

Baptism - When and Why

A parish priest was meeting with a couple who had asked about having their baby baptised. Apologetically he had to admit that he didn't recognise them and, it turned out, that was because they didn't go to church. The priest said that a first step would be for them to be at Mass on a regular basis otherwise why would they want to have their baby baptised into a faith that they were not practising? Baptism is meant to be the first step on their child's sacramental journey, he explained, and they, as its parents, would be making a promise as part of the baptismal rite to bring their child up in the practice of the faith. This at least meant being at Mass on Sundays - as they should be anyway - so they could then encourage and support their child in its journey of faith.

This seemed to come as quite a surprise to them because, they said, the previous parish priest had baptised their first child without saying they had to go to Mass.¹ They wanted to let their children make up their own minds when they were older and so they didn't want to make them go to church and, in fact, they themselves wouldn't be going. As is usual in such situations, the priest made it clear that while he wasn't refusing to baptise their baby, the Church requires that there first be a well-founded hope on the part of the parents in terms of the practice of the faith and that until there was, the baptism would have to be deferred. On that basis the couple decided that they would leave it, one child would be Catholic and one wouldn't, and the meeting ended.

There are a number of aspects to this story that are worth looking at in more detail. Unfortunately the experience of this parish priest is not uncommon, nor is the effort that priests have to make in such situations in trying to be pastorally sensitive to the people involved, while at the same time upholding the teaching of the Church with regard to the sacraments, something that cannot be compromised and certainly not simply for the sake of convenience or "to be nice".

If parents are not practising their faith, how do they view the sacrament of baptism? Often people ask about a "christening" (a very non-Catholic term) rather than about baptism, and this immediately raises a question as to how churched they are. Then, too, is baptism simply something they feel has to be done (they may even use that very word: "I want to have my child *done*") not for any theological or even sacramental reason, but because the baby is that age or, perhaps, because of pressure from the family? If the child is a few years older, is it simply to get them into a Catholic school? – and that's not cynicism, it happens all the time.

¹ He had, in fact, been trying to be pastoral sensitive to them and hoped that by baptising their first child, this might encourage them to return to the practise of their faith. Sadly it obviously hadn't.

Parents – not the Church – are *the first educators of their children in the ways of the faith*. That’s a direct quote from the catechism. Therefore if the faith isn’t important to the parents, how can they be expected to fulfil that responsibility toward their children? – and yet it is *their* responsibility, not the Church’s. A Catholic education in a Catholic school will help, but there is no substitute for parental example. If something isn’t important to them, then it won’t be learned as being important by their children. Conversely if it is important to the parents, then an active practice of the faith (not just a nominal claim to it) is going to be equally important. For argument’s sake, if the Church’s policy was to baptise all comers regardless of whether there was a “well founded hope” with regard to their faith, then what? How is a child going to grow in its Catholic knowledge and practice unless its parents accept their responsibilities in that regard?

Then there’s the specious argument about letting a child make his or her own mind up when they are older! That’s just abdicating responsibility. Would a parent leave their child that free when it came to playing in traffic, putting their hand into a fire or a wet finger into an electric socket, or having free access to bottles of lethal liquid under the kitchen sink? If the Catholic faith is important to the parents, why wouldn’t they want to bring up their child as a practising Catholic? In any case, how can a child be expected to decide about something so important if a whole area of knowledge and practice has never been learned or experienced? Political correctness in our education system (even in our Catholic schools) already ensures that children are taught as much – if not more - about other world religions as about their own. What then, *who* then, is guiding them towards a choice for, and a commitment to, their Catholic faith? Baptism and a Catholic upbringing are the first steps in that process.

