

Baptism Catechesis



Giovanni Bellini, *The Baptism of Christ*, 1502

Congratulations on the gift of your child's new life! The friars at St. Joseph's are proud to be a part of welcoming your child to the Universal Church of Jesus Christ and to our parish community.

This Baptism Catechesis will walk you through the fundamentals of Baptism, explaining what the sacrament is and how you and your child can live the graces of Baptism most fully.

Please read this webpage before attending the Baptism Preparation Class at St. Joseph's.

There are three sections in this Baptism Catechesis webpage.

- Theology of Baptism
- Raising Children in the Faith
- The Baptism Ritual

THEOLOGY OF BAPTISM

Basic Beliefs

What is the purpose of human life?

We are different. The purpose of animal life is animal life.

The purpose of plant life is plant life, but we are different. The purpose of human life is beyond human life; we are called to a supernatural destiny: we are called to know and love God. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church (no. 27) says: "The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself."

This knowledge of a higher purpose, of a supernatural end of all human life, is written deep within us. We are not satisfied with the merely material, merely finite, merely temporal. We are always seeking something more. We were made for the infinite and only the infinite will satisfy us: Infinite Truth, Infinite Goodness, and Infinite Beauty. And those infinities are just names for the One True God.

Who is God?

We think that God is some super-powerful human. Or that he is some nice grandfatherly figure. But God isn't any of these. God is the Creator who stands outside all creation; he is the living source of all that is, everything else is nothing in comparison to him. As he says of himself (Exodus 3:14): "I am who I am." He is not super-big; he is Spirit and has no material parts. But he is not abstract: he is personal; tri-personal in fact. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And he is not remote from us, not on some distant planet or carelessly sitting outside the sphere of human existence. He is the God who reveals himself: he comes to make himself known to men and women throughout history, telling them more and more about himself until his final revelation in Jesus Christ.

Is Jesus God?

Yes, the one and only begotten Son of the Father. He is true God and true man: 100% God and 100% man. Jesus is a Divine Person in two natures, human and divine, perfectly united together. He is not disguised as a man; he is a man. He is not raised to a god; he is God. This is the mystery of the Incarnation: God becomes man so that we might become like God.

As the Catechism (no. 464) says: “The unique and altogether singular event of the Incarnation of the Son of God does not mean that Jesus Christ is part God and part man, nor does it imply that he is the result of a confused mixture of the divine and the human. He became truly man while remaining truly God. Jesus Christ is true God and true man.”

Why did God become man?

Because we sinned against God, all humanity became separated from God. We needed someone to make up for our sinfulness: but only a man could do so since it was we who sinned against him; and only God could do so since we sinned against God. Only a man and a God could save us; so a man and a God, in one Person with two natures, did.

Who is the Holy Spirit and what does he do?

He is the third Person of the Trinity; the bond of love between the Father and the Son. The Father knows himself in the Son and loves himself in the Holy Spirit; the three are the same name but different Persons. He is as much God as the Father and the Son; not three gods but one God in Three Persons.

Do I have to believe in the Trinity if I can't understand it?

Only God fully understands himself; he is too far above our concepts to be grasped by finite intellects and minds. But through faith we do grasp him as who he is: God reveals himself to us and his revelation is true. So, belief is the only way to know God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He left us certain analogies and hints, but they all fall short of complete knowledge of him. The Catechism (no. 143) says: “By faith, man completely submits his intellect and his will to God. With his whole being man gives his assent to God the revealer.”

Sacraments in General

What is a Sacrament?

The Catechism (no. 1131) says: “The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament. They bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions.” The sacraments are the means of connecting ourselves to Jesus Christ. God became man in Jesus Christ: he took human flesh and joined it to God. Through the Holy Spirit we can become partakers of the divine nature by the sacraments. As the Catechism (no. 1116) says: “Sacraments are ‘powers that comes forth’ from the Body of Christ, which is ever-

living and lifegiving. They are actions of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body, the Church.”

