

From the desk of Fr. Jim

On the Foundation of the Sacramental Life

Part 6: The Baptism of Infants

The Baptism of infants is, in some ways, treated as a special subject. Some non-Catholic religious groups claim that an infant cannot be baptized. I am unsure of their arguments, but they generally have to do with the impossibility of an infant child making a public proclamation of their faith. Concern over this is not necessarily ill-founded. The Catholic Church teaches in many places that it is important for all of us to be involved in the public proclamation of our faith. We also teach that this is an issue concerning Baptism. As a result of our Baptism, we are all called to an apostolic work in the Church and the world. That a person is required to do this as they come forward for Baptism is, of course, a result of basing one's Christian understanding on something other than divine revelation. The Scriptures require belief for adults, not children, but both are called to Baptism.

Even when the subject of adult Baptism is approached, it is clear that the driving force of the grace given in Baptism is not the individual's decision. God is the one who adopts. It is He that Baptizes. That this includes children is clear from the Scriptures:

Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you and your household will be saved." So they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to everyone in his house. He took them in at that hour of the night and bathed their wounds; then he and all his family were baptized at once. **(Acts 16:30-33)**

(There are other similar passages: Acts 16:15; 18:8; and 1 Corinthians 1:16.)

Parents need to take seriously the command to baptize their children. That this should occur soon after birth is clear from Church law:

Parents are obliged to see that their infants are baptized within the first few weeks. As soon as possible after the birth, indeed even before it, they are to approach the parish priest to ask for the sacrament for their child, and to be themselves duly prepared for it. **(Can. 867, 1)**

However, it should be noted that there is a mixture of traditions and legal elements in the consideration of when Baptism should take place. In the ancient Church, infants were baptized along with adults at the Easter Vigil. During some periods of the Church's history, and in some places, this was the only time Baptism was offered, thus children might have their Baptism greatly delayed. In later centuries, a high incidence of infant mortality encouraged the Church to Baptize at any time; initiation of infants soon after birth became the norm. In the last century, this was scrupulously observed to the point that many mothers were not present at the Baptism of their children. Now the law of the Church strikes a middle ground by inclusion of the word "weeks" and removing the

word “immediate.” Of course, if a child is in danger of death, the Church does prescribe that the child is baptized without delay.

A further delay is recognized in the requirements concerning parents of those to be baptized.

1 For an infant to be baptized lawfully it is required:

- a. that the parents, or at least one of them, or the person who lawfully holds their place, give their consent;
- b. that there be a well-founded hope that the child will be brought up in the Catholic religion. If such hope is truly lacking, the baptism is, in accordance with the provisions of particular law, to be deferred and the parents advised of the reason for this.

2 An infant of Catholic parents, indeed even of non-Catholic parents, may in danger of death be baptized even if the parents are opposed to it. **(Canon. 868)**

None of this prepares us for the question of what happens to a child who is not baptized. The rather famously controversial concept of “limbus infantum,” or limbo, is at issue. Perhaps we can take that up another time, since there is an interesting and complex history associated with the concept. Suffice it here to say that this concept is no longer used by the Church to explain what happens to a child who is not baptized. We are dependent on concepts of God’s mercy that his free gift of love is extended to a child who dies without this gift of Baptism. This impacts many other concepts of salvation, such as those related to original sin, but we have accepted a certain degree of ambiguity about this in favor of providing some comfort to those who experience the death of an un-baptized child. The Catechism of the Catholic Church clearly follows this approach:

As regards children who have died without Baptism, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus’ tenderness toward children which caused him to say: “Let the children come to me, do not hinder them,” allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism. All the more urgent is the Church’s call not to prevent little children coming to Christ through the gift of holy Baptism.

(Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1261)