

From the desk of Fr. Jim

On the Foundation of the Sacramental Life

Part 8: The Liturgy of Baptism

The liturgy of Baptism in the Catholic Church is instructive as well as a celebration of the gift of God. Here we can provide some general practical information. The normal (and therefore, proper) place for Baptism is in the parish church. Emergency Baptisms will be discussed later, but these would be the only time that Baptism would take place outside the parish Church. The normal minister of Baptism in the parish is the pastor or those (priests or deacons) whom he delegates to preside.

It should be noted here that the clear teaching of the Church is that Baptism normally takes place in the parish in which a person resides. If, however, there is a desire that the Baptism take place at another parish, one near the ancestral home, for example, then permission of the local pastor must be obtained. This is usually freely given, provided that the request is made by an active, participating family in the parish. While we will make note of this later, it should be understood that even though the parents may reside in a particular parish, the Baptism is to be recorded in the parish in which the Baptism actually takes place. When the child comes to receive other sacraments, knowing where the Baptism is recorded will become important.

The whole community is always welcome at the celebration of Baptism, as they represent the whole People of God, as well as having certain duties and responsibilities toward the child. It is a requirement of the Catholic Church that the parents be prepared for the Baptism of their children. This is to be carried out by either the pastor and or other parents who are devoted to this task.

Sunday (or during the Saturday anticipation of Sunday) is the best time for Baptism, as it is very important that we maintain a clear connection with the Death and Resurrection of the Lord. As well, Baptism should be celebrated as a communal (as opposed to a private) celebration. This should be open to all the recently-born children, along with their parents, godparents and friends.

The parents and godparents have the role of presenting the children for Baptism. After greeting the people, the priest asks for the child's name, allowing for this sign of officially presenting the child for Baptism. The priest then reminds the parents of their responsibility to train their child in the faith. This is an important instruction, as the parents retain the constant burden of seeing to this duty.

After Baptism it is the responsibility of the parents in their gratitude to God and in fidelity to the duty they have undertaken, to assist the child to know God, whose adopted child it has become, to prepare the child to receive Confirmation and participate in the Holy Eucharist. In this duty they are again to be helped by the parish priest (pastor) by suitable means.

(Ritual of Baptism, Introduction, # 5, 5)

It should be noted that this does not in any way eliminate the parish community from their share in this joyful burden.

The People of God, that is, the Church, made present by the local community, has an important part to play in the baptism of both children and adults. Before and after the celebration of the sacrament, the child has a right to the love and help of the community. During the rite ... the community exercises its duty when it expresses its assent together with the celebrant after the profession of faith by the parents and godparents. In this way it is clear that the faith in which the children are baptized is not the private possession of the individual family, but the common treasure of the whole Church of Christ.

(Ritual of Baptism, Introduction, # 4)

The godparents (also called sponsors, in Latin “patrina,” “matrina”) are also asked concerning their readiness to help the parents “in their duty as Christian mothers and fathers.” This is a rather general role, but should be taken on with great enthusiasm. Prayer, involvement in the religious education of the child, as well as practical participation in seeing to the Catholic formation of the child, are essential. A godchild should, without fail, be kept in the daily prayers of godparents. Remembering them on their birthday, the anniversary of Baptism, patron saint’s day, and major feasts of the Church year can all be important ways to form a supportive bond. Godparents should be selected according to their ability and willingness to provide this help. Therefore, they must be practicing Catholics, firm believers, and accept their role with a deep sense of duty.

A child (or adult) may have a godfather or a godmother, or both. They must be sixteen years old or older. They also must have received all three Sacraments of initiation: Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. If a desired “godparent” is not a member of the Catholic Church, but is a baptized Christian of another faith community, they may act in the honorable position of a “witness.” However, those who take on the duties of a godparent must be a member of the Catholic Church. It is equally important to note that parents cannot take on both roles of parent and godparent.