

BY
WATER
and the
HOLY
SPIRIT



Preparing for Catholic Infant Baptism

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The author is grateful to his many colleagues over the years at St. David the King Parish in Princeton Junction, NJ, including Fr. Timothy Capewell, Nanci Bachman, and Carmen Santos.

1: Everything You Need to Know about Baptism Can Be Learned in One Night

If I had my way, parents presenting a child for baptism would only have one assignment: Attending an Easter Vigil liturgy in almost any parish.

If you've never been to an Easter Vigil, let me start by telling you that it takes place only once a year, after sunset on the Saturday night before Easter Sunday. Catholic word of mouth might frighten you into thinking that it is unendurably long, and that you'll regret going even once. In fact, it's probably only a couple of hours — think of it as a movie-length feature, rather than the weekly hour-long Sunday mass you can somehow survive, and perhaps you can prepare yourself to give this celebration a little more space in your life than you otherwise might. And you should also be aware that the Vigil at one time extended throughout the entire night, so you are already getting a version tailored to impatient modern people.

Never experiencing an Easter Vigil is like being a baseball fan and never seeing the last game of a World Series — it's literally showing you what everything you do and believe as a Christian has been leading towards all along.

What will happen at that Easter Vigil is this: You will be immersed in the imagery of Jesus's victory over death — and not just his victory, but ours.

First, an outdoor bonfire lights a single Easter candle, carried into a darkened church, a way of telling us without words that light conquers darkness and always will. Scripture readings remind us of the long relationship God has had with difficult, sometimes unfaithful people like us, and that the relationship is passionate and still unbroken and still there for us, if we want to be part of it.

Then, there's real reason that you need to come to this liturgy: The Easter Vigil is the only time each year when adults are baptized. You will see a group of people who somehow have found themselves ready to stand in front of an assembly of Christians and promise to turn their back on the past and spend their future following Christ. They have probably been attending formation classes for a year or more, learning to pray, questioning and perhaps disagreeing with what they are being asked to believe, making friendships in a church that most of them did not grow up in and that still, in many ways, seems strange to them. Some of them can't quite fully explain what happened in their lives that brought them to this point, doing something so contrary to the world's expectations.

And yet, here they are, ready to say out loud that they are now Christian believers. It is rare that you don't see in their faces and hear in their promises a sense of how important this decision and this moment are to them, a sense that they want their future to be completely different from this night forward.

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

I do.

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?

I do.

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting?

I do.

When you hear these statements of “I do” spoken by real people into the bright Easter light of a Vigil, you might be able to see them as just as life-changing as the “I do” that gets promised at a wedding. They are promises that change everything. They are the words that make baptism possible.

2: Baptizing Infants

Now, here is the important thing to notice about the Catholic ritual at which infants and small children are baptized: It uses virtually the same words and ritual that you heard at the Easter Vigil, when we baptize adults. The difference is, when it comes time for the promises, we turn for answers, not to the person being baptized, but to the parents. It is the parents whose promises make the baptism possible.

You could ask, of course, why the church is willing to do this. It makes perfect sense for an adult coming forward for baptism to profess the faith before he or she is baptized. But if the questions and answers are so important, why would we be willing to baptize someone too young to answer or even be aware of the questions?

Throughout history, there have been Christian communities who have taken this objection to a logical conclusion, and decided that baptism is too important to impose on an unwilling infant. In those churches — such as traditional Baptists here in the United States — baptism is reserved for a later time

in someone's life, when the person can (in theory) decide for himself or herself whether he or she is ready.

In our Catholic church, there is a long tradition that answers the question differently: By being born into a family where they will be surrounded by faith, children in a Christian household are already, in a very real sense, part of the church. Because of the faith of the parents, the church feels assured that the children can already be initiated and recognized as Christians themselves. In the early church, entire families sometimes converted to Christianity at once, parents along with children of every age, all baptized together. It is a tradition that recognizes the power of the family as the primary place where faith is learned and passed along.

This is why in our Catholic church we have only one primary expectation for anyone presenting a child for baptism: the willingness to make those baptismal promises. There is no requirement that the parents of a child be married, well educated, or have their act completely together. All sorts of human imperfections can be not only tolerated but embraced. But one thing remains: Some baptized member of the church, at a child's baptism, needs to make a solemn promise that they will try to bring that child into touch with the faith as he or she grows older.

