

# RITE OF BAPTISM FOR CHILDREN, INTRODUCTION

## IMPORTANCE OF BAPTIZING CHILDREN

1. The term ‘children’ or ‘infants’ refers to those who have not yet reached the age of discernment and therefore cannot profess personal faith.
2. From the earliest times, the Church, to which the mission of preaching the Gospel and of baptizing was entrusted, has baptized not only adults but children as well. Our Lord said: ‘Unless a man is reborn in water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.’<sup>1</sup> The Church has always understood these words to mean that children should not be deprived of baptism, because they are baptized in the faith of the Church, a faith proclaimed for them by their parents and godparents, who represent both the local Church and the whole society of saints and believers: ‘The whole Church is the mother of all and the mother of each.’<sup>2</sup>
3. To fulfill the true meaning of the sacrament, children must later be formed in the faith in which they have been baptized. The foundation of this formation will be the sacrament itself that they have already received. Christian formation, which is their due, seeks to lead them gradually to learn God’s plan in Christ, so that they may ultimately accept for themselves the faith in which they have been baptized.

## MINISTRIES AND ROLES IN THE CELEBRATION OF BAPTISM

4. 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, in addition to the ways of congregational participation mentioned in the General Introduction to Christian Initiation no. 7, 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.

5. Because of the natural relationships, parents have a ministry and a responsibility in the baptism of infants more important than those of the godparents.
  1. Before the celebration of the sacrament, it is of great importance that parents, moved by their own faith or with the help of friends or other members of the community, should prepare to take part in the rite with understanding. They should be provided with suitable means such as books, letters addressed to them, and catechisms designed for families. The parish priest (pastor) should make it his duty to visit them or see that they are visited; he should try to gather a group of families together and prepare them for the coming celebration by pastoral counsel and common prayer.
  2. It is very important that the parents be present at the celebration in which their child is reborn in water and the Holy Spirit.

3. In the celebration of baptism, the father and mother have special parts to play. They listen to the words addressed to them by the celebrant, they join in prayer along with the congregation, and they exercise a genuine ministry when:
  - a. they publicly ask that the child be baptized;
  - b. they sign their child with the sign of the cross after the celebrant;
  - c. they renounce Satan and recite the profession of faith;
  - d. they (and especially the mother) carry the child to the font;
  - e. they hold the lighted candle;
  - f. they are blessed with the prayers formulated specifically for mothers and fathers.
4. A parent unable to make the profession of faith (for example, not being a Catholic) may keep silent. Such a parent, when making the request for the child's baptism is asked only to make arrangements or at least to give permission for the child's instruction in the faith of its baptism.
5. 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.
6. Each child may have a godfather (patrinus) and a godmother (matrina), the word 'godparents' is used in the rite to describe both.
7. In addition to what is said about the ordinary minister of baptism in the General Introduction to Christian Initiation nos. 11-15, the following should be noted:
  1. It is the duty of the priest to prepare families for the baptism of their children and to help them in the task of Christian formation that they have undertaken. It is the duty of the bishop to coordinate such pastoral efforts in the diocese, with the help also of deacons and lay people.
  2. It is also the duty of the priest to arrange that baptism is always celebrated with proper dignity and, as far as possible, adapted to the circumstances and wishes of the families concerned. All who perform the rite of baptism should do so with exactness and reverence; they must also try to be understanding and friendly to all.

## **TIME AND PLACE FOR THE BAPTISM OF CHILDREN**

8. As for the time of baptism, the first consideration is the welfare of the child, that it may not be deprived of the benefit of the sacrament; then the health of the mother must be considered, so that, if at all possible, she too may be present. Then, as long as they do not interfere with the greater good of the child, there are pastoral considerations, such as allowing sufficient time to prepare the parents and to plan the actual celebration in order to bring out its true character effectively. Accordingly:
  1. If the child is in danger of death, it is to be baptized without delay, in the manner laid down in no. 21.
  2. In other cases, as soon as possible – if need be, even before the child is born, the parents should be in touch with the parish priest (pastor) concerning the baptism, so that proper preparation may be made for the celebration.
  3. An infant should be baptized within the first weeks after birth. The conference of bishops may, for sufficiently serious pastoral reasons, determine a longer interval of time between birth and baptism.