Sacraments reflect the dual nature of all human beings: we are both material and spiritual. Each sacrament has a physical element called “matter” (i.e. water) and a spiritual element called “form” (i.e. the words “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”). Sacraments are visible signs of the invisible grace of Christ present in them.



Rogier van der Weyden, *Seven Sacraments Altarpiece*, 1445-1450

How many Sacraments are there?

The Church has seven sacraments, which comprise three Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist; two Sacraments of Healing: Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick; and two Sacraments of Vocation: Matrimony and Holy Orders. The sacraments follow the Christian from the beginning of life to the very end; they form and shape the important moments in one's natural life with supernatural grace. Some can be repeated (the Eucharist, Reconciliation, and Anointing) while others are only administered once (Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Orders, and—unless a spouse dies—Matrimony).

The Sacrament of Baptism

Why is Baptism called a Sacrament of Initiation?

The Sacraments of Initiation are the ones that begin the Christian life. Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist are the Sacraments of Initiation. When adults enter the Church, they receive all three sacraments together. Children are baptized immediately, but in the Christian West they receive First Holy Communion and Confirmation only after reaching the age of reason. Together the Sacraments of Initiation form Christians in the divine life, and together these three sacraments make a person a full member of the Church, ready to live the Church's life of faith.

Baptism is the foundation upon which all of the other sacraments are built. Baptism makes someone a part of the Body of Christ and therefore enables him or her to receive the graces of all the other sacraments. As the Catechism says (no. 1254), it is “the source of new life in Christ from which the entire Christian life springs forth.”

Where does Baptism come from? Did Jesus make it up?

Baptism existed as a ritual washing in the time immediately before Christ, but Jesus changes its meaning and makes it a sacrament. Various Jewish sects at around the time of Christ practiced something like Baptism as a sign of sorrow for sin.

Christian Baptism takes the ritual and makes it something totally new. Near the beginning of each of the four Gospels, we encounter John the Baptist baptizing people in the River Jordan. But John explains to the people, “I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3:11).

Because it was made a sacrament by Christ, it actually gives us grace for our whole lives, and raises us up to live the very life of God through our everyday acts of love. Baptism not only washes away our old habits of sin, but also causes us to take on a new life as sons and daughters of God.

What are the essential elements of Baptism?

The Catechism says (no. 1239-40) the essence of Baptism is being immersed in water or having it poured over the crown of the head three times, while the minister pouring the water says, “N., I baptize you in the name of Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” In an emergency that is all that is required.

Who can baptize?

Anyone can validly baptize someone using the Trinitarian formula —“N., I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”—if they intend to do what the Church does. Even non-baptized persons are able to baptize. However, as the Catechism (no. 1256) says, in ordinary circumstances bishops, priests, and deacons are the ministers of Baptism.

If anyone can baptize, why can't we just do it in the tub at home?

Baptism is more than just water and words; the sacrament begins the child's new connection to the Church, and so most fittingly takes place in a physical church building, with a priest or deacon representing Jesus Christ initiating the child into the life of the children of God, along with other members of the faithful who likewise gather to give thanks to God for his gifts to the child.

Why does the Church baptize infants?

Because everyone is born with a fallen human nature, even newborns have need of Baptism for the forgiveness of Original Sin.

Faith is a supernatural gift, which results from Baptism. There is no reason to deprive children of the grace of the Christian life, and every reason to give them Jesus' healing and lifegiving gifts of grace at the earliest age possible. After all, Jesus said, “Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14). Catholic parents, therefore, have an obligation to have their children baptized within the first few weeks after birth.

Who can be godparents and why are they needed?

Godparents, or sponsors, help guide the one baptized as true spiritual mothers and fathers to live a good Christian life in keeping with the promises made at Baptism. Only one godparent is required; there can be one godfather and one godmother, but not two of either. According to Church law, they must be (1) chosen by the one to be baptized or their parents, (2) at least 16 years old, (3) a Catholic, who has received Confirmation and lives a life in keeping with the faith, (4) not under canonical penalty, and (5) not the mother or father of the one baptized.