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?

So, as parents bringing a child forward for infant baptism, what are you actually “preparing” for by coming to a baptism preparation program? You are preparing to answer that question: Whether you feel close enough to that faith yourself to promise to pass it along.

3: What Happens at Baptism?

Whatever else baptism is — sacred, impressive, joyful, ancient — it is not “magic.” By magic, I mean some power or spell that changes the person being baptized and takes them over somehow, whether or not he or she wants it to.

Instead, baptism builds on the faith already present in the person being baptized, or present in the parents asking for baptism for their child. What happens is, *first* there is a profession of faith, *then* the baptism that reinforces and strengthens that faith, by God’s grace and with the support of the church. It is not something that “works” without desire and participation, our willingness to be shaped and changed and open to the workings of God.

If baptism isn’t magic, what happens when someone is baptized? No single word or definition gets it across, so let’s consider four different angles from which we can see what is happening.

1. Baptism Is Sacrament

Most Catholics who went through any sort of religious education program were probably taught a good concise definition of the word “sacrament,” and to this day, it’s a definition Catholics should have at their fingertips. In our current catechism, sacraments are called “signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us.”

A sign of grace — but what is “grace”? Grace is “the free and undeserved help that God gives us.” We don’t earn it, or deserve it. God just loves us, reveals to us signs of his presence and good will, and gives us what we need to serve God in this world.

A baptism, then, like all the other sacraments, is a ritual that we believe brings grace, if we are open to it: a power from God that transforms and inspires and strengthens. Grace brings us a sense that we have a relationship with God. When we experience love in any part of our lives and somehow recognize that God is the origin of it, that is grace. When we feel called to serve in a way we never did before, or to turn aside from a way of life that is destructive, that is grace. When we realize at turning points in our lives that God wants us to flourish, and not to be burdened with guilt or unhappiness, that too is grace. It is experiences of grace that keep us going as Christians. Without that personal experience of God’s presence and love, our Christian identity will never be the driving force in our lives that God wants it to be.

Of course, God’s grace can and does come to us outside of the sacraments. (God, after all, can do whatever God wants to, and hasn’t been known to limit outpourings of love and help to Catholics.) But we believe that the sacraments are rituals where we can count on grace, moments and turning points when grace is constantly and consistently available to us, an outpouring of the Spirit, the real presence of Christ among us still. As Catholics we have the life-changing privilege of these sacramental moments when an entire community prays for the

grace of God to be given to us. And despite all the many imperfections of the people receiving the sacraments and the people administering them, we believe that God's desire to fill us with grace means the sacraments are always the presence of Christ.

2. Baptism Is Initiation

If you're at all up to date with your Catholic education, you'll also know that baptism is the first of three *sacraments of initiation*, the sacraments that, together, bring a person into full membership in the church. At that Easter Vigil described a little earlier, the adults baptized that night then received the sacrament of confirmation, and then the sacrament of the eucharist — all three sacraments of initiation, in that order, in a single evening.

When it comes to children baptized as infants, of course, the Catholic church has a different practice. In most places, your child will receive his or her first communion years after baptism, and then the sacrament of confirmation several years more after that. There's no need here to go into all the historical and pastoral reasons for how things got to be this way. Let's just say that there are still plenty of different points of view in the church about when, and in what order, children should receive these initiation sacraments.

All that matters to us now, despite these different practices after baptism, is that baptism is still the primary sacrament of beginning the Christian life, the one that makes belonging to the church, and to Christ, possible. For every baptized person, this ritual of Christian identity is considered to be so necessary, powerful, permanent, and significant that there can never be a need for you to be baptized again, no matter how far from your faith or your church you might feel you have traveled. Once baptized, you are always baptized. This mark as a Christian stays with you throughout your life.

It's worth mentioning here that this initiation ritual of baptism unites Christians at a much deeper level than many Catholics realize. Anyone baptized in the name of the Trinity

— Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — in virtually any Christian denomination is, to the Catholic church, a baptized person. If someone who is baptized in one of these other denominations later wishes to be a Catholic, he or she doesn't get baptized again. Many divisions of belief and practice still exist among all the Christian churches, but baptism is not one of them.

