

The Sacrament of Baptism— Celebrating the Embrace of God

By Sandra DeGidio, O.S.M.

Wendy was 12, Rick was 9, Joel was 6 and Karleen was 2. They were all from one family whose parents had been away from the Church for several years. Now Mom and Dad were returning and the four children were being baptized at the same time.

The whole family had spent several months preparing for their return and for the celebration, which took place at the parish Sunday Eucharist. The homily which preceded the ritual emphasized the seriousness of Baptism and that it calls us to live the faith that we profess in the rite.

As the baptismal rite began, the family and their sponsors gathered around the font, and the presider addressed the children. "You and your parents and sponsors have spent a long time preparing for this day. Is it your desire to be baptized?" As the three older children responded with an affirmative answer, 2-year-old Karleen shouted, "NO!"

There was an audible community chuckle at the little one's spontaneity, followed quickly by a visible sense of seriousness.

The youngster's response carried more import than might be initially thought. Children have an uncanny way of cutting quickly to the essence of theology. Although moments later Karleen changed her response to "Yes," her "No" serves to remind us that Baptism is, after all, not to be taken lightly. In a sense Karleen was saying, "Wait a minute, this is serious business, I gotta think about it!" In so doing, she made everyone else think a second time, too.

A lifelong journey

Baptism is a serious step—a step we spend much time getting ready for. We get new clothes, we get a candle to light the way, water to help us grow, oil for strength, even companions for the journey. But that is only the beginning of a much longer journey, a lifetime journey of commitment and discipleship.

Our journey begins with an invitation, a call from God through the Christian community to live the gospel as committed disciples of Christ. When we



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accept the invitation, that call and response is ritualized and made visual and “real” for us in the celebration of Baptism.

In the Church of the first three centuries adult Baptism was the norm. Those who were interested in Christianity were invited to join the Christian community on a journey of faith. Those who accepted the invitation became candidates for the sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist). The candidates, were called catechumens and entered into a step-by-step process toward full membership in the Church. This process was called the catechumenate. Joining the Church in the early centuries was no easy matter. The baptismal commitment was not to be taken lightly.

SEVEN PRACTICAL TIPS AS YOU PREPARE FOR YOUR CHILD'S BAPTISM

1. If your parish has a program to help prepare parents for the Baptism of their child, participate in the program early in the pregnancy.
2. If not, contact the parish three or four months before the child's birth. Ask for a copy of the Baptism ceremony and prayerfully study its rich symbols and prayers.
3. Choose godparents who will be a real and long-lasting help in the Christian formation of your child. It would be helpful if they could participate in the Baptism preparation with you. They are meant to be more than “honorary” sponsors.
4. Track down the family christening dress. And consider making or decorating the white baptismal garment used near the end of the ritual. You might also decorate the baptismal candle with baptismal symbols, using acrylic paints or nail polish. If there are other children in the family, they can help.
5. You might write a “Parents’ Prayer” or “Parents’ Wish” that includes your hopes and dreams for this new child. Check with the priest or parish leaders to see if there may be a time during or before the ceremony when you can pray or read it aloud. Or present it at a party afterwards.
6. Make the ceremony a community event. Invite relatives, friends and neighbors to participate in the Baptism liturgy. Some could serve as Scripture readers or musicians.
7. Keep the white garment, the candle, the prayers, photos and other symbols of the baptismal ceremony to share with your child in future years. These keepsakes can be brought out on the child's anniversary of Baptism or birthday and serve as powerful reminders of the ongoing importance of the event.

The entire Church would pray for and with the catechumens, instructing them in gospel values, sharing with them the faith life of the Church and celebrating the stages of their faith journey with special rituals of welcoming and belonging. A person's coming to faith—or conversion to Christianity—was looked upon as a community responsibility.

The final Lent before the initiation was a special time for catechumens. It was like a 40-day retreat including prayer, fasting and other forms of self-scrutiny as they prepared to accept the faith and be received in the Church. Lent started out as the Church's official preparation for Baptism which was celebrated only once a year at the Easter Vigil. That is why the Scripture readings for the liturgies of Lent and Easter are so

heavily filled with baptismal allusions.

Unfortunately, this beautiful, community-supported journey to faith was short-lived. With the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in 313, joining the Christian Church became fashionable, the thing to do. The standards of the catechumenate were relaxed, and people were simply baptized on request.

By the beginning of the fifth century, the catechumenate process itself had virtually disappeared. The sacraments of initiation became three separate sacraments celebrated at separate times. Soon adult Baptisms declined, infant Baptism became the norm and the process and theology of Christian initiation of adults as practiced in the early Church became a lost art.

In some instances, infant Baptism became a routine ritual bordering on magic. It is our firm Catholic belief that the Sacrament of Baptism expresses the wonderful gift of God by which we are “made holy,” become “children of God” and “temples of the Holy Spirit.” We must take care, however, not to restrict God's gift to one single moment (the pouring of water) or overlook that part of the sacrament that is our lifelong response to God's gift.

