

## **The Sacrament of Baptism**

Saint Peter in the Epistle speaks of the waters of Baptism, which he says are prefigured by the waters of the Great Flood (the First Reading), which washed away sin and gave a new birth to goodness in God's sight. So, today I thought it might be good to speak a bit about this great Sacrament.

To be Christians -- which is to say, to be followers of Christ -- we have first to pass through the waters that He Himself gave us as the first of His Sacraments and thus be incorporated into Christ's Church. The waters of Baptism signify, first of all, a cleansing, a washing-away of sin. If it's a baby being baptized, the Sacrament cleanses him of the original sin that we are all conceived into as children of Adam. For people baptized after the age of reason, the Sacrament also washes away all sins committed up to that point. All of this is part of the most obvious symbolism of the rite.

But water does more than wash: it also gives life. Think, for instance, of how any living creature requires water to live. We can go for some time without food, but without water we soon wither away and die. So, too, with the Sacrament, in addition to the cleansing from sin, the baptized person receives a new life of grace -- God's on life within him or her. Like flowers in the desert, the baptized soul can flourish and thrive even in the midst of the dry sands of this world, for the waters give a life that is more than human, a life that comes from God Himself.

If you've been recently to a Baptism, you know that there is more to the ceremony than a simple pouring of water. The priest also recites rich prayers, there are rituals with candles and sacred oil, the invocation of the Saints, the vesting with a white garment. And of all these additional ceremonies, the most important are the profession of faith and the pronouncing of the baptismal vows. Everyone who is baptised must make vows -- either the person himself, or his parents and godparents in his name. He solemnly vows before God to reject Satan and all his pomps, to live as a true Catholic, to believe what the Church believes, and so to be a sincere follower of Christ. These vows are just as important -- indeed, they are more important -- than the those of the other Sacrament with vows, Matrimony. The idea of marriage vows are fixed in our minds (and rightly so) as some of the most sacred obligations that a human being can make. Even though we don't usually think of baptismal vows so often, they are even more sacred, for they make possible not just family life, but eternal life. It's sad that we don't call those vows to mind more often and realize what a sacred obligation we have received in them. Shouldn't we be guarding those vows with every bit as much effort as we guard our marriage vows?

Since baptismal obligations are so serious, the people who will pronounce those vows in a child's name should do so only after careful thought, realizing exactly what they are getting themselves into. Godparents have become something of a cultural institution for us, so much so that often the spiritual dimension is lost. As your average American what comes to mind when he hears, "Godfather," and you'll likely get an answer that has to do with the Mafia. Whom should parents choose to be the godparents of their child?

Culturally, it's often assumed that the parents' best friends, or close relatives, or wealthy acquaintances should be chosen. But, really, just because my best friend is a nice guy, and an excellent person in the human sense, and someone I'd trust my life with, that doesn't necessarily mean he'd be a good godfather. Godparents should be distinguished primarily as excellent role models of the Catholic life, since they are responsible for seeing that the child is brought up in the practice of the Faith. That's why the Church's law requires that godparents have received all three Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Communion) and that they be practicing Catholics in conformity with basic Christian morals. The Church, in other words, wants them to be able to take the vows without perjuring themselves.

Since Baptism is such an important Sacrament, parents should have their children baptized within the first few months after birth. We don't wait to feed our kids until they learn to ask for it themselves. We don't withhold milk until they can go to the refrigerator on their own. Neither should we without spiritual sustenance until they are older. When parents and godparents take that step in a child's name, they are accepting the obligations of raising that child in the Faith. To give you a more concrete idea of what that means, here are the six primary duties that the Church teaches:

1) *I intend for this child to be a believing and practicing Catholic.* That's what the Sacrament is supposed to start, after all, and without that intention no priest can administer the Sacrament.

2) *I commit myself to coming to Mass on Sundays and Holy Days and to see that my child does the same.* Baptism makes a person a member of the Holy Catholic Church, and apart from the Church the ritual has no meaning. Without an active practice of the Faith of our Baptism, the Sacrament itself does nothing useful and won't save us. In fact, it imposes obligations that our absence makes it impossible for us to live up to.

3) *I commit myself to teaching my child the basics of the Faith of Jesus Christ and the ordinary prayers.* Parents are the first teachers of their children and have the primary responsibility for seeing to their instruction in the Faith. If the parents aren't doing that, all the priests and nuns in the world won't make much of a difference.

4) *I commit myself to showing my child the Catholic life by my own example.* Any parent knows that you can tell a kid whatever, but if he sees you doing the opposite, your words and "values" will ring hollow, and he will ignore you. You can't expect him to obey the Commandments (such as honoring his parents), if you disobey them yourself.

5) *I commit myself to seeing that my child receive his First Confession, First Communion, and Confirmation at the appropriate time, according to the norms of the Church.* Baptism is the first of the Sacraments and is meant to open the way to the others, so that the child may grow in grace before God.

6) *I commit myself to enrolling my child in the normal classes of catechism when he reaches the appropriate age.* Our knowledge of the Faith must keep growing, and we have a duty to put our children into religious education courses. Like any educational activity, it is expected that parents and godparents will take an active role in reinforcing the Catholic teaching that the children receive in class.

These then are the basic baptismal responsibilities of parents and godparents. They are extremely serious, but they are also fairly straightforward. In this Lenten season, we'll be brought back to the theme of Baptism on several occasions, especially as we draw closer to Holy Week. Now's a good time to reevaluate how well we are living up to our own vows, as well as our obligations to our children and godchildren. May God give us the grace to do both things well, flourishing in the Faith ourselves and helping the younger generations to do the same.