

Infant Baptism

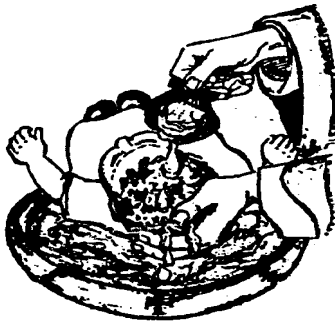
Gift to the Parish

by Thomas Richstatter, O.F.M.

Edited by John Burchet

Our understanding of infant Baptism has been changing. During a recent conversation with a parishioner, I asked him why he had his children baptized. "They told us we had to, Father," he answered. "Original Sin. We all saw the special place in the cemetery where unbaptized infants were buried." Yet Bill went on to explain that his grandchildren would be baptized because their parents have a sense of commitment to the Church: "Original Sin is still important," Bill told me, "but I have a lot more trust in God's love and mercy than I used to."

Bill's thinking about infant Baptism is typical of many Roman Catholics today. You don't have to be a sacramental theologian to know that some very important changes in our understanding have taken place. These changes are so important and so fundamental to our Christian life that they concern every member of the parish—even those of us who may see no reason to read an article about infant Baptism!



Baptism is not merely something for the baby or a family celebration, nor a thanksgiving for birth; it is a sacrament. Sacraments, as Vatican II teaches, have three functions: "to make people holy, to build up the Body of Christ, and finally, to give worship to God" (Constitution on the Liturgy, #59). How does an infant's Baptism build up the Body of Christ? How does it give worship to God? How does the parish celebration of a Baptism make the parish holy? Original Sin is still a factor, but our understanding of infant Baptism has broadened.

Original Sin in Context

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that Original Sin is "an essential truth of the faith" (#388), yet it is not a truth which can or should be understood in isolation, apart from other essential truths. The doctrine of Original Sin is not simply a "divine threat," a way to scare us into baptizing babies.

When I was a senior in high school I had a brilliant physics teacher. I remember the day he explained vacuum. On a platform, the priest had set up a bell jar with a valve in the top, connected to a pump. After pumping the air out of the jar, Father Brian demonstrated how "nature abhors a vacuum" by allowing smoke and other colored gases and particles to be sucked into the jar through the valve. He explained how this principle functions in ordinary things around the house, for example, how a vacuum cleaner sucks up dirt by establishing a partial vacuum. After a while I found myself thinking and talking as though a vacuum were a thing in itself. But a vacuum is not something; it is actually the absence of something.

Original Sin is like that: It is the absence of something. The theology of Original Sin was developed as a way to speak about our need for salvation in Christ Jesus. Like the vacuum, Original Sin can best be understood "not by looking at what it is" but by looking at what it is the absence of or the need for. As the Catechism explains, "The doctrine of Original Sin is, so to speak, the "reverse side" of the Good News that Jesus is the Savior of all" (#389).

Just as you "take away" the vacuum in the bell jar by filling the Jar with air, so Original Sin is removed when the person is filled with the Holy Spirit, the saving love and grace of Christ. "We must therefore approach the question of the origin of evil by fixing the eyes of our faith on him who alone is its conqueror" (Catechism, #385). I fear that many Catholics have tried to understand Original Sin apart from understanding grace. "We must know Christ as the source of grace in order to know Adam as the source of sin" (#388).

Consequently when we speak of infant Baptism and Original Sin it is important to remember that Catholics baptize infants not primarily for what Baptism takes away but for what it gives! After all, the Church baptized infants long before St Augustine helped develop the doctrine of Original Sin at the turn of the fifth century, When parents look into the smiling face of their newborn and feel the love they have for it, they know deep in their hearts that God loves this innocent child and has created it for eternal happiness.

What happens to babies who die without Baptism?

God's love is a mystery, a love not easily figured out. There is an ancient axiom: "The way we pray reveals what we believe. " Listen carefully in the following prayer from the funeral rite to what the Church is teaching us about God's regard for children who have not been baptized: "O God, you are our final home. We commend to you N., our child. Trusting in your mercy and in your all-embracing love, we pray that you give him/her happiness forever. " (Order of Christian Funerals. #282)

Is it right to make decisions for a baby?

Certainly there are some things that parents should let a child decide: who she will marry or not marry, what profession he will pursue or not pursue. But there are things that good parents don't let a child decide. for example: whether or not she can run into the street when a car is coming, whether he will go to school on days he doesn't want to go.

There are subtle decisions parents make for their children. Even before the birth of the infant a mother makes a decision regarding the baby's health by regulating her own alcohol, caffeine or other drug use during pregnancy. Another example: No matter where the child eventually chooses to live, or what language he or she eventually chooses to speak, parents feel that it is good that the child know their language. They don't wait until the baby is 15 or 21 before speaking to the child!

