

The Sacrament of Baptism: A Guide for Parents

Saint Ignatius Catholic Church



*Every baptized person should consider that it is in the womb of the Church
where he is transformed from a child of Adam to a child of God.*

St. Vincent Ferrer

What is Baptism?

Baptism is the first sacrament that a person receives in the life of faith. It washes away the stain of original sin as well as, in the case of somebody receiving Baptism later in life, any personal sins the person has committed. More than that, it gives the person new life—the life of God. This new life is the presence of God, who is life itself, within a person’s soul. We sometimes speak of this presence as “sanctifying grace” or as the “indwelling of the Holy Spirit.” This reality begins at Baptism and continues to be present from that moment forward in a person’s life. Because of this, a person who has been baptized is rightly called a “Temple of the Holy Spirit”: they become, in their very person, a place in which the Holy Spirit is present and active. The baptized are also called children of God, because Baptism unites them specifically to Jesus Christ, making them His brothers and sisters—and children of the Father—by adoption. This also gives us a new family: our union with God places us within the communion of His Church.

Why does Baptism have to come first?

Every other sacrament depends on us being in a relationship of friendship with God. But friendship demands some sort of equality between persons. Obviously, there is no way in which we can put ourselves on level ground with God. But God has chosen to put Himself on level ground with us by taking on human nature in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ. In Baptism, we are united with Jesus by God’s grace—sharing in the salvation He won by His death and Resurrection. Being one with Jesus establishes us in a relationship with God the Father which allows us to call upon Him as our own Father. Without this initial grace of God, we would not be prepared to receive His other graces.

Wait, let's take a step back... What is grace?

Grace refers to any spiritual good that God freely gives to us. We refer to the Holy Spirit especially in these terms: God freely gives us His Spirit to dwell in our hearts. This presence of the Holy Spirit is a continual grace which is always in action, and is often referred to as “sanctifying grace”. Other graces are given in particular moments to help us in our needs. So, for example, we might ask God for patience in a difficult circumstance, for healing in a relationship, etc.

How does sanctifying grace affect our lives after Baptism?

Sanctifying grace does exactly what its name implies: it *sanctifies*, which means “to make holy”. As long as we have God present within us, He is at work in our lives, helping us. He sustains in us the virtues of faith, hope, and love. He also helps us to grow in every other virtue by His grace, strengthens us in temptations and difficulties, makes our good works fruitful, and emboldens us to live and proclaim the Gospel. We might summarize the action of sanctifying grace by saying that it transforms us more and more into the image of Jesus Christ, the image of God.



What are the symbols of Baptism and what do they mean?

Water: This is the primary symbol of Baptism and it is necessary for a valid baptism. Water represents life, cleansing, new birth—all of which are given to us spiritually in Baptism. But water also represents a forceful power which brings death. In the Red Sea, God gave the Israelites new life by leading them through water, but the same water rushed upon the Egyptians who pursued them. Spiritually, this represents the fact that the waters of Baptism give us a new life in God by first destroying in us the power of sin which we were previously enslaved to.

White Garment: The color white symbolizes purity. This represents the fact that Baptism washes away the stain of all sin in a person, making of them a new creation. Being clothed in it calls to mind that we are clothed with Christ in Baptism.

Baptismal Candle: This candle represents, the light of Christ: calling to mind the risen Christ Himself, who is the light of the world, but also calling to mind the faith which He offers us. It is lit from the Paschal Candle to represent the fact that this light is a gift which we receive from Christ as a gift and which needs to be carefully guarded against anything that threatens to extinguish it.

Oil of Catechumens: This oil represents the strength that God gives us to enter the spiritual combat of life. Athletes and gladiators would anoint themselves with oil before the contest: this rite draws on that imagery.

Sacred Chrism: Before Christ, priests, prophets, and kings were consecrated with this kind of perfumed oil. In the New Testament, Jesus perfectly fulfills all of these roles in His Person. Our anointing with chrism calls to mind that, being united to Christ in Baptism, we are consecrated in these roles.

What does it mean to be “consecrated”?

