

CATHOLIC
PARENT
KNOWHOW

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PREPARING YOUR CHILD FOR

Baptism

YOUR QUESTIONS
ANSWERED

Baptism Is the Sacrament of a Lifetime

Dear Parents,

One day a catechist asked a little boy, “When did you first learn about God?” The little boy had a perplexed look on his face, so the catechist thought that perhaps he didn’t understand the question. She tried again, “Who first taught you about God?” Again he looked puzzled for a moment, but then smiled brightly and said, “I can’t really answer your question. I’ve always known God!”

That child is extremely fortunate. He must live surrounded by a family and parish community that is alive with God’s love and isn’t afraid to talk about it, to live it.

And your child is fortunate, too! That is why you are asking for Baptism for your child — because you are alive with God’s love.

There is no miracle as moving as the birth of a child. The entrance of a child into our lives certainly never leaves us the same, and the celebration of Baptism should never leave the child, family, or parish community the same.

As I have been privileged to walk with my own family — and with countless others in my ministry — I have become more aware that the rituals and sacraments we have in the Church are so powerful and rich, and we can’t just go through the motions.

We can’t just say: “Baptism is one more thing I need to do on my list of things to get done for this child. ... OK. That one’s over and done with.” We need to give ourselves time — lots of it — to prepare for

rituals and sacraments, to really celebrate them, to remember and reflect on what we did, to live their realities, and then to keep on asking ourselves how and why we are doing what we’re doing ... *for years to come.*

So, this booklet is not just about the moment of Baptism, because Baptism is not just about one moment. *Baptism is a lifetime sacrament.* It happens only once (it cannot be repeated), but it is about the rest of our lives. What we do and say in those few moments is lived each day for the rest of our lives.

For the first years of your child’s life, yours will be the most important influence in his or her

understanding of life as a follower of Jesus and life as a member of the Catholic Church. At Baptism your child is a Christian, but your child becomes a Christian as the years unfold. What a challenge, but what a privileged responsibility you have in that!



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What it's all about:

The Rite & Symbols of Baptism

Have you ever given a gift because it said the right thing?

Have you ever spent time with someone who simply needed your presence?

Symbolic actions like these often say more than our words can express.

Our sacraments are symbolic actions. The mystery and wonder of God's life and love and our gifted relationship with God can never be contained in just words. They are celebrated in symbolic actions.

In the Rite of Baptism we celebrate the reality of being immersed in God's life through:

The Gathered Assembly: The community gathered for the celebration represents the whole Church, welcoming this new member and affirming the profession of our faith.

The Signing of the Cross: Parents, godparents, family members, and parishioners join the presider in tracing the Sign of the Cross on the child's forehead. A sign on something shows its origins or ownership.

The Sign of the Cross shows that we belong to Jesus. It is the membership badge or identity sign of the Christian. By tracing it reverently, we welcome the baby into this worldwide community that has made the cross its distinguishing sign. It's another way of saying that from now on this little child will never have to carry the cross alone, or walk alone. It's also a promise of the lifetime guarantee that we share in Christ's resurrection, which comes to us through the cross.

Anointing: The first anointing, with the oil of catechumens, on the breast, calls on Christ to strengthen the child being baptized, especially for the times when

living life as a follower of Jesus can be challenging.

Later, the oil of chrism (a perfumed oil) is rubbed on the head. It is a sign of strengthening to live as a follower of Jesus a life that is priestly, prophetic, and royal: bringing God to a needy world, boldly speaking the truth of God's love and serving the poor and afflicted with compassion. In the prayer the whole Church expresses its hopes for your son or daughter.

Water: Water, of course, is the essential sign of Baptism. It can be a sign of both life and fruitfulness as well as death and destruction. In nature we clearly experience the power of water both to nourish and to destroy life. Water gives life, saves life, and takes life away. Using water in Baptism reminds us of this power and helps us to experience our dying with Christ and our rising with him to new life (Romans 6:3-4).