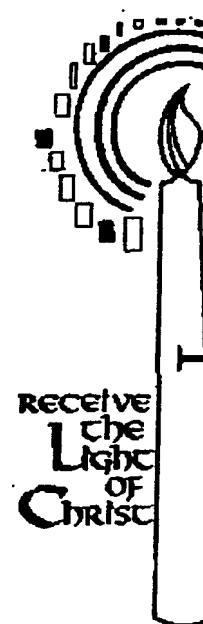
But the discussion about "who decides" and "free choice" misses the point! God is the one who chooses. I am a Christian, not because I have chosen God, but because God has chosen me! The Baptism of an infant is not primarily about a decision we have make for God; it is about a decision that God has made for us. At Baptism, we celebrate God's free gift of grace and salvation. This essential truth about Baptism is all the more striking at the Baptism of an infant.

The infant's gift to the parish

When we think of infant Baptism our attention is usually on what the infant receives. But have you ever thought of what the infant gives to you and to the parish? Infants and children can give us special insights into the nature of God.

At least five times in the Gospels, Jesus tells us that we must become "children." Recall the incident in Luke's Gospel when people were bringing infants to Jesus over the disciples' objections. Jesus tells the disciples. "Let the children come to me and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these [W]hoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it" (18:15-17).

What does Jesus mean when he says that we must become like children? We are proud to live in a land of personal freedom and individual responsibilities. We stress growth and maturity; we strive to be "all that we can be." And Jesus wants us to be like children? Surely Jesus doesn't want us to remain forever in diapers, speechless and helpless!



When I see the infant held in the arms of its father or mother at a Baptism, I can see beyond the visible and experience something of the love of the parents for the child and the trust of the child in its parents. The infant loving its parents, trusting them. Having faith in them is a model of our faith, hope and love of God - and God's faith, hope and love for us.

To see a child held in the arms of its father or mother is to get a glimpse of what God is like, to see an image of the relationship between the human race and the Creator. The infant "makes present" the reality of who we are before God: creation, radically dependent on our loving Parent. This is our most honest, deepest and truest stance before God.

This is what sacraments are about: coming into loving contact with who God-is-for-us and acknowledging that the reality is wonder and awe and thanksgiving. As the infant is baptized, already it is not only a member of the Church, it is a disciple! By its very being the infant preaches Good News, telling us of the wonders of God's love.

If only we could preserve that stance before God, that trust a child has for its parent. Too quickly we Christians lose the attitude of children and begin to act independently of God. Instead of coming to Church to be "held in the arms of our loving God," who loves us like a father or mother, we come in order to tell God what we think God should be doing for us. If God does what we want, we are happy with God, if God doesn't, we become turned off by religion! A baby indeed offers a great gift to the parish community.

Infant Baptism at Sunday Mass

In order for the parish to receive this gift it is important for us, the already baptized, to be present during the celebration of the sacrament. This is why an increasing number of parishes celebrate infant Baptism at Sunday Mass. If your parish is not celebrating Baptisms chances are yours will be in the future or that you will be hearing about the practice from friends or family in other parishes. All of us can learn something by considering how the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist are linked.

To sit in church passively and watch the Baptism of a baby I don't even know will hardly make it worth my while to spend the extra time the Baptism adds to Eucharist! But we don't come to liturgy as passive spectators. Vatican II teaches that the sacraments are to be celebrated in a way that "the Christian people, as far as possible, are able to understand them with ease and to take part in the rites fully, actively and as befits a community". (Liturgy, #21). What are some ways in which the parish community can participate more actively in the Baptism of infants?

The Gathering Rites.

Each Sunday Eucharist begins with rites which are directed toward bringing us together as the Body of Christ, toward preparing us that to hear the word of God and celebrate the Eucharist. When Baptisms are celebrated at Eucharist, the parents and the children to be baptized are presented to the parish during the Gathering Rites.

The parents are asked what names they have given their children. That is a good time for everyone to reflect:

What name was given at your Baptism? Has this name influenced you in any way? At your Baptism you received the name Christian; has there been a price to pay for this name?

Parents and sponsors are reminded that they "are accepting the responsibility of training them in the practice of the faith," as the Rite of Baptism for Children says. This reminder is important for the whole parish. The family, including, the parish family, is the context in which the faith of the infant will grow and be nurtured.

Look around you. Is this a good place for these children to grow up Catholic? Why would anyone want to join this parish? Is there a real community into which these children are being initiated? As a member of the parish family, the answers to these questions should involve you personally. What are you doing to make this parish a community which people would want to join? Are you living your Catholic Christian life in such a way that a young person growing up in the parish would want to imitate it?

In a certain sense, the whole parish should look upon itself as the children's godparents! Christian witness is a serious responsibility that must be accepted by the parish in order for infant Baptism to be all that it promises.

Next, the Sign of the Cross is traced on the foreheads of those to be baptized. I was marked with that cross at my Baptism and my parents continued to mark me with it each evening when I went to bed until I was old enough to make the Sign of the Cross myself.