Broadening our view of Baptism

Baptism—and all sacraments, for that matter—are much more than the moment of celebration. They neither begin nor end with the liturgical ritual. They are celebrations of lived experiences. They exist before, during and after the celebration.

The ritual of Baptism does not bring God's love into being as if that love did not exist before the ceremony. Baptism is the Church's way of celebrating and enacting the embrace of God who first loved us from the moment of our conception. Baptism is a ritualization and manifestation of something real—of the outpouring of God's Spirit and of our acceptance of that transforming love. It remains for us to grow into what we already are: daughters and sons of God. Baptism celebrates a family's and a community's experience of that love in the baptized.

There are other life experiences—birth, death, washing, growing and so forth—that are celebrated in Baptism. The sacrament is multifaceted, as is revealed in the Scripture references and the symbols of Baptism. Let's look at these symbols and the Scripture passages from which they originate.

Water and Spirit

Water is the obvious symbol that we associate with Baptism, representing life, death, cleansing and growth.

It is interesting that our initiation process begins with water just as the beginning of time portrayed in the very first pages of Scripture also begins with water—chaotic waters that are put into order by the Spirit hovering over them. That life-death meaning of water continues through the pages of Scripture. Consider, for example, the flood waters of Noah's day and the saving waters of the Red Sea parted by Moses. Those waters of

the Red Sea, even if they killed the Egyptians, opened the way for the Israelites to pass from slavery to freedom, and later crossing one more body of water (the river Jordan) to pass into the Promised Land.

In the New Testament, then, it is appropriate that John the Baptizer baptized in the Jordan River, symbolizing that the baptized were also to leave the slavery of sin for the freedom of a new Promised Land. Nor is it without significance that Jesus began his ministerial journey by being baptized in the Jordan, and that the Spirit was present.

Then there are the references to fruitful, life-giving waters offered by the prophets. For example, speaking for Yahweh, Ezekiel announces: "I will sprinkle clean water on you and...give you a new heart" (see 36:24 ff), and Isaiah promises, "I will pour out my spirit on your children" (44:3). In the Acts of the Apostles, we see how the Spirit of Jesus, poured out on the new Church at Pentecost, brings order and strength (Acts 1 and 2).

Water and Spirit are strong and important symbols of Baptism. To be baptized is to be plunged into the waters and to open oneself to the Spirit of Jesus. To be baptized is to have the Spirit help us make order out of the chaos of the sinful world into which we are born. To be baptized is to be welcomed into the Church (the new promised land) and to be nourished there as we journey with each other and with Jesus in his ministry.

New life, new birth, new light

To be baptized is to be given new birth and new life (John 3:5). It is interesting to note that some of the early baptismal fonts had the shape of "a womb," to emphasize the new birth/new life aspect of the sacrament.

This image is related to the darkness-light theme that is also associated with Baptism (Hebrews 6:4). In birth we emerge from the darkness of the womb to the bright light of a new world. Some early initiation liturgies had the baptismal candidates first turn to the west—where the sun sinks into darkness, to renounce Satan—and then turn to the east, the direction of dawning light, to accept Christ.

The new life motif of Baptism is intimately associated with Christ's passion, death and resurrection. In discourses with his disciples regarding his approaching death, Jesus said, "I have a baptism to receive. What anguish I feel till it is over!" (Luke 12:50). When asking James and John if they really knew what they were requesting by wanting to sit at his side, he asked if they were ready to share in his death. "Have you the strength...to be baptized with the baptism I am to be baptized with?" (Mark 10:38). Paul reiterates Jesus' questions when he asks: "Are you not aware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?...we were buried with him so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead...we too might live a new life" (Romans 6:3).

It is not an accident that *the* baptismal liturgy of the year is the Easter Vigil, the grand celebration of Christ's Resurrection. Through Baptism we become an "Easter" people. The giving of a candle lighted from the Paschal

Candle helps spell out this reality. It is also the way that the Church, through baptismal sponsors who represent the total community, "passes the torch" of Christian commitment to those being baptized.

Off with the old, on with the new

Baptism ushers us into a new era. We no longer need be slaves to sin. We put our allegiance with God and good (Romans 6 and Colossians 3:9). To symbolize this old/new theme, the newly baptized is dressed in a white garment during the ritual of Baptism.



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In the early Church, the newly initiated were expected to wear the white garment and keep it unsoiled for the 50 days of Easter. Today, in most cases, it has become a symbol that is present only for the duration of the ritual and then is packed away with other family memorabilia. Among other things, the white garment symbolizes the Church's belief that Baptism sets us free from Original Sin.