The life of the Risen Christ is ours. Because of Baptism, sin is destroyed, new life emerges; all is clean, refreshed, and made new.

The Baptismal Garment: A white garment is placed on the newly baptized, a sign of new status. It symbolizes that she or he has put on new life as a child of God (Galatians 3:27) and is now a new creation.

In the first centuries, the early Christians wore new clothes after their Baptism to proclaim their new life in Christ. The white baptismal garment is a continuation of that practice. We promise to "put on Christ" throughout our lives.

As parents you have taken on the responsibility to provide shelter, food, and clothing for your child. This symbol is also a reminder to wrap your child in the care and compassion of Christ.

The Lighted Candle: Your child's baptismal candle is lit from the parish's Easter (Paschal) candle, a sign of the Risen Christ. This symbol reminds all that your child is welcomed into the Church to participate with her in being the "light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). The candle is a visible reminder that this light of Christ is to be kept burning all through life, a light shining in what is sometimes a dark world.

The symbols of the lighted candle and the white garment capture in a unique way the challenge of Baptism as we hear St. Peter say, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

Baptism touches our entire life. The beginning and what seems to be the end — at least the end of our earthly life — are intertwined. Many of these symbols recur in the funeral liturgy. At the door of the church, the presider sprinkles the coffin with holy water and recalls the waters of Baptism. Then the pall, a symbol of the baptismal garment, is placed on the coffin. The body is brought into the midst of the assembly, just as the child was at the time of Baptism. The Easter candle burns beside the coffin. This symmetry and relationship remind us that our Christian identity, begun in our Baptism, underlies all other descriptions of who we are.



The Church's Seven Sacraments

God shares his very life with us through the seven sacraments. They are rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus and the Tradition of the Church.

As the Church grew, Catholics came to recognize the actions in which Jesus had revealed for them God's grace: his welcoming, his giving of the Holy Spirit, his forgiving and healing, his self-gift in the Eucharist, his choosing and sending of disciples, and his challenge to married persons, indeed to all, to place the kingdom of God first.

These seven actions of Jesus were ritualized through the ages, becoming the official sacraments of the Catholic Church (at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215), helping the Church celebrate continually and constantly his risen presence among us.

The sacraments are not simply rituals of human making; they are different than all other rituals with which we are familiar. Catholics believe:

- Jesus himself acts in and through the sacraments.
- Through the Spirit, the grace of Jesus' actions empowers us. The sacraments can change us, and our world, because of God's power.
- We must be prepared for and actively participate in the sacraments if the grace of God is going to empower us. They cannot work without us.

"The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament. They bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1131).

Our Seven Sacraments

- The three Sacraments of Initiation — **Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist** — initiate new members into the community. In Baptism, we die to all that is sinful and then rise to life in Christ. Confirmation focuses attention on the gift of the Spirit first received at Baptism and strengthens our bond with the Church. In Eucharist, we receive the Body and Blood of Jesus, in order to go forth and be the Body of Christ in the world.
- **Reconciliation and Anointing of Sick, Sacraments of Healing**, celebrate the Church's mission of forgiveness and its resolve that all are included. Reconciliation centers on spiritual healing; it forgives our failings and sins. In the Anointing of the Sick, the Church anoints and prays for healing for those who are suffering.
- In the Sacraments of Service — **Holy Orders and Matrimony** — the Church reminds us of our call to be a people for others. The Sacrament of Holy Orders ordains men to serve the Church as deacons, priests, and bishops. Matrimony celebrates the love between a woman and a man, as well as their vow to serve each other, reflecting to the whole Church God's love for all humankind.

8 Ways to Fulfill Our Baptismal Promises

(for Years to Come)



The religious formation of a child begins at birth. Your child has been created in the image and likeness of God. Everything that you do for and with your child will help to continue to deepen that image and likeness.

God reveals himself to us as a loving parent, which places great responsibility on parents in forming a child's understanding of God. It is through your love, patience, and care that your child will first learn the love, patience, and care of God. It is through your forgiveness that your child will first learn about God's gift of forgiveness and healing. It is by praying with you that your child will learn to pray.