Remember what it means to be marked with the cross of Jesus. Each Mass begins with the Sign of the Cross: Does this action remind you of your Baptism? Is it not because you have been baptized that you come to Sunday Mass?

Six Practical Tips

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, see your pastor or parish staff three or four months before the child's birth. Study, prayerfully, the Baptism ceremony and its rich symbols.
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 baptismal preparation with you. They are meant to be more than honorary sponsors.
4. Encourage relatives and friends to be present for the Baptism (not just the party) and to participate in the liturgy, perhaps by serving, reading or singing.
5. Consider making or decorating the baptismal dress and/or baptismal garment which the priest or deacon places over the infant after the actual Baptism. Perhaps a relative will volunteer to make it. (Be sure the garment allows enough opening for anointing of the chest.) Talk to your priest or deacon before you do this.
6. Decorate the child's candle with baptismal symbols (with acrylic paints or nail polish), obtain a baptismal certificate and, with the priest's or deacon's permission, take pictures of the event. All these things can be saved for the child as souvenirs, touching reminders of the ongoing importance of his or her Baptism.

Preparing for the Baptism.

At the conclusion of the Gathering Rites, just like at every other Sunday Mass, we are seated to listen to the readings from Sacred Scripture, the stories which tell us of the implications of our Baptism and our Christian commitment. The Rite of Baptism follows the readings because a sacramental celebration is a response to God's word. After the readings and the homily our attention is directed to the baptismal font, the womb of Mother Church.

We bless God for the wonderful gift of water and remember how the invisible God graces us through visible signs. We remember how God has saved us through water in the past (the great flood, the waters of the Red Sea, the waters of the Jordan where Jesus was baptized) and we ask that the Holy Spirit make fruitful the waters of this womb so that these infants may become sons and daughters of the Church.

The parents and godparents are then asked to reject sin and profess their faith. The parish joins with them in these promises, for our baptismal promises need to be renewed each day of our lives. It's like the vows a husband and wife make to each other on their wedding day: They must be renewed daily and strengthened if the marriage is to grow and mature.

What do we promise at Baptism? We promise to renounce Satan, to "reject the glamour of evil and refuse to be mastered by sin." To turn from sin I must know what sins I face. Many are to be found in the "Ism" family: consumerism, egoism, escapism, materialism, militarism, narcissism, nationalism, racism, sexism. We are then asked to profess our faith. Just as the infant loves and trusts its parents, it has faith in the God of its parents. To believe that the infant cannot have faith because it cannot recite answers to catechism questions or make "a rational assent to revealed truths" is to understand faith in a very limited way. If a child can have faith in its parents, a child can have faith in God. It is this loving, childlike trust in our creator God that we profess in the Creed, which is professed as part of our renewal of baptismal promises.

Question Box

1. How is Baptism a parish event rather than a private one?
2. What case can you make for Baptisms at Sunday Mass?
3. Name some ways you can actively participate in an infant's Baptism.

Baptism

After our Profession of Faith, the children to be baptized are then plunged into the water and are taken from the womb, dripping wet. Now they are born again, born of the Spirit, adopted children of God, members of the Church alive in Christ.

The newly baptized are then anointed with oil. In the Roman culture at the time when our baptismal rites were being formed, it was normal practice to anoint with oil after bathing. At Baptism, the water became associated with the removal of sin and the oil became a sign of being filled with the Spirit (remembering, of course, that the two actions happen together — as vacuum is removed by the jar being filled with air). In the course of time these two rites became separated and the anointing with oil became the Sacrament of Confirmation. It remains in the baptismal rite as a link between these two sacraments of initiation.

As the parents and godparents dress the infant, remember the words of St. Paul, "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3 :27). The parents are then given a candle lighted from the Easter candle and are instructed to keep the light of Christ burning brightly for their children so that they may "keep the flame of faith alive in their hearts."

Once again, we are not to be silent spectators. The meaning of what is happening to the infants is operative in our lives. We are born again; we are clothed with Christ; we are to walk in the light of the gospel. Are your life decisions made "in the light of Christ"? Does your life spread more light than darkness?"

Fullness of Initiation

Following the Baptism, Mass continues as usual. Before Holy Communion, immediately before the Lord's Prayer, the priest addresses the community, reminding all of us of the presence of our newest Christians, and the fullness of initiation that will eventually come with Confirmation and Eucharist.

As you pray the Lord's Prayer, see once again the image of "Our Father, who art in heaven" in these fathers here on earth. See in the love of these mothers for their infants the love of God for you! See— in the trust of the infants for their parents the model of our Christian life. We have come to church as children, wanting to be embraced in the protective arms of our loving God, whom Jesus called Father, who loves us, as the Bible says, like a Mother. And now that God feeds us with the Eucharist - the greatest and ultimate Gift.