

Baptism Is a Gift

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Baptism is a precious gift given by God through the Church. As parents, we have the privilege of presenting our children to receive this gift, a gift that will last a lifetime and beyond.

Baptism is the gift of new life, the eternal life of the risen Christ. This gift is a sacrament, an encounter with Christ himself. Baptism is a moment when Christ comes to us and acts within us and among us. In this encounter, we are transformed. This is true for adults who understand the meaning of the sacrament and choose it for themselves, and it is also true for the youngest children—indeed, for babes in arms—at their Baptism.

The scriptures remind us of the mystery of God's intimate relationship with us, even before we were born: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you" (Jeremiah 1:5). "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb" (Psalm 139:13). The Church honors this relationship by offering Baptism to the youngest children.

Jesus' words to Nicodemus, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (John 3:5), have always been understood by the Church to mean that even the youngest children should not be denied the sacrament of Baptism. The child's right to Baptism becomes even clearer when we recall Jesus' words to his disciples regarding little children: "it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs" (Matthew 19:14).

Thus, infant Baptism is part of the most ancient tradition of the Church. It is a powerful and visible reminder to us that God's love and salvation are not earned. But are offered to us as a gift. Infant Baptism is a sign of God's desire to give us "more than all we can ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20).

Obviously, the tiny baby cannot ask for or even imagine the richness of new life in God. Even adults, who received the gift of Baptism as babies,



only gradually recognize and appreciate how precious this encounter with Christ is in our lives. Our understanding and wonder deepens with each passing year. Infant Baptism can be an occasion for parents, godparents, and the assembled community to enjoy, with renewed wonder and gratitude, this precious gift in our lives.

The gift of Baptism is so precious that, by its very nature, it calls forth a response from the one who receives this gift in joyful recognition of its riches. In the case of infant Baptism, God is more than willing to wait for each child's personal response, which will come as he or she grows in wisdom and understanding, guided by parents and teachers to recognize the unfathomable gift received. The joy and praise of little children, whom Jesus called "the greatest" in the kingdom of God, must surely be the sweetest sound of all to God's ears.

Of the many ways Jesus has revealed himself to us, the image of the Good Shepherd is particularly rich in relation to the sacrament of Baptism. At our Baptism, Christ, the Good Shepherd, comes to meet us and claim us as his own; he "calls his own sheep by name" (John 10:3). We are marked with his sign, the cross, to show that we belong to him. Through a reading of the word of God, we receive his light and life. Submerged in holy water, we die to our old life, limited and mortal as a result of original sin, and we arise from the water as a "new creation," with a share in the deathless life of the risen Christ. We who are called and known so personally then enter his sheepfold, the Church.

"When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice" (John 10:4). Our Baptism is the beginning of a journey. Throughout this journey we are meant to enjoy the Good Shepherd's presence in our lives, to experience the benefits of his care and protection and to grow



in our love of him and in our knowledge of his endless love for us. As our journey continues, we become more capable of hearing his voice, of following where he leads and of growing and changing to become more like him.

Our children need our help on this journey—and the help of the entire Church—to become aware of the immense gift they have received in Baptism. Our help begins before birth and is most critical in early childhood, when the child has the greatest religious needs as well as the greatest religious capacities.

In our efforts to help them, we would do well first to remember Jesus' teaching about little children, particularly the moment when he placed a child in the midst of his disciples and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). Children have something to teach. As we seek to know them and their real needs, as we try with joy and fear and humility to respond to those needs, something wonderful and perhaps unexpected happens. We realize that we need them on our journey toward God as much or more than they need us. We discover that the "fullness of joy" that we have been privileged to witness in their relationship with God can become our own!

In one of his poems, William Wordsworth said, "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting." As Christians, we can say that our Baptism is our second birth. But it is not a birth of "sleep and forgetting"; rather, it is a birth of awakening and remembering. Our Baptism is the beginning of a lifelong journey of awakening to the fullness of life that Jesus came to give us and a journey toward remembering who we really are: beloved sheep of the Good Shepherd, precious members of his sheepfold, the Church.