But just what is Original Sin? The Church continues to insist on this doctrine and upon the reality of evil in the world—a point clearly echoed in our daily newspapers. The killings, violence, greed and dishonesty we see mirrored in the media are reminders that all human beings inherit the sinful tendencies and structures passed on to us by previous generations, beginning with our first parents.

Part of the beauty of Baptism is its assurance that through this sacrament we share in Christ's victory over the power of darkness in the world. Yet, the doctrine of Original Sin does not eclipse the good news that God's mercy and saving love are stronger than the power of sin—even before the baptismal waters are poured. In other words, we must be careful not to look upon unbaptized infants and adults as outside the scope of God's saving power.

Tad Guzie comments on similar issues in *The Book of Sacramental Basics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981): "The doctrine of Original Sin as we have inherited it developed only gradually. No one will deny the truth about the reality of evil that it affirms. We are certainly

born into an ambiguous world where the force of sin impinges on us as quickly as the force of love. And we are certainly born with inner tendencies which, once they become conscious, show a propensity for selfishness as much as for self-giving. But in addition to this dimension of life which the doctrine of Original Sin has rightly recognized, we also need to be attentive to what it has left unsaid. God loves us from the first moment of our conception.”

Baptism as future oriented

It has already been said that Baptism is initiation into the mission and ministry of Christ (1 Peter 2). Like Christ, baptismal candidates are anointed for this purpose. They are anointed with the oil of catechumens and the chrism of Christ’s salvation. As such they are strengthened for the lifetime journey of commitment to discipleship with Christ.

To be a disciple is to be a learner, a journeyer with others who learn together along the way. Discipleship is built on the concept of Church as a community of followers who support one another in sharing the Spirit and mission of Christ as found in the New Testament. It suggests that life is not a static condition, but a continual movement toward making real the actions of Jesus in today’s world.

That’s what we agree to when we say “Yes” to Baptism. We publicly acknowledge that we have been chosen, marked and set on our way. Most of the real business of Baptism comes after the ceremony.

Baptism and babies

All of this is pretty heady stuff, especially when considered in light of baptizing babies. The largest percentage of Baptisms in our Church are still infant Baptisms, even though the process of faith and conversion is essentially an adult experience and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is now the norm in the Catholic Church. So what does all of this mean for those infants?

Obviously, infants cannot respond immediately to the call/response aspect of the sacrament. Nor can an infant understand the change of allegiance, the putting off of the old and putting on of the new, the dying and rising, the new life, or the sharing in the life of Christ. However, the parents of those infants can understand and live those values and pass them on to their children. They can also experience the support of the community in living those ideals, and that is extremely important.

Infant Baptism only makes sense if parents are true Christian disciples. If they are not, then it makes little sense to initiate their children into a Church which calls for a commitment to living the mission of Christ.

The Rite of Baptism for Children emphasizes the importance of faithfulness on the part of parents when it says to parents: In asking to have your children baptized, “you are accepting the responsibility of training them in the practice of the faith.” That word *practice* is crucial; it calls for Christian modeling on the part of parents.

Considering the future orientation of Baptism and the fact that we are marked for a lifelong journey of discipleship, it is important that parents be strong role models and lead the way. It is equally important that the children’s sponsors (godparents) do the same. They are significant supporters of parents and the ones who can first begin to reveal to their godchildren the value of the Christian community.

Children learn to be Christian by osmosis, by *experiencing* Christianity at home. The “domestic church” prepares children for the local and world Church. It is in the home, in the domestic church, that children first learn basic trust which is the foundation of faith. Without the experience of faith, hope and commitment in the home, children will not be able to know and understand the larger Church.

Vatican II’s *Declaration on Christian Education* points this out quite emphatically: “Since parents have given children life, they are bound by the most serious obligation to educate their offspring and therefore must be recognized as the primary and principal educators. This role in education is so important that only with difficulty can it be supplied when it is lacking....It is particularly in the Christian family...that children should be taught from their early years to have a knowledge of God according to the faith received in Baptism, to worship him and to love their neighbor.”

Baptism and the Christian community

Sacraments can only be spoken of in *relational* terms. The new sacramental rites repeatedly speak of how the sacraments effect a deeper “relationship” or greater “conformity” with Christ and with the Church.

Baptism happens not only to the individual, but also to Christ’s body, the Church. That’s why the rite insists that we celebrate Baptism in the Christian assembly, with the community present and actively participating. It is the community, after all, who is welcoming the new members, journeying with them, providing models for them, supporting and nourishing them.

Baptism begins with God’s love and care revealed to us through Christ. It continues with us, the Church, living and enacting God’s love and care through Christ to the world. That’s a serious commitment.

Karleen reminded us of this when she shouted “No” to the idea of taking the Sacrament of Baptism too lightly. Perhaps her “No” can lead us to a fuller “Yes” in responding to the challenges of this sacrament. ■

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