

Please, read below the Catholic teaching about baptism:

Catholic Baptism

What a Catholic baptism is?

The symbolism behind the sacrament?

Why they're so important to our faith?

Why Catholics baptize infants?

How to get your child baptized?

What Is It?

Baptism serves as the first sacrament one receives when entering the Catholic Faith. It is a sacrament of initiation (which you can only receive one time), meaning once you received it, you officially enter into the body of Christ, the Catholic Church. The recipient receives justifying and sanctifying grace when baptized, and the Holy Spirit begins to dwell within them.

Form and Matter

Every sacrament requires two things, form and matter. The form of the sacrament is the words that are spoken and the matter is the physical substance used during the sacrament. For example, for baptism, the form is the baptismal formula, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The matter is the water poured over the head of the recipient. Traditionally, the one being baptized has water poured over them or is fully emerged in water three times. Additionally, the ceremony includes vows rejecting Satan, vows of the godparents, and the material symbols of the white gown and baptismal candle. These additional aspects are important, but not required for all baptisms, namely those in emergency situations (scroll down to learn more about emergency baptism).

Valid and Licit

Like any sacrament, baptisms must be both valid and licit to serve the individual as God intended. If a baptism is valid, then it is recognized as having been done using the correct form, matter, and structure that is needed for the sacrament. If a baptism is licit, meaning it's legal, it is recognized as having been done in line with Canon Law.

It is impossible for a baptism to be invalid and licit, because all invalid baptisms are also illicit. However, a baptism can be valid and illicit. An example of this would be if a lay person baptized someone using the baptismal formula and pouring water over their head, but doing so without being in an emergency situation that requires such action. Another more specific example would be if the parents of the child being baptized said during the ceremony