3. Baptism Is a Bath

Sacraments use signs to communicate to us something about what each sacrament means, and in the case of baptism, the primary and necessary sign is water. Why water?

Some of it, of course, is because water is an elementary need for all of us, necessary for life on earth and a primary symbol of the generosity of creation. At the Easter Vigil and at every baptism, the words used to bless the baptismal water evoke images of water throughout the history of God's relationship with us, from the first word of creation spoken over the waters in the Book of Genesis, to the parting of the Red Sea to save the people of Israel, to the water in which Jesus himself received baptism. God has surrounded us with life-giving water, and we wouldn't be here without it.

But in baptism, one main image of water we're meant to see is a bath, a "plunge" (the original meaning of the verb "baptize") in which we are washed and refreshed and reborn. In baptism, every element of our past life that we want to put aside is washed away. The catechism tells us that "by Baptism all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as all punishment for sin." It is a complete fresh start for anyone, child or adult. Everything that has damaged us is cleaned away, and we are made new people.

Christianity isn't the only faith with washing rituals. In Jesus's day, as well as our own time, a ritual bath marked the transition for non-Jews who wanted to become Jews — a symbol of both cleaning off the past and being immersed in something new. But for Christians, we have an added dimension

that baptism's bath quite literally washes the power of sin and destruction away, and gives us the strength to be free from it.

Does baptism remove all the power sin has over our future behavior and choices? Unfortunately, no. God's gift of our humanity still leaves us free men and women, and at times we will all fail in our attempts to live the lives God calls us to. But baptism's washing tells us two things about sin. First, that God is stronger than sin, and that God's grace gives us the power to overcome it. And second, that sin can be and is forgiven — the cleanness and freshness of baptism can, throughout our lives, always be restored to us.

4. Baptism Is Death and Resurrection

Baptism's last and deepest meaning is perhaps the hardest for us to grasp, especially for those of us who were ourselves baptized as infants. Because baptism, above all, is a sacrament that immerses us in the life of Christ — and especially in what we call the Paschal Mystery, his death and resurrection. That same baptismal water that washes and refreshes us is also a plunge into darkness, and our coming out of the water is a rebirth in which we rise from the dead just as Christ did. If you want to be a follower of Christ, baptism shows you right up front what that involves: dying, and coming to life again reborn.

Does this all sound too symbolic or far-fetched to be “real”? It may be because the baptism ritual, the way we often celebrate it, fails to make the connections for us. So, instead of the baptism ritual we're planning for your child, please picture just for a moment a baptism ritual for adults from centuries ago in the early church.

Since it is a real “vigil” for the dawn of Easter, you've been waiting all night, after years of preparation, for this morning of Christ's resurrection, as well as this turning point in your own life. The darkness of a long night is gradually giving way; after a night of scripture readings and anticipation, you have answered the great baptismal questions and turned

east towards the rising sun. When the moment arrives, you're immersed three times in a deep pool of water — a lot more like real drowning than anything the church provides for most people these days.

Then, raised up out of that water, anointed with oil, reclothed in a white garment, the sun rising, these were the first words of scripture you would have heard:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6:3-5; New Revised Standard Version)

Dead to sin, and now alive to God, following in the footsteps of Christ himself towards a life in glory. Baptism, it turns out, is not for the faint of heart.

4: The Baptism Ritual

The baptism ritual for infants may be celebrated differently from parish to parish, but it usually encompasses the following elements as the high points of the celebration.

Welcome

The ritual begins, often, outside the church's worship space — a reminder that what baptism does is bring people into the church. (That's the reason, by the way, that baptismal fonts are, or should be placed at the rear of the church as we enter each Sunday. The baptismal water we use to make the sign of the cross is a reminder that we, too, passed through that water into the church, and forward to the eucharistic table.)

At this welcoming ritual there is a series of questions for the parents and godparents — because, again, it is their words, and their promises to pass the Christian faith on to their child, that make it possible for the baptism to proceed.

After that, the minister of baptism (priest or deacon) says, "I claim you for Christ our Savior by the sign of his cross," and traces the cross on the forehead of the child to be baptized.