At first sight, there might seem to be a slight contradiction in the Church’s practice concerning when the sacrament should be celebrated. While the Church teaches that baptism is necessary for salvation, it qualifies this by adding “for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament” - in other words an adult. However, the salvation of a baby (to whom the gospel has not yet been proclaimed and who is obviously unable to request baptism) is not in question; God is not going to condemn an innocent soul just because the Church hasn’t yet poured water.²

Having said that, a baby’s parents - to whom the gospel has been proclaimed and who therefore know the importance of baptism – should want that sacrament for their baby at the earliest possible opportunity. This “want” should result from their knowledge of the gospel and the place of faith (and its active practice) in their lives and not out of some semi-superstitious feeling (or social pressure)

² By the same token, if a baby is in danger of death an emergency baptism should be carried out. This will hopefully provide some consolation and peace of mind for the parents should the worst happen.

that their baby should be “done”. They are making a commitment on behalf of their child until, through the sacrament of confirmation for example, the child is of an age to make that commitment for itself. It is for precisely this reason that the Church teaches that while “Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist lay the *foundations* of every Christian life... for all the baptized, children or adults, faith must grow *after* Baptism... that there is a need (therefore) not only for instruction after Baptism, but also for the necessary flowering of baptismal grace... that Christian parents will recognize that (responsibility in this area) accords with their role as nurturers of the life that God has entrusted to them... and that for the grace of Baptism to unfold, the parents’ help is important, so too the role of the godfather and godmother, who must be firm believers”.³

There really isn’t any conflict, therefore, between the Church’s wish that babies be baptised as soon as possible after being born and the requirement as expressed in Canon Law, the law of the Church, that: “for an infant to be baptised lawfully it is required 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 to be deferred and the parents advised of the reason for this”.⁴ Similarly, the Introduction to the rite of baptism says: “Parents are sometimes not ready for the celebration of baptism or they ask for their children to be baptized although the latter will not afterwards receive a (Catholic) education. Conferences of bishops may issue pastoral directives, for the guidance of parish priests, to determine a longer interval between birth and baptism.”⁵

The possibility of baptism being deferred - not refused, but deferred - is precisely because of the vital importance (to the flowering of the graces of the sacrament) of support and encouragement for the child’s faith. The baptismal rite says: “This faith is proclaimed for them by their parents and godparents, who represent both the local Church and the whole society of saints and believers”.⁶ Faced with a deferment, parents will often argue that their child is being deprived of the sacrament, but if things are actually being done with the spiritual well-being of the child in mind, then the spiritual follow-up on the part of the parents must be assured. If it isn’t going to happen, then it is they who would be failing their child, not the Church.⁷ (Their spiritual responsibilities also include future sacraments and attendance at a Catholic school.)

It might be the case that, in the absence of regular practice on the part of the child’s parents, a grandparent may be willing to accept spiritual responsibility for their grandchild and so stand with the parents when the baptismal promises

³ Taken from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para’s 1212, 1254, 1231, 1251 & 1255 respectively.

⁴ *The Code of Canon Law*, Can. 868.

⁵ *Rite of Baptism for Children*, para 25.

⁶ “ “ “ “ , para 2

⁷ Parents who may think the answer is to tell the priest whatever he wants to hear should remember that they will be making promises to God, not the priest.

are being made. While they would thus be assuming (almost *in loco parentis*) a more direct spiritual responsibility for the child than if they had been its godparents, the parents should still be encouraged to accept, at least to some degree, their role as the primary educators of their children in the ways of faith – perhaps doing so in gradual stages as, hopefully, they return to a more active practice of their faith and so feel more able.

A final thought from the story concerns the statement that, if their baby wasn't baptised, one child would be Catholic and one wouldn't. This begs the question as to what it means to be a Catholic. A person may have been baptised into the Church (and therefore be nominally Catholic), but what actually makes them a Catholic is the active practice of their faith within the laws and teachings of the Church. If that isn't the case or it isn't going to be, then we are back to the question that runs all through what I've been saying: why baptism or, more specifically, why *Catholic* baptism?

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In a postscript to the original story, disregarding what their parish priest had told them and the explanations he had offered, apparently the couple contacted the priest who had baptised their first child to ask if he would now baptise their second - on the assumption that, as before, he wouldn't expect them to start going to Mass. Quite rightly he said no: firstly because he *would*, in fact, expect them to start going to church, but also because they were no longer members of his parish. If there is a genuine pastoral reason for someone being baptised in another parish, as a matter of courtesy the priest who will be celebrating the baptism must obtain their parish priest's permission. Usually this will be a formality, but it is a necessary one just the same, and there should be a more acceptable pastoral reason than the fact that parents have found a priest who, for reasons best known only to himself, is willing to baptise without any requirements beforehand or any expectations afterwards.

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Fr Neil McNicholas