

## **Holy Baptism of Children**

### **A guide for parents and godparents**

Having a child baptized in the Christian faith is a holy and joyous occasion. It is a deeply significant event in a person's life, identifying that person as a Christian and joining him or her to the fellowship of Christians in every place and time. This brochure is designed to help you understand the importance and meaning of Christian baptism.

### **Some History**

Baptism is the sacrament by which God adopts us as children and makes us members of God's family. To understand baptism we go back to Old Testament times. When Gentiles converted to Judaism they were immersed in water, baptized, as a ritual cleansing in preparation for sharing the mysteries of Jewish faith, especially the liberative story of the crossing of the Red Sea. John the Baptist, the last of the great Jewish prophets before Jesus, expanded on this theme by baptizing all who repented of their sins and took on a new life. He promised God's forgiveness in preparation for the coming of a Messiah. When John baptized Jesus, scripture says the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, and God's voice recognized him as God's Son. This was the beginning of Christian baptism, which became the initiation rite for persons entering the early church. In the early church people sometimes spent years in study and

formation before being baptized. In our time we are recovering the original sense of baptism, as initiation into the fellowship and story of our faith.

### **What Is Baptism?**

Baptism is "full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body, the Church." Through baptism we bring even very young children into the church, where they can know the love God has for them and participate as full members of the community and partners in the church's ministry. As in the early church, Holy Baptism is appropriately administered with the congregation present, and when joined with the other major sacrament of the church, the Holy Eucharist. Although baptism may take place any time, it is especially appropriate during the Easter Vigil, the service of the early church in which we share in Christ's victory over death. Other particularly appropriate occasions for baptism are the celebration of Jesus' Baptism, the Day of Pentecost, All Saints' Day, and the time of the bishop's visitation to the parish.

### **What Baptism Is Not**

Baptism is not spiritual vaccination. People used to believe that children must be baptized to be protected from "original sin;" they were thought to be carriers of the sin of Adam and Eve and needed to be cleansed of it lest they die unsaved. To the contrary, we do not believe that children

will be condemned if they die, but rather received as innocent and pure into the arms of Christ who said, "Let the little ones come to me." Baptism is also not "naming" or "christening" the child. The child is named during the service in recognition of his or her desire to become a member of Christ's Church, but this is not the reason for baptism. Furthermore, baptism is not merely a rite of thanksgiving for the birth of a child. Though the service is full of thanksgiving for God's gifts (e.g., for water, the Holy Spirit, and all the benefits of baptism), it is not specifically an occasion to get together to thank God for the child's birth. The Prayer Book has a separate rite for this called, "A Thanksgiving for the Birth or Adoption of a Child."

### **Signs and Grace**

The outward and visible sign of baptism is water, in which a person is baptized in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Water refers to the creation story in which "the Spirit of God moved over the face of the deep." It refers also to the Exodus story about the passage through the Red Sea, to the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized, to Jesus' cleansing of the leper, and to other scriptural references. Water represents the difference between life and death, as in dry deserts like those of Palestine. It symbolizes the passage from an old life to a new life. In the water of baptism we are made one in a new life with Christ. At baptism we are "sealed" by the Holy Spirit, and "marked as Christ's own

forever” with oil in the form of a cross on our foreheads.

The inward and spiritual grace of baptism is union with Christ in his death and resurrection, by which we receive birth into God’s family (the Church), God’s promise of love and forgiveness of sins, and new life in the Holy Spirit. By baptism we are born into the whole communion and fellowship of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. By recognizing God’s grace in our lives we find power through the Holy Spirit to offer the gifts God has given us for ministry and healing in the world. Baptism is our commissioning for ministry. We find our lives enriched by the Holy Spirit who gives us gifts: inquiring and discerning hearts, courage to persevere even in life’s difficulties, a spirit to know God, and joy and wonder in all God’s works.

### **What Is Required of Us?**

Parents and godparents affirm their belief and trust in Jesus, their commitment to follow and obey Christ’, and their renunciation of all things that draw us from God. When they commit a young child to Christ they take on the promises and vows of the Baptismal Covenant for the child. With God’s help, they must do their best to encourage and support the child to learn and grow in Christian faith. They are responsible to the child and to God to help the child live into the promises made for him or her at baptism, and to know, love,

and serve God through the church, however God may call him or her to do so.

### **Responsibilities**

You are expected to:

- 1) Attend church on a regular basis, so that the child will learn by observing that public worship of God is an important part of life.
- 2) Begin at an early age to teach children about God: that God made us, loves us, and cares so much for us as to come live among us in Jesus Christ.
- 3) Teach by example of your own behavior that Christians are people who believe in honesty and keeping promises, respect the dignity of every human being, and make personal sacrifices to see that justice prevails over injustice, good over evil, and peace over discord.
- 4) Present the child to a bishop for Confirmation when the child is of an age to take on the promises and vows of the Baptismal Covenant for him or herself.

Accordingly, instruction is required before baptism, as it was in the early church. Ongoing commitment to the church should be demonstrated by regular participation in worship, and faithful support of the church’s life and ministry.

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