1 Make a list of your family members' Baptism dates and mark them on the calendar. Don't forget the Baptism dates of the adults in the family. These are special dates.

2 Consider celebrating baptismal anniversaries as special family days — maybe enjoy special desserts on those evenings. Tell your child how you came to choose his or her name. Take out the photos, the baptismal gown, baptismal certificate, and the candle. Light the baptismal candle and invite all to renew their baptismal promises.

3 Tell your children about their godparents and why you chose them. Encourage them to go to their godparents as well as to you when they have questions relating to their faith and their understanding of God.

4 Talk together. Tell stories about your God times. Use Scripture stories or wonderful children's literature. Answer their questions, even the ones they're not asking!

5 Pray as a family — often and as a natural part of family life: at mealtimes, bedtimes, happy times, worrisome times, after an argument, when someone is in trouble, and always on special occasions (Thanksgiving, birthdays, baptismal days).

6 Make Mass a family event. Sit near the front. Point out one or two things each week for your child to watch for. Talk about the homily on the way home. Before Mass, talk with your family about who you want to pray for during the General Intercessions and what you want to thank God for during the Eucharistic Prayer.

7 Grow together in appreciation of God's Word. On Saturday evenings, read the Scriptures you will hear at Mass. What is God saying to your family this weekend?

8 The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that Eucharist commits us to the poor (see 1397). Together prepare a meal for a neighbor in need, sort through toys and clothing for gifts to the poor, visit a nursing home, or add pennies to a charitable donation.

As you share your faith with your child, your relationship with God will also deepen. As you pray with your family, attend Mass, and share your Christian values, your family will grow closer together in love for one another and God.

Your child's life of faith is only the beginning!

Some Questions You May Have

Why does the Rite of Baptism begin with the naming (when that's already been done on the birth certificate)?

It does, for two extremely important reasons. As with many things, naming is rooted in faith, not just something legal! Scripture strongly reminds us of God's intimate personal love for each of us: "I have called you by name, you are mine" (Isaiah 43:1).

Second, and very crucial, we also take on the name of Christian for the rest of our lives. This is a privilege, which has rights as well as responsibilities. The sacrament isn't just about us as individuals; it is about our identification with Christ.

Why does the rite talk about sin, especially when a baby is being baptized?

Sin does exist in the world. Of that we have no doubt. Scripture tells the story of Adam and Eve. From the beginning of human history, people have rejected God's free offer of love and grace. Sin still marks human history. Children are born into this human condition. They, as all of us, are affected by the sinful world in which we live.

This Church teaching of original sin (see CCC, 388-389) describes the human condition of being born as part of an imperfect people where the effect of sin in the world, from the very beginning, cannot escape us. The human tendency of selfishness, of "me first," is ever-present.

There is something going on inside us that, as St. Paul said, makes us choose the very things we do not want to choose (Romans 7:15). It is not that we are born evil but that we are born with the possibility of choosing evil.

The reality concerning original sin teaches that every human being needs the salvation offered by Christ.

What the Rite of Baptism recognizes is that we need God's grace and one



another's support and witness in our Catholic community in this lifelong task of being healed of this tendency. On our own we can't make it (see CCC, 396-409).

What does "a new life in Jesus Christ" mean?

This essential meaning of Baptism is described near the beginning of the rite: the priest prays that Jesus, Christ look lovingly on the child and, by the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection, bathe the child in light, give him or her the new life of Baptism, and welcome the child into the holy Church.

"New life in Christ" is a life filled with the Spirit, a life committed to following Jesus. It is a life that is filled with and lived according to the values of Jesus, often different than the values of today's culture. It is freedom, yet challenge.

How can I be more aware and help my child be more aware of the gift of God's grace?

Baptism (as all sacraments, as all life) is about grace. One of the limitations of the past was that sometimes we spoke of "getting grace" as though it were a thing. Grace is relationship with God, the way God shares life with us. Grace is God's own life, God's energizing love, God's power within us, which enables us, united with God, to keep growing each day to

become more and more the person God created us to be.