Blessing of the Water

After a brief scripture reading and perhaps even a brief homily, the ritual proceeds with the blessing of the baptismal water. There are several forms of this blessing, but they all remind us of the scriptural images of water throughout the ages, and ask for the transforming and enlivening power of the Holy Spirit to be present.

We ask you, Father, with your Son
to send the Holy Spirit
upon the water of this font.
May all who are buried with Christ
in the death of baptism
rise also with him to newness of life.

Baptismal Promises

The parents, godparents, and all the baptized present in the assembly are asked to respond “I do” six times, in response to the six baptismal promises — three promises to reject sin, and then three promises to embrace the life of God in the Trinity.

Baptism with Water

After the promises, it is time for the actual baptism ritual.

Now a fact many people don't realize about Catholic baptism is that the preferred ritual for baptizing anyone, adult or child, is immersing them in water three times, and not what many people see as the “traditional” method of pouring a small quantity of water over their heads. Of course, that method “works” as well, but immersion baptism has a much richer history and a longer tradition. And, frankly, someone literally coming up out of the water soaking wet also becomes a much more visible, even spectacular sign of the complete rebirth of the person being baptized. (And after the baptism, *then* they

are clothed in their white baptismal garment — isn't that more dramatic and transformative than wearing it beforehand?)

Many parishes, of course, aren't equipped to cope with an immersion baptism, even for an infant. However, if it is offered, please ask about what it's like. Once you see it, it might change the way you think about baptism forever.

Anointing

The symbolism of oil is much less obvious than that of water. We know water is something that washes, that is vital to life. But why do we anoint people with oil?

In the ancient world, oil represented both a source of strength and a sign of royalty. Athletes covered themselves in oil before a race; kings in the Old Testament had oil poured on their heads as a sign of favor and protection, singling them out as God's chosen. Oil is used in the baptism ritual to give us some of that same sense about the newly baptized person: He or she is chosen by God as part of a royal people, and is anointed for strength and protection as his or her Christian life begins.

God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ
has freed you from sin,
given you a new birth
by water and the Holy Spirit,
and welcomed you into his holy people.
He now anoints you
with the chrism of salvation.
As Christ was anointed
Priest, Prophet, and King,
so may you live always
as a member of his body,
sharing everlasting life.

Baptismal Garment and Candle

The white garment your child is wearing, or a small white stole provided by your parish, is recognized and blessed as a sign of rebirth. Then, the godparents light a candle, taking its flame from your parish's Easter candle. (Notice how this connects every baptism to Easter, and to the light brought to all of us by the resurrection.) The smaller candle is also a final symbol of the responsibility taken on by the parents and godparents:

Parents and godparents,
this light is entrusted to you
to be kept burning brightly.
This child of yours
has been enlightened by Christ.
[He/she] is to walk always
as a child of the light.
May [he/she] keep the flame of faith alive
in [his/her] heart.
When the Lord comes,
may [he/she] go out to meet him
with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom.

Final Blessing

In the final blessing, the minister asks for prayers not only for the person who has been baptized, but for the mothers and fathers whose work as Christian parents is just beginning.

5: Life After Baptism

After the baptism celebration itself is behind you, the idea of raising not just a child, but a Christian child, is an intimidating prospect to say the least. One way of beginning, however, is to consider some ways that your child's baptism can become an ongoing part of your life together as a family.

If you are depending on the church to provide all the religious formation your child needs, I fear you will be gravely disappointed. Parish religious education, and Catholic schools, are great. But a deep emotional attachment to God and the church starts much earlier: with the images, prayers, habits, rituals, and words we hear the whole time we're growing up.

Here are a few time-honored practices that can keep your memories of the day alive and help pass the faith along. Don't feel called upon to do anything in this list you don't like, or that you're not comfortable doing. Children know whether an idea seems natural, and comes from the heart. The only goal here is to help you think of some concrete ways you can keep the power of your child's baptism alive in your family.

Celebrate the anniversary. Remember the date your child was baptized and mark it on your calendar the same way you would his or her birthday or any other special occasion. You could observe the day with a gift, a visit to the church for a simple blessing with water at the font, a prayer before dinner, and a phone call or a visit with the godparents.