To be consecrated means to be “set apart” for a purpose: for the worship of God. It is marked by an anointing with Sacred Chrism. In the Old Testament, priests were “set apart” to offer sacrifices to God, prophets to receive God’s word and bring it to others, and kings to order all things in their kingdom in harmony for the common good.

At Baptism, we are united to Christ, who takes on all of these roles. As members of His Body, we too are consecrated—set apart—to serve God in these capacities. This gift is also a responsibility.

- Sharing in Christ’s priesthood, all of us are called to make our lives, and everything in them, an offering to God. In particular, we do this in the Mass: because it is at the Mass that God allows us to unite all of our joys and difficulties, our works and prayers, to the perfect offering of Christ.
- Sharing in the role of prophecy, we are called to listen to God’s word in Scripture and in the teaching of His Church so that we can share that word with others.
- Sharing in Christ’s kingship, we called to order every aspect of our lives—our thoughts, our words, our deeds—towards the goal of loving and serving God. In Baptism, we receive not only the calling to live each of these roles, but also the power to carry them out.

In Baptism, your child will be set apart for one purpose, one goal. This goal has nothing in common with the aspirations of the world: success, comfort, wealth, pleasure, and so on. As parents, there will always be a temptation to focus on these worldly goals for your child, but, by accepting the gift and the responsibility of Baptism, you are agreeing to prioritize above all other things his or her role as one set apart for God.

All of this sounds nice, but does Baptism really make a difference? Not all baptized people are great people...

This is very true, and it's an important thing to always remember as parents. We *do* receive sanctifying grace at Baptism as a free gift, but that doesn't mean it's an automatic process from there in which we have no role. God never takes away our freedom. We have to cooperate with God's grace for it to be effective, and there are some graces that He wants us to ask for in prayer in order to receive them. We are not spectators in the spiritual life: we are agents in our own salvation.

This spiritual life is not easy, because, while Baptism removes the *guilt* of sin, it does not remove the *effects* of sin. All of us—even children—continue to have a tendency towards sin which needs to be fought against. God's grace helps us to enter into that spiritual combat well-equipped and to come out victorious, but it does not take away the struggle. And it is always possible for us to reject or ignore that grace: choosing a serious sin knowingly and intentionally over God. This kind of action is called a mortal sin, because it extinguishes the life of God in our souls: we close ourselves off to His grace. When this happens, we are no longer being sanctified by God in our day-to-day life. He still offers us the graces of faith and of conversion, calling us to repent of our sin and start again, but if our separation from God's sanctifying grace continues, it begins to show its effects in our falling further and further into sin, harming both ourselves and others.

All this is to say that having been baptized is not an unqualified free pass to heaven, nor is it a guarantee that anybody will be a good person. It is the beginning of a relationship which has to be sustained through life in order for it to produce its good fruit.

What does all of that mean for us as parents?

The life of grace has to be sustained, and serious dangers to it have to be avoided. It is analogous to physical life. Children, when they become adults, will be responsible to provide for their own sustenance, their well-being, and their safety. But, as children, they depend on their parents to concern themselves with these things and, little by little, to show them how to take care of themselves as well. The same is true in the spiritual life. There will come a day when children have to take on responsibility and decide things for themselves in the life of faith. But until that time, they depend on their parents to provide them with spiritual nourishment and to teach them how to avoid those things which are harmful and even deadly to the spiritual life.

We easily recognize the harm that can be done by parents who are negligent about providing physical food to their children or about keeping them from harm. Good parents stand in contrast to this by being especially attentive to all of their children's physical needs. The same reality applies to a child's spiritual life. This life is not something optional tacked on to everything else, like a kid being part of a club; it is of critical importance, it is a matter of life and death, with greater consequences both in this life and the next than any other responsibility that parents have.



What are the practical ways for us to sustain the life of grace in our family?

There are four aspects of the spiritual life which all work in tandem and which are necessary to develop in your children: knowledge of the faith, sacramental participation, moral living, and prayer. Below are some practical ways in which to do so.

Knowledge of the Faith

- Read Scripture as a family, especially the Psalms and the Gospels.
- Read Catholic books as a family, including the lives or the writings of the saints.
- Learn about the faith through your own study in order to be able to teach it well to your child at his or her level when the time comes.

Sacramental Participation

- Attend Mass every Sunday of the year and on Holy Days. Nothing is more essential to the life of faith.
- Go to Reconciliation as a family—not just through the school or religious education program—at least once a year, but ideally more often. (As children get older, it is important to give them many opportunities to make use of this Sacrament—because they may not ask when they need it).
- Use holy water at home and teach children to make the Sign of the Cross deliberately as a reminder of Baptism and a renewal of our Baptismal promises (renouncing sin and Satan and upholding the faith).

Moral Living

- Be the example of what it means to live the faith. When you act according to the teachings of Christ, take time to explain to your children why you are acting that way.
- Praise and correct children primarily with regard to their character, not primarily with regard to their athletic, intellectual, or other skills.
- Protect children from all things that could lead to sin—in a particular way, in today’s world, this needs to include serious consideration of social media, internet usage, etc.

Prayer

- Teach children to pray the Morning Offering or some other practice of prayer to begin the day.
- Pray deliberately before meals.
- Spend a more substantial time in prayer (at least five minutes) as a family each day. A Rosary or a part of a Rosary is a good way to practice this. Other options could include spiritual reading with some time for reflection, the Divine Mercy Chaplet, or other prayers that encourage meditation.
- End the day with prayer. Some form of the “examen” or the Night Prayer of the Church are great ways to end the day.
- Spend family time in Adoration—with an eventual goal of one hour a week. Adoration refers to time spent in prayer of adoration before Jesus in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is set in what is called a monstrance in order to be visible to those who are praying. This draws our attention to Christ and helps us to enter into real prayer.

How do godparents play into all this?

Godparents should be practicing Catholics. They should pray for their godchildren each day and help the children to grow in the Catholic faith however they can, especially by their example. This is a role with spiritual responsibility, and not an honorary position highlighting the person's relationship to the child (e.g. not just a way to acknowledge an uncle or aunt). Godparents should direct children in the life of faith when the situation presents itself. In their conversation and with their gifts, they might encourage children in the life of prayer, in devotional practices, in getting to know their patron saint, etc.

What is available at the parish to help us grow in the faith?

Mass and Confessions are offered daily! There are also many one-time events or other opportunities which are not listed here: special Masses, talks, opportunities for prayer, etc. A few things to be aware of in particular, though, are listed here:

Adoration

The Eucharist is exposed for prayer on Thursdays, 10 am-7 pm, and Saturdays, 7-9 am. Taking the time to come before our Lord to pray each week, even if it's just a short while, carries many blessings; it will deepen your life of prayer as a family. Come and discover the power of this time spent with Christ!

Religious Education

Religious education is provided at St. Ignatius school for our students, but is also available to parish families outside the school through our weekly Parish School of Religion (PSR) program. We are also happy to support families who choose to teach the faith exclusively at home—keeping them connected with the parish, helping to find materials, etc.

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS)

This is a beautiful way of teaching children to live the faith starting at age three. Through this education, children learn to reflect, to speak to God, and to recognize the signs and symbols of the faith. CGS is provided in our Pre-School program and through PSR, but is also available to all families on various days of the week. Do not miss the opportunity to give your children the gift of this education—it is more than worth it!

MagnifiKid

This is a monthly missalette designed specifically for children ages 6-12 to be able to follow and appreciate the Mass. Families can subscribe through the parish office and the missalettes will be available, labeled with the child's name, at the parish office lobby.

Special Events

During Advent, we have an evening event for families called Happy Birthday Jesus, in which children participate in various crafts and meet Saint Nicholas. In the Summer, a week-long day camp, Vacation Bible School (VBS), is available for children. Other events and opportunities may also arise—stay informed through Flocknote in order to take advantage of these!



Please contact our Coordinator of Religious Education, Elaine Kroger (ekroger@sainti.org), to learn more about any of these opportunities and to stay connected!