4. When the parents are not yet prepared to profess the faith or to undertake the duty of bringing up their children as Christians, it is for the parish priest (pastor), keeping in mind whatever regulations may have been laid down by the conference of bishops, to determine the time for the baptism of infants.
9. To bring out the paschal character of baptism, it is recommended that the sacrament be celebrated during the Easter Vigil or on Sunday, when the Church commemorates the Lord's resurrection. On Sunday, baptism may be celebrated even during Mass, so that the entire community may be present and the relationship between baptism and eucharist may be clearly seen; but this should not be done too often. Regulations for the celebration of baptism during the Easter Vigil or at Mass on Sunday will be set out later.
10. So that baptism may clearly appear as the sacrament of the Church's faith and of incorporation into the people of God, it should normally be celebrated in the parish church, which must have a baptismal font.
11. After consulting the local parish priest (pastor), the bishop may permit or direct that a baptismal font be placed in another church or public oratory within the parish boundaries. In these places, too, the right to celebrate baptism belongs ordinarily to the parish priest (pastor).
12. Except in case of danger of death, baptism should not be celebrated in private homes.
13. Unless the bishop decides otherwise (see no. 11), baptism should not be celebrated in hospitals, except in cases of emergency or for some other compelling pastoral reason. But care should always be taken that the parish priest is notified and that the parents are suitably prepared beforehand.
14. While the liturgy of the word is being celebrated, it is desirable that children should be taken to some other place. But provision must be made for the mothers or godmothers to attend the liturgy of the word; the children should therefore be entrusted to the care of other women.

## **STRUCTURE OF THE RITE OF BAPTIZING CHILDREN**

### **A. Order of Baptism Celebrated by the Ordinary Minister**

15. Baptism, whether for one child, or for several, or even for a larger number, should be celebrated by the ordinary minister and with the full rite when there is no immediate danger of death.
16. The rite begins with the reception of the children. This is to indicate the desire of the parents and godparents, as well as the intention of the Church, concerning the celebration of the sacrament of baptism. These purposes are expressed in action when the parents and the celebrant trace the sign of the cross on the foreheads of the children.
17. Then the liturgy of the word is directed toward stirring up the faith of the parents, godparents, and congregation and toward praying in common for the fruits of baptism before the sacrament itself. This part of the celebration consists of the reading of one or more passages from holy Scripture; a homily, followed by a period of silence; the general intercessions, with its concluding prayer, drawn up in the style of an exorcism, to introduce either the anointing with the oil of catechumens or the laying on of hands.
18. In the celebration of the sacrament:

1. The immediate preparation consists of:
    - a. the solemn prayer of the celebrant, which, by invoking God and recalling his plan of salvation, blesses the water of baptism or makes reference to its earlier blessing;
    - b. the renunciation of Satan on the part of parents and godparents and their profession of faith, to which is added the assent of the celebrant and the community; and the final interrogation of the parents and godparents.
  2. The sacrament itself consists of the washing in water by way of immersion or infusion, depending on local custom, and the invocation of the blessed Trinity.
  3. The completion of the sacrament consists, first, of the anointing with chrism, which signifies the royal priesthood of the baptized and enrollment into the company of the people of God; then of the ceremonies of the white garment, lighted candle, and ephphetha rite (the last of which is optional).
19. Before the altar to prefigure the future sharing in the eucharist, the celebrant introduces and all recite the Lord's Prayer, in which God's children pray to their Father in heaven. Finally, a prayer of blessing is said over the mothers, fathers, and all present, to ask the outpouring of God's grace upon them.

## **B. Shorter Rite of Baptism**

20. In the shorter rite of baptism designed for the use of catechists,<sup>3</sup> the reception of the children, the celebration of the word of God, or the instruction by the minister, and the general intercessions are retained. Before the font, the minister offers a prayer invoking God and recalling the history of salvation as it relates to baptism. After the baptismal washing, an adapted formulary is recited in place of the anointing with chrism and the whole rite concludes in the customary way. The omissions, therefore, are the exorcism, the anointing with oil of catechumens and with chrism, and the ephphetha rite.
21. The shorter rite for baptizing a child in danger of death and in the absence of the ordinary minister has a twofold structure:
1. At the moment of death or when there is urgency because of imminent danger of death, the minister,<sup>4</sup> omitting all other ceremonies, pours water (not necessarily blessed but real and natural water) on the head of the child and pronounces the customary formulary.<sup>5</sup>
  2. If, however, it is prudently judged that there is sufficient time, several of the faithful may be gathered together and, if one of them is able to lead the others in a short prayer, the following rite may be used: an explanation by the minister of the sacrament, a short set of general intercessions, the profession of faith by the parents or one godparent and the pouring of the water with the customary words. But if those present are uneducated, the minister of the sacrament should recite the profession of faith aloud and baptize according to the rite for use in danger of death.
22. In danger of death, the priest or deacon may also use this shorter form if necessary. If there is time and he has the sacred chrism, the parish priest (pastor) or other priest enjoying the same faculty should not fail to confer confirmation after baptism. In this case he omits the postbaptismal anointing with chrism.

