure you of my constant prayers for your whole family. I hope this letter will help you to properly prepare for the celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism.

Fr. Adam Wroblewicz CR, Pastor.