Because God is present to us in so many ways, grace, God's life, is everywhere. But the seven sacraments are unique celebrations of Jesus' presence with us. Grace, God's life, is deepened and renewed within us in distinctive ways in the celebrations of the sacraments (see CCC, 1129, 1131).

Awareness can be deepened with reflection and shared discussion within your family of the times each one has been aware of the simple and profound ways God works in his/her life.

Why does my parish have a class for parents before Baptism?

Children are baptized in the faith of the Church: of parents, godparents, the local parish, the Church throughout the world, the saints. Sometimes, this sense of the Church becomes a faint backdrop to what is seen as primarily a private family event.

Thus parishes bring parents together to discuss and pray with each other — looking at the vast reality of what Baptism means for them, for their child, for the parish, and for the Church.

Because this is so important, parent sessions were mandated by the *Rite of Infant Baptism* in 1969, after the Second Vatican Council. The Church wanted to assist parents in many ways but especially to help them see this big connection: Baptism connects us — for life — to a worldwide family that gives us privileges and responsibilities.

Why are Baptisms often at Sunday Mass?

It is for this same reason that Baptisms are often celebrated at Sunday liturgies: so that the larger parish community can be present. When a new baby enters a family, the life of every member is changed! It is very similar in our Christian family.

Those who are already part of our Church family are affected by this brand-new member and have responsibilities: they are called to be witnesses, to share their faith, to guide him or her in the way of Jesus, to offer support in difficult times, to share prayer and worship, and to always give good example.

Welcoming each new member, therefore, is the responsibility of all those who have been baptized. It is not a private affair.

Who can be a godparent?

The godparents are the link between the family and the Church. In addition to representing the Christian community, godparents help parents to bring up their children in the faith by their witness and prayers. To be a godparent is a privileged service in the Church and a special ministry.

Church law (see *Code of Canon Law*, 872-874) says that a godparent be at least sixteen years of age, have received the Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist), and lead a life of faith in harmony with the duty he or she is undertaking. The godparent may not be one of the parents of the person being baptized.

Only one godparent is required for Baptism and a maximum of two (one male and one female) can be recorded in the baptismal record. When pastoral circumstances warrant it, one of these sponsors may be a baptized non-Catholic Christian as a witness of the Baptism.



Scripture Readings

Suggested for Use in the Celebration of Baptism for Children

The following are some of the readings from Scripture that are options for the Celebration of Baptism for Children. Because Baptism is a sacrament that we live our whole life, the readings are appropriate for parents (and families) to use for prayer and reflection for months and years to come.

Exodus 17:3-7 (Water from the Rock)

Are there things that you are thirsting for — a sense of peace, a reconciled relationship, an answered prayer, a feeling of God's presence? Can you trust like Moses did that God will supply the "water" for this thirst?

Mark 1:9-11 (The Baptism of Jesus)

After Jesus was baptized, he heard a voice from heaven saying, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." What would you like to hear God say to you? How have you felt affirmed by God's love throughout your life?

Galatians 3:26-28 (Being clothed in Jesus in Baptism, all are one)

Paul said, "There is neither Jew nor Greek ... neither slave nor free ... neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." What would he say today? With whom do you feel united? Does Baptism call you to widen your circle of unity?

1 Peter 2:4-5, 9-10 (The Living Stone and a Chosen People)

This New Testament letter indicates how privileged God views us: "in God's sight chosen and precious," a "royal priesthood," and "God's own people." How close do you let God come to you? How affectionate is your relationship with God?



PRAYER FOR OUR FAMILY



Gracious God, you have made us a family.
Thank you for choosing us to be together.

We want to listen more closely,
to care more tenderly,
to act more courageously,
so that we may do our part in building your Kingdom,
bringing peace and compassion.

Filled with your Spirit,
send us forth to be the Body of Christ
to all we meet.

We ask this in Jesus' name.

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