## **ADAPTATIONS BY CONFERENCE OF BISHOPS OR BY BISHOPS**

23. In addition to the adaptations provided for in the General Introduction (nos. 30-33), the baptismal rite for infants admits other variations, to be determined by the conferences of bishops.
24. As is indicated in the Roman Ritual, the following matters are left to the discretion of the conferences:
  1. As local customs may dictate, the questioning about the name of the child may be arranged in different ways: the name may have been given already or may be given during the rite of baptism.
  2. The anointing with oil of catechumens may be omitted (nos. 50, 87).
  3. The formulary of renunciation may be made more pointed and detailed (nos. 57, 94, 121).
  4. If the number to be baptized is very great, the anointing with chrism may be omitted (no. 125).
  5. The ephphetha rite may be retained (nos. 64, 101).
25. In many countries parents are sometimes not ready for the celebration of baptism or they ask for their children to be baptized even though the latter will not afterward receive a Christian education and will even lose the faith. Since to instruct such parents and to inquire about their faith in the course of the rite itself is not enough, conferences of bishops may issue pastoral directives, for the guidance of parish priests (pastors), to determine a longer interval between birth and baptism.
26. It is for the bishop to decide for his diocese whether catechists may give the homily on their own or only by reading a written text.

## **ADAPTATIONS BY THE MINISTER**

27. During meetings to prepare the parents for the baptism of their children, it is important that the instruction should be supported by prayer and religious rites. For this the various elements provided in the rite of baptism for the celebration of the word of God will prove helpful.
28. When the baptism of children is celebrated as part of the Easter Vigil, the ritual should be arranged as follows:
  1. At a convenient time and place before the Easter Vigil the rite of receiving the children is celebrated. The liturgy of the word may be omitted at the end, according to circumstances, and the prayer of exorcism is said, followed by the anointing with oil of catechumens.
  2. The celebration of the sacrament (nos. 56-58, 60-63) takes place after the blessing of the water, as is indicated in the rite of the Easter Vigil.
  3. The assent of the celebrant and community (no. 59) is omitted, as are the presentation of the lighted candle (no. 64) and the ephphetha rite (no. 65).
  4. The conclusion of the rite (nos. 67-71) is omitted.
29. If baptism takes place during Sunday Mass, the Mass for that Sunday is used, or, on the Sundays of the Christmas season and of Ordinary Time, the Mass for the Baptism of Children, and the celebration takes place as follows:
  1. The rite of receiving the children (nos. 33-43) takes place at the beginning of Mass and the greeting and penitential rite of the Mass are omitted.

2. In the liturgy of the word:
  - a. The readings are taken from the Mass of the Sunday. But in the Christmas season and in Ordinary Time they may also be taken from those given in the Lectionary for Mass (111, 474-489) or in this baptismal rite (nos. 44, 186-215).
  - b. When a ritual Mass is prohibited, one of the readings may be taken from the texts provided for the celebration of baptism for children, with attention paid to the pastoral benefit of the faithful and the character of the liturgical day.
  - c. The homily is based on the sacred texts, but should take account of the baptism that is to take place.
  - d. The Credo is not said, since the profession of faith by the entire community before baptism takes its place.
3. The general intercessions are taken from those used in the rite of baptism (nos. 47-48). At the end, however, before the invocation of the saints, petitions are added for the universal Church and the needs of the world.
4. The celebration of baptism continues with the prayer of exorcism, anointing, and other ceremonies described in the rite (nos. 49-66). After the celebration of baptism, the Mass continues in the usual way with the presentation of the gifts.
5. For the blessing at the end of Mass, the priest may use one of the formularies provided in the rite of baptism (nos. 70, 247-249).
30. If baptism is celebrated during Mass on weekdays, it is arranged in basically the same way as on Sunday, but the readings for the liturgy of the word may be taken from those that are provided in the rite of baptism (nos. 44, 186-194, 204-215).
31. In accordance with the General Introduction no. 34, the minister may make some adaptations in the rite as circumstances require, such as:
  1. If the child's mother died in childbirth, this should be taken into account in the opening instruction (no. 36), general intercessions (nos. 47, 217-220), and final blessing (nos. 70, 247-248).
  2. In the dialogue with the parents (nos. 37-38, 76-77), their answers should be taken into account: if they have not answered Baptism, but Faith, or The grace of Christ, or Entrance into the Church, or Everlasting life, then the minister does not begin by saying Baptism, but uses Faith, or The grace of Christ, and so forth.
  3. The rite of bringing a child already baptized to the church (nos. 165-185), which has been drawn up for use only when the child has been baptized in danger of death, should be adapted to cover other contingencies, for example, when children have been baptized during a time of religious persecution or temporary disagreement between the parents.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Jn 3:5.
- 2 Augustine, Ep. 98, 5: PL 33, 362.
- 3 See SC art. 68.
- 4 See General Introduction to Christian Initiation no. 16
- 5 See *ibid.* no. 23.

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