

# THE GIFT OF BAPTISM

A Handbook for Parents

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PUBLICATIONS

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# A VERY SPECIAL WELCOME

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DEAR PARENTS,

Congratulations on the birth of your child and thank you for taking this first step with your child on a lifelong journey of faith.

Baptism is a sacrament of welcome, of acceptance, of challenge, and of opportunity. It welcomes your child into a faith and into a faith community—and welcomes you, your family and friends, and your baby's godparents to share in that same experience.

It's a grand beginning.

Those of us who call ourselves Christians—followers of Jesus, the Christ—welcome you and your child. We may speak different languages, wear different clothes, and have different traditions, but we are the same in our faith. We share our history with Jesus, with the Apostles, and with believers from all generations since.

As a parent, your role at baptism may seem secondary to the role of your child. But that's hardly true. As the parent of a child about to experience the sacrament of baptism, you are blessed with some awesome responsibilities and some tremendous opportunities.

You may never have thought about it in that way. But it's true: You and the godparents you choose are about to make an impact on the faith of a young life. Your role, as you will hear again during your child's baptism, is one which calls you to promise that you will teach your child by word and action about God, faith, and values.

This little book will help you understand and reflect on this sacrament, our shared Christian faith, the baptismal ceremony, the relationship between parent and child and church, and the responsibilities and rewards of being a Christian parent.

God bless you and your child on this lifelong journey of faith.

## HOW DID IT ALL BEGIN?

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Baptism is one of the most important—and most paradoxical—sacraments. For all its popularity (virtually all of Christianity celebrates it in various forms), baptism is perhaps one of the least understood of the sacraments or rites of the church.

Baptism can be a ritual, a social event, a faith-filled moment, a religious milestone, a family tradition, an excuse for a party. And it can be all of these.

Baptism is also a paradox because it is, at the same time, the most personal of sacraments as well as the most communal.

Sometimes parents view their child's baptism as a singular, personal touch from God. They see God's presence as a narrow beam of light from heaven illuminating the child in their arms, while perhaps catching the others present with reflected glow. Other families are more aware of the communal nature of baptism. They recognize the beam to be a floodlight bathing them, the child, and all believing Christians with God's life and love.

In their celebration of baptism, parishes may choose to accentuate either the personal or the communal nature of this sacrament. Celebrating baptism during Sunday Mass, in front of the entire congregation, recognizes the communal nature of the sacrament as the child is greeted and welcomed by everyone.

Other parishes mark the sacrament of baptism in a more personal way—often on a Sunday afternoon—with only family, sponsors (godparents), and close friends present.

Regardless of the number of people present at the ceremony, your child is being baptized into a faith community that celebrates the presence of Jesus Christ and worships together in that place. That is also why

baptisms are held in church, rather than in homes, in yards, or down at the local riverbank. The church and your presence at it for this very important Christian milestone is the glue which connects you and your child to the larger community of faithful believers and to their God.

And that, after all, is what baptism is all about.

*Through baptism men and women are incorporated into Christ. They are formed into God's people, and obtain forgiveness of all their sins. They are raised from their natural human condition to the dignity of adopted children. They become a new creation through water and the Holy Spirit. They are called, and indeed are, the children of God.*

— From Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:5;  
Council of Trent; John 3:1

There's an old anecdote that describes a newly baptized infant as "a very early Christian." There's more than a little truth in that. But among the very early Christians—the original ones who lived a long time ago in Palestine, Greece, and the Middle East—baptism was something which almost never included small children.

In the early church, when the Christians were an underground society living in fear of being persecuted, becoming Christian was undertaken rather quietly. An adult who heard the Good News preached by a disciple usually made discreet inquiries about joining the local Christian group. If a candidate seemed sincere, he or she would be instructed in the faith and baptized.

As centuries passed, becoming a Christian wasn't such a dangerous thing anymore. The church was prospering and just about everyone—at least in that part of the world—was Christian. And just like today, Chris-

tians were having babies.

The church had learned what to do about welcoming adults: It instructed them, accepted them, and baptized them. But when Christians had babies, the church wasn't so sure what to do.

Around the year 400, a bishop named Augustine—we know him today as Saint Augustine—thought and prayed and decided that if these children were going to be raised as Christians they should have the sacramental blessing that goes with being Christian. So the church began baptizing children, placing upon them the seal of the promise of faith. Because they couldn't state their beliefs like adults, it was left to their parents to make the baptismal promises and profession of faith for them.

The tradition of infant baptism continues in the Catholic church and many other Christian faith communities. The parental role remains extremely important. During the baptismal ceremony you are reminded that it is your duty to guide your child in the practice of the faith. That's something you can do well only if you are faithful to God and the Christian community. In that way, baptism is a welcoming event not only for your child, but also for you.

Baptism starts a sacramental initiation that continues with first holy communion (eucharist) and confirmation. For more ideas about how to continue this walk of faith and initiation with your child, see pages 47-52 in this book.

Of course, not all the children presented for baptism are infants. Sometimes they are toddlers, or even older. Although the church encourages that children be baptized as soon as practical, there's no need to feel guilty about not rushing things.

Parents who wait until their child is older can look forward to a different sort of experience. For example, a toddler will have to be told about some of the things which will happen during the ceremony. (Any-



one who's tried to pour water over the forehead of an unsuspecting three-year-old understands that.)

Along with learning about their parental role in this sacrament, the parents of toddlers and especially the parents of school-aged children will need to explain the ritual and the reason for baptism in a manner which the child can understand. This could mean purchasing a children's Bible or a book which explains baptism using age-appropriate words and pictures. It also means involving the child more deeply in the social aspect of this faith-event by letting him or her help plan the party and invite young friends. For more about baptizing an older child, see page 27.

*Dearly beloved, these children have been reborn in baptism.  
They are now called children of God, for so indeed they are.  
In confirmation, they will receive the fullness of God's Spirit.  
In holy communion they will share in the banquet of Christ's  
sacrifice, calling God their Father in the midst of the church.*  
— *Rite of Baptism for Children.*

Baptism is not something which magically makes a baby into a Christian. Rather it helps nurture the seeds of faith. The splash of baptismal water or the immersion into a baptismal pool (Yes, more and more Catholic churches do that) and the words said by the priest or deacon during the ceremony are not magic. The church does not believe in a God of magic; it believes in a God who invites, who loves, who forgives.

Baptism helps us affirm that which we already believe—that this child you are presenting to the church is welcomed by God and welcomed, cleansed of all sin, into God's people, the Christian community. This is what the essence of baptism has always been—a welcome by God and the Christian community, an initiation to share the wonders of faith.

From its very beginning, the ritual—and the reality—of baptism has symbolized the joining of a soul to a group of like believers, a community dedicated to following the Creator through Jesus Christ. Baptism is the grand beginning. The rest is up to us. And to God.

It is an awesome and opportunity-filled time.