

BAPTISM
OF INFANTS
AND CHILDREN
at
ST. MICHAEL'S BY-THE-SEA

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Introduction

Holy Baptism is the first step into the Christian life. It is the doorway through which we begin our resurrected life in Christ. However, baptism is not magic, nor is it a type of eternal fire insurance. While its effects are real, so are the responsibilities it entails. The baptism of our children requires something of us.

Baptism of children is not simply between the child, the priest, and God. It requires the express support, cooperation, and participation of parents and godparents. Just as it is every parent's responsibility to feed and nurture their child's physical and emotional needs, it is the responsibility of the Christian parent to feed and nurture their child's spiritual needs. This is the commitment every parent makes when they choose to have their child baptized.

This brief booklet seeks to clarify the important roles and responsibilities of parents and godparents regarding Holy Baptism. It is written with the prayer that your child will be baptized into the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, and welcomed into the portion of Christ's Body – the Church – which is St. Michael's by-the-Sea.

The Christian Faith in the 21st Century

It is safe to say that we live in a post-Christian age. Presently, author Christopher Hitchens's book "God Is Not Great" is on the best-seller list and is outselling the pope's volume on Jesus Christ.¹ On tour in support of his book, Hitchens made the insightful observation that, "Everywhere I speak, I find that the faithful go to church for a mixture of reasons, from social to charitable to ethnic, and take their beliefs a la carte or cafeteria-style, choosing the bits they like and discarding the rest."²

There are a variety of good reasons why people today "go to church". But there are very clear and definite reasons why baptized Christians participate in the life of the Christian community.

Membership

Membership is the state of belonging to a group or organization. Different organizations have various conditions for membership. Some require a fee, others require a pledge. Sometimes membership is simply a matter of showing up. But being a member of the Church is different than being a member of an organization. A Church member is really the member of a family – the family of God.

¹ Christopher Hitchens, "God Bless Me, It's a Best-Seller!" *Vanity Fair*, (September, 2007), p. 235.

² Ibid.

We are born into our earthly families at the moment of birth. When we are baptized we are born into our heavenly family. We are adopted as children of God. Through baptism we are spiritually reborn into the Church, which is the Body of Christ, and our mystical membership begins. Membership in the Church means that we have literally become living members of the Risen Body of Christ.

St. Paul reminds us that each member of the body has an important role to play.³ So too does each baptized Christian have an important role to play within the Body of Christ. Our unique function as individual members is rooted, nourished, and sustained within the context of the one Body. Our membership in the Church brings us into fellowship with one another under the Head of the Body, Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Baptized Christians go to church because they are individual members of the Body of Christ, and the parish church is where the Body gathers.

Conditions for Membership

When persons are baptized, they voluntarily enter into a covenantal relationship with God. That covenant is expressed in the public vows which are made in the baptismal liturgy. Baptismal vows are like wedding vows: they are entered into freely, and they are not to be taken lightly. However, where wedding vows are made between a man and a woman, our baptismal vows are made between us and God.

The heart of the baptismal covenant is found in the confession that we renounce Satan, repent of our sins, and accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior.⁴

What About Children?

Obviously an infant or young child cannot rationally say they accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. They cannot make this confession for themselves. How can they then be baptized?

The confession and promises in the baptismal covenant are made for the child by their parents and godparents. The parents and godparents guarantee that the child will be brought up within the Church, to know Christ, and be able to follow him.⁵

They are asked: "Will you be responsible for seeing that the child you present is brought up in the Christian faith and life?" "Will you by your prayers and witness help this child to grow into the full stature of Christ?" "Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?", to which they respond, "I will with God's help."⁶

It is the responsibility of all baptized Christians to continue -- with God's help -- in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. But as a parent or godparent of

³ I Corinthians 12.

⁴ *The Book of Common Prayer*, (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 858.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 859.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 302,304.

a baptized child, not only do we assume that responsibility for ourselves, but we assume it for another soul as well.

Parents and godparents “go to church” to fulfill their own baptismal covenant. But they also participate in Christian community to fulfill that same covenant on behalf of their children and godchildren.

The Desire of the Christian Heart

It is the desire of the Christian heart to grow into the full stature of Christ.

Parents and godparents raise their baptized children within the life of the Church in order to nurture this desire in them. The hope and prayer is that when these young souls have reached the age when they can make spiritual decisions for themselves, they will indeed voluntarily confirm the baptismal vows that were made for them. They will choose to renounce Satan, confess their sins, and accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

When a child confirms for him or herself the baptismal covenant that was made for them, they are ready to receive the sacrament of Confirmation. Confirmation for the child is the chief aim of the parent and godparent.

Baptism at St. Michael's by-the-Sea

Holy Baptism is appropriately administered within the Eucharist as the chief service on a Sunday or other Feast. The Church has always reserved Holy Baptism for the special Feasts of the Easter Vigil, the Day of Pentecost, All Saints' Day, and the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord. St. Michael's continues to observe this ancient tradition. Alternative dates may be considered for pastoral reasons.

In order for a child to be baptized, at least one parent is to be a baptized and active member of St. Michael's by-the-Sea.

If neither parent attends St. Michael's, but are active members of another church family, a recommendation for baptism is requested from the clergy of the parents' home church to the clergy of St. Michael's.

As stated above, it is the express responsibility of parents to raise their baptized child in the Church. If parents do not attend a church themselves, it is unrealistic to expect them to raise their child in the Church. If neither parent is an active member of a church family, it is our fervent prayer that you will consider St. Michael's by-the-Sea as your new church home. After a three-month period of regular participation, if you decide God is calling you to a life in Christ at St. Michael's, we strongly encourage you to have your child baptized.

Parents are required to attend a preparation class. Here a priest instructs the parents and godparents as to the significance of Holy Baptism and the importance of their role in the baptized child's life. The class is 90 minutes and covers the biblical and theological understanding of Baptism as well as the practical aspects of the ceremony.

Godparents

Godparents must be baptized and active members of a Christian community, preferably in the tradition of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic faith. As such, they are naturally poised to nurture their godchild in the sacramental life in order to prepare them for the reception of First Holy Communion as well as Confirmation.

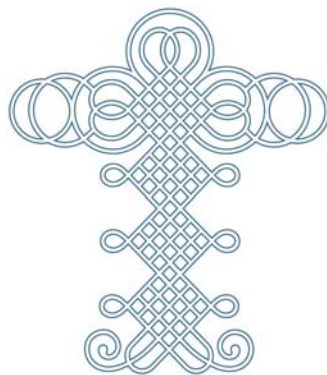
Conclusion

Holy Baptism is a wonderful and exciting event! It is the beginning of life as a member of the living Body of the Risen Christ. In it we are sealed with the Holy Spirit, and marked as Christ's own forever.

It is the great privilege and blessing of all clergy to rightly and duly administer this holy sacrament. The clergy of St. Michael's by-the-Sea look forward to meeting with you and welcoming the newly baptized into our church family.

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost;
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Amen.*

All Saints' Day 2007



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