

## INTRODUCTION

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—thinking he didn’t understand the question—tried again and asked, “Who first taught you about God?” Again the boy looked puzzled for a moment but then smiled brightly and said, “I can’t really answer that question. I’ve always known God.”

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

Your child is fortunate! 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 never leaves us the same; in

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the same way, the celebration of baptism should never leave the child, the family, and the parish community the same.

The rituals and sacraments we celebrate in the Church are so powerful and rich! 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 baby. ... Okay, that one's over and done with.") We need to give ourselves time—lots of it—to prepare for the 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.

In many ways, then, this booklet is not just about the moment of baptism, because baptism is not just 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 several years of your child's life, you will be the most important persons in how she/he understands their life as a follower of Jesus and their living as a member of the Catholic Church in our world today. Because of baptism your child is a Christian, but your child also becomes a Christian as the years unfold because of the environment and role models that surround her/him. What a challenge, but what a privileged responsibility!

Our first—and usually our most important—experiences of God happen within family life. Family life is holy and sacred. That's where God is. Several years ago while I was giving my new great-niece her bottle, her six-year-old brother sat next to me, talking away. Out of the blue (we weren't talking about anything at the moment that would have connected to this), Tyler said to me, "You know, Janet, God is a part of every family." In the words of a child! Families don't need to have a spirituality in which we strive to "put" God into our lives, our routines, and our time—because God is already there. It is not our work, our responsibility, our job to pray,

to do good works so that God will come and be with us, so that God will love us, so that we will be a Catholic family, so that we will experience God. God already loves us totally, unconditionally. God is already there; we just need to take the time to become more aware. Sometimes that is hard to do because we live such busy lives. That is our job—to slow down and become aware that (in Tyler’s words) “God is a part of every family?”

May this time of your child’s baptism be a graced moment of just that: time for reflection on your own faith, what it means to you, and your hopes and dreams of what it will mean for your child and your family in the years to come as you live together as disciples of Jesus.



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## What is baptism?

“Holy Baptism,” the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) teaches, “is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: ‘Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word’” (CCC 1213).

Baptism is a multifaceted mystery. Here are six of the most important facets.

### 1. Initiation into a believing community

In today’s all too often impersonal world, a supportive community is such a gift. We often experience this community within our parish, but we also belong to a much more expansive community. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that baptism brings us into the “one People of God of the New Covenant, which transcends all natural or human limits of nations, cultures, races, and sexes” (1267).

### 2. The bestowal of a name

This includes the personal name you have chosen for your child, which reminds us of God’s words of intimate love for each of us: “I have called you by name; you are mine” (Isaiah 43:1). But it also means your child will take on the name of Christian for the rest of their life. This is a privilege, which has rights as well as responsibilities.

### **3. Renunciation of sin**

Sin exists 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 chosen to reject God's free offer of love and grace. Sin still marks human history. Children are born into this human condition. They, like all of us, are affected by the sinful world in which we live.

Most of us are aware of the line from Leonard Cohen's song "Anthem," which says: "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." The Church teaching of original sin (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 388–89) describes the human condition of being born as part of an imperfect people where, from the very beginning, we cannot escape the effect of sin in the world. The human tendency of selfishness, of "me-first" is ever-present. This Church teaching reminds us that the flaw at the heart of all reality is nothing we did personally; there is simply "a crack in everything"; we should not be surprised, then, when it shows itself in us or in everyone else.

There is something going on inside us that, as St. Paul said, makes us choose the very things we do not want to choose. It is not that we are born evil but that we are born with the possibility of choosing evil. The reality of original sin teaches that every human being needs the salvation offered by Christ.

The rite of baptism recognizes that we need God's help (grace) and one another's support and witness in our Catholic Christian community as we go about the lifelong task of being healed of this sinfulness and letting the light in. We cannot do this alone (CCC 396–409).

#### **4. The celebration that God has chosen us**

The baptism of an infant is not primarily about a decision we have made for God; it is about a decision that God has made for us. In baptism we celebrate God's free gift of grace and salvation.

#### **5. The gift of 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 not a thing like water or fire. Parents don't bring their child for baptism and say, "Fill her/him up." 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 that enables us, united with God, to keep growing each day to become more and more the person God created us to be. In baptism—in all the sacraments—God relates to us as our loving parent who shares life with us—just as you, as parents, share your life with your child.

Because God is present to us in so many ways, grace, God's life, is everywhere—in the ordinary times. Because 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 (CCC 1129, 1131).

Because of the grace of baptism—sharing in the very life of God—we are

- enabled to believe in God, to hope in God, and to love God through the theological virtues (faith, hope, and love);

- given the power to live and act under the prompting of the Holy Spirit through the gifts of the Holy Spirit (wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, piety, fortitude, and temperance);
- empowered to grow in goodness through the moral virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance); (CCC 1266).

## **6. The beginning of a new life in Jesus Christ.**

The essential meaning of baptism is described near the beginning of the rite: the priest asks everyone present to join him in calling on our Lord Jesus Christ to look lovingly on the child and, by the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection, to bathe the child in light, to give him or her the new life of baptism, and to welcome the child into the 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, which is often very often different from the values of today's culture. It is a life both of freedom and challenge.

Much in the ritual of baptism (symbols, prayers, Scripture readings) is about dying and rising, the beginning of a new life, a life committed to following Jesus. In the early Church, some of the baptismal fonts had the shape of a womb to emphasize the new birth/new life aspect of the sacrament.

## **What does it mean when the Church says baptism is about promises?**

One part of the baptismal liturgy is the baptismal promises. But perhaps it is true that the entire sacrament is about promises, vows, to our gracious God.

Baptism can be seen as an expression of giving from grateful creatures in the presence of God and the Christian community. It is like declaring out loud, “Loving God, in thanksgiving, for all you have graciously done, and because I so desire to be part of Christ’s body on earth, take me for this work in your community. I want to begin this journey; so I proclaim it in public and in symbols” (the sign of the cross, water, oil, light, new garment).

In presenting their child to the Church for baptism, parents are responding to God in love. They are promising before God and the Christian community to do their best for their child.

Each part of the sacramental liturgy can be seen as a way the parents are making a promise to God and before the community about how they will be parents for their child.

When they trace the Sign of the Cross on the forehead of the child, they are promising a relationship with this child of God, not just the physical relationship that has been given, but a unique spiritual relationship of faith.

Presenting the child for the oil is a promise to work for the physical health of the child as well as surrounding her/him with the environment and example to be a follower of Jesus. The laying on of hands is a promise to impart and share one’s own faith and experience of God.

The prayer of the faithful is not one of begging but one of hope and promise to introduce the child—with concern and care—to the needs of the wider community to which they belong.