Involve your godparents. If you've chosen godparents who are thrilled with the idea of their special role, then make sure your kids have the chance to know them and hear from them. Children can become fascinated with the idea of godparents, and that someone has taken on a special responsibility for their lives as Christians.

Make a commitment to Sunday mass. Attending mass with a small child can seem like a pointless trial for everyone involved, especially on mornings when everyone is cranky about everything. Nevertheless, just being in the church regularly gives any child some basic religious formation. You'll find it surprising that just seeing the image of Jesus on the cross makes a deep impression on small children, and at some point may make them more curious about the story of why he was there and what he did for us.

Pray with your children. Prayer at home does not have to be long, or formal, or deeply quiet. Its natural presence as part of your daily routine is far more important than its correctness or its originality. Grace before dinner, prayer before bed, prayers when a friend or relative is sick — all these are daily reminders of our relationship with God and our membership in his household.

For many good ideas about how prayer can become a simple, regular part of many times of year and family events, try *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers*, a book prepared by the U.S. Catholic Bishops especially for use at home. It's easily available online.

Bless your children. The sign of the cross that we trace on your child's forehead at the beginning of the baptism liturgy is not the only time you can ask for God's favor and protection.

Parents have always had the responsibility and the power to call down God's blessing upon their children. Bless them at bedtime, before they begin a journey or a new school year, or at any other time you feel the urge to do it.

Celebrate the feasts and seasons at home. Children love ritual, especially when it takes concrete, tangible form: lighting an Advent wreath each evening, candles before Lenten dinners, pictures and stories of their patron saints. The *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers* book mentioned above is a good place to start.

Support your own faith. Among all the ways we as adults can build our children's faith, taking our own adult faith seriously — and remembering the significance of our own baptism — is the most powerful. Take advantage of the adult faith formation activities your parish offers, and carry the occasional book of Catholic theology or spiritual reading around with you. (Among the many good ones available, Fr. James Martin's *My Life with the Saints* and *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything* are readable and valuable on multiple levels.) If nothing else, it might prepare you a little better for the unexpected questions about faith and the church that your children will ask sooner or later.

Celebrate Easter. The three liturgies of Easter (Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil) are our time to relive the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. Celebrating these great three days (or, in Latin, the *Triduum*) is a commitment of time that can totally immerse us in the gospel story and remind us that our own baptism is our initiation into the life of Jesus.

6: Some Frequently Asked Questions

Who can be a godparent?

Choosing a godparent is an entirely different decision than, say, choosing the people in a wedding party. The church hopes that godparents turn out to be people who will, according to the words of the baptism liturgy, help you in your work as Christian parents.

The official rules about godparents are simple:

- You only need to name one godparent, but if you are going to have two (as most people do), it should be a man and a woman.
- At least one of your godparents must be an active and practicing Catholic who has received the sacrament of confirmation. (“Active and practicing” is usually verified by asking your godparent’s parish to provide a sponsor certificate. These are easily obtained.)
- One of your godparents may be an active and practicing baptized Christian from another denomination.

- If your family or national tradition involves having more than two godparents, by all means include them at the liturgy and in your child's life — just be aware that only two names will end up on your official certificate.
- If for some reason one of your godparents can't be present for the actual baptism liturgy, he or she can usually be represented by a stand-in or "proxy."

When should we baptize our child?

The church's strong recommendation is that parents bring their child for baptism as soon as they can. In practice there are sometimes delays of a few months, given the unexpected complications of life with a newborn, the desire to include distant family members in the celebration, and other realities.

We weren't married in the Catholic church. Does this affect anything about our child's baptism?

The marital status of the parents has nothing to do with their right to ask for baptism for their child. While some parishes may be inhospitable to parents who are in invalid marriages or unmarried, this does not reflect the church's teaching. If there is someone who will raise the child as a Catholic, the child should be baptized, period.

This having been said, parents bringing their child for baptism might well take the opportunity to consider the sacramental status of their marriage. If you were married "outside the church," perhaps you can arrange for your marriage to be sacramentally blessed and recognized. Many parents in this situation believe that this is impossible or difficult, but this is sometimes based on misinformation. Always feel free to ask a priest or deacon with whom you are comfortable about your specific circumstances.