Prospective godparents who are practicing Catholics who do not belong to St. Joseph's need to be able to provide a letter from the pastor of the parish where they are registered, indicating that they are in good standing with the Church.

While many parents want to choose godparents in order to honor family members or friends (and it is a great honor), it is more important that the person chosen be able to fulfill the duty of being good Christian role models. If there is already one godparent, a practicing, non-Catholic Christian may also serve as a “Christian witness.”



Louis de Boullogne, *The Baptism of St. Augustine*, 1695-1700

How is Baptism connected to the other sacraments?

There is a unity to the life of grace given in the sacraments. The Eucharist and Baptism are central to the meaning of the other sacraments. Baptism is the first sacrament we receive and is required for all of the others. By making us a part of the Body of Christ, Baptism opens the graces of the other sacraments to us.

Baptism is always received in view of the hunger for the Eucharist, which is the source and summit of the Christian faith. Receiving the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ is the absolute height of the Christian life here on earth. Baptism makes possible the graces of the Blessed Sacrament and allows one to be admitted to Holy Communion.

The Sacrament of Penance restores us to the Christian life imparted by Baptism when we are weighed down by later sin. The other sacraments shape and direct the graces of Baptism in their own way.

Purpose and Effects of Baptism

Does Baptism forgive sins? How does this relate to my infant child?

Yes. In Baptism, we become a part of the Body of the Christ, which is the one object of Christ's saving action on the cross. Baptism joins us to Christ's Passion and thereby washes away every stain of sin. The sin of Adam and Eve affects us all, so all have "Original Sin." The Catechism tells us (nos. 404-5) that all need salvation, as sin affects us all. Although we do not bear personal fault for Original Sin, it still leaves us turned away from God. Our relationship to God is in need of repair from the beginning.

How many times can someone be baptized?

Baptism is once-in-a-lifetime event. Because Baptism makes a mark on the soul, called a character, it has permanent effects.

Is Baptism necessary for salvation?

"Jesus answered, 'Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit'" (John 3:5). It is Baptism that brings about salvation in us. The effects of Baptism, forgiveness of sin and incorporation into the Body of Christ, are not only requirements for salvation, they are what salvation means.

God is not limited by the sacraments he created to save us. Catechumens, those preparing for Baptism, have long been held to belong to the Church by way of a Baptism of desire.

Moreover, those who die as a result of confessing the Christian faith are said to be baptized by the Baptism of blood.

The Catechism assures us (no. 1261) that the Church also holds out hope that something like a Baptism of desire might apply to infants who have not been able to be baptized.

What are all the effects of Baptism?

While Baptism is a single event, it takes away Original Sin, removes personal sin and its punishments, incorporates someone into the saving grace of the life of the Trinity, unites the person to Christ as a member of the Church, bestows the priesthood of all believers, fills the person with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and marks someone indelibly as belonging to Christ.

RAISING CHILDREN IN THE FAITH



Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Christ and His Mother Studying the Scriptures*, 1910

What does it mean when families are called the “Domestic Church”?

Families are the center of our faith. The Catechism (no. 1666) explains, “The Christian home is the place where children receive the first proclamation of the faith. For this reason, the family home is rightly called ‘the domestic church,’ a community of grace and prayer, a school of human virtues and of Christian charity”. The home is the primary place where we learn to love and forgive.

Why is my faith journey just as important as my child’s faith journey?

Your practice of the faith will speak to your child louder than any words possibly can. Your example and participation will set expectations as your child grows. Research has shown that committed parents are the number one influence for teens becoming faith-filled adults. As your child grows, his or her faith will mature and grow as well. As parents, your faith journey will be expanded through your child. His or her questions will get you thinking about your faith in a new way.

What can I do to make my home a Catholic environment for my child?

Look around your house. What kinds of evidence can you find of living in a Catholic home? Do you have crucifixes, statues, and other religious art in your home? Are there Bibles and other religious books (for all ages) in the house?

Think about how you will celebrate religious holidays and seasons in your home. Are there traditions from your own upbringing that you will incorporate? Many prayer books and websites can be good resources for discovering Catholic traditions that you can bring into your family life. Many households celebrate Advent with an Advent Calendar and Advent wreath. Lent is a time of prayer, fasting and penance.

How will your family pray together? Prayers before meals can take a variety of forms. There may be one family prayer said, or individuals can rotate and share prayers. This may be a time to have prayer requests and intentions said. Evening or bedtime prayers are another way to reflect on the day, give thanks, ask for forgiveness, and offer intentions. Praying the family rosary can also provide a solid foundation for your life of prayer.

The Catechism (no. 2691) also recommends creating “a prayer corner with the sacred scriptures and icons,” or other holy images of favorite saints and scriptural scenes, “in order to be there, in secret, before our Father. In a Christian family, this kind of little oratory fosters prayer in common.” Even in a noisy and busy home, such a prayer nook can be a reminder of God’s presence, and a treasured part of a family’s life of prayer.

When and how do I take my child to Mass?

No doubt babies and Mass can be a challenge, but do not be daunted by the difficulties; the presence of babies, toddlers, and children of all ages at mass is a beautiful witness to the thriving life of the Church.

The quick answer for when to take your child to Mass is weekly (or more), in the way that works best for you. Consistency and expectations set early will pay off in the long term. For some parents this means only religious books are brought into the Church (no food and no toys).

Short-term goals are good and they can build on one another. For example, begin by working on being quiet, move on to staying in one place and then introduce the rituals of the church (standing, sitting, and kneeling). Try to keep your child engaged in the mass in a way that appeals to your child. Talk to your child about what he or she will see at mass (color changes during liturgical seasons, Advent wreaths lit, etc.). You can cue him or her to look for certain rituals during the Mass. Pick your battles and offer your child choices on your non-essentials, such as where he or she would like to sit in the church. Some parents find that their

children are more engaged when sitting in the front and others prefer to sit in the back or in the middle. See what works best for your family. And when disaster strikes, moving to the cry room in the vestibule of the church allows your child to settle down in his or her own time, without disturbing the flow of the Mass.

How do we connect to parish life?

Getting involved in the parish and parish ministries is an excellent way to practice your faith and is a wonderful complement to your and your child's family life. There are ministries that serve families of all ages and others that serve the surrounding community. For more information about groups, activities, and ministries in the parish, please visit these parish webpages:

<https://stjosephgv.nyc/parish-ministries> and <https://stjosephgv.nyc/getting-involved>.

Connecting with a community of believers not only helps you grow spiritually, but can be a practical means of support and wisdom.

It is our hope and prayer that you will consider St. Joseph's Religious Education Program when your children begin their formal religious and academic education. For more information, please visit <https://stjosephgv.nyc/religious-education>.

Where can I get help raising my child in the faith?

The best help comes from a strong network of love and trust with family, friends, and godparents, all of whom can help teach your child about Jesus Christ through their speech and actions. In addition to these personal relationships, there are many resources on the Internet giving ideas for how to live your faith in your family.

<http://www.domestic-church.com/>

<http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/parents/tools-for-building-a-domestic-church.cfm>

<http://www.adolescentcatechesis.org/research/completedresearch/>

THE BAPTISM RITUAL

Understanding the Sacrament

What is the priest wearing?

The priest or deacon will be in a simple surplice, a stole, and a cope. The chasuble, that big poncho-looking colored garment, is for the Sacrifice of the Mass, so unless Baptism is done during a Mass it is not worn.

Why are we asked the child's name?

We come to God as persons, and the giving of the child's name means we offer everything of that child to God, personality and all. The name is also a great opportunity to enlist a particular saint to watch over the child, a personal patron.

What is the purpose of the Litany of Saints?

Entrance into the Church includes not just the living on earth, but also the living in heaven: the saints. After the intercessions, the saints are invoked to watch over and protect this new child of God.

Why is there an exorcism?

The Church is not bashful about the presence of evil in the world. The Catechism (no. 1237) says: "Since Baptism signifies liberation from sin and from its instigator the devil, one or more exorcisms are pronounced over the candidate." Just as professing God means first turning from sin, so exorcism precedes Baptism, warding off the devil and his false promises at this most important time in your child's life.

What does the anointing on the chest mean?

This is the first of two anointings in the ritual. This first anointing is done with the Oil of Catechumens and follows the exorcism prayer. It is a visible promise of cleansing and strengthening by God through the sacrament for the child's life.

Why is the water blessed?

The water used in Baptism is consecrated (made holy) for the sacrament; since it is about to become a vehicle of the grace of Christ, it is blessed for this service. The blessing of water is a reminder that holy actions are done best with holy things.

Why do we need to reject Satan before professing the Creed?

To accept Christ, one must turn away from evil; sin is essentially a turning away from God, so a return to God means a turning away from sin. Therefore, the Church includes a renunciation of Satan before the profession of the Triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

Why is water poured three times on my child's head?

The pouring of the water and the words spoken are the heart of the rite. The Catechism says (no. 1239): "It signifies and actually brings about death to sin and entry into the life of the Most Holy Trinity through configuration to the Paschal mystery of Christ. Baptism is performed in the most expressive way by triple immersion in the Baptismal water. The three times that the water is poured or one is immersed are connected to the three persons of the Holy Trinity in whose name we are baptized and freed from sin. Baptism welcomes us into the life of the Most Holy Trinity.

Water represents both new life and death. This paradox of water represents the paradox of the sacrament. Water is life-giving and without it we would die. It represents a death to sin and the worldly way of life and new life in Christ.

What is the difference between the first and second anointings?

Each one uses a different oil and has a different signification.

As the Catechism puts it (no. 1293), “Oil is a sign of abundance and joy; it cleanses (anointing before and after a bath) and limbers (the anointing of athletes and wrestlers); oil is a sign of healing, since it is soothing to bruises and wounds; and it makes radiant with beauty, health, and strength.”

Even the titles we give Jesus, both “Christ” from the Greek *christos* and “Messiah” from the Hebrew *mashiach*, mean “Anointed One.”

The first anointing is done with the Oil of Catechumens, whereas the second uses Sacred Chrism.

The Catechism says (no. 1237) that before Baptism, the anointing is a part of the symbolic casting-off of the devil and ritual cleansing. In infant Baptism, the sign of the cross is made on the child’s chest.

The second anointing is done with Sacred Chrism as a sign of the Holy Spirit received at Baptism and as an anticipation of Confirmation which will be received after he or she reaches the age of reason.

Why the white garment?

The white garment signifies that the child has put on Christ in Baptism.

What does the candle mean?

The candle represents the light of Christ entering into the newly baptized person’s life. It is given to the parents and godparents with the admonishment that “this light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly” throughout the child’s growth in mind, body, and faith.

Why is the candle lit from the Paschal Candle?

The Paschal candle connects Baptism back to Christ’s Resurrection. A new Paschal candle is lit before the Easter Vigil each year and it represents Christ bringing light into the world out of darkness and sin. What Easter represents for the entire Church; Baptism is for each individual. The light comes full circle when the Paschal candle is again lit at the Mass of Christian Burial.

What is the purpose of blessing the child’s ears and mouth?

During the *Ephphetha*, as it is called, the celebrant prays that the child may both receive and proclaim the word of faith. The truth of Christ is never meant to be private; the mouth is also blessed because the joy of the Gospel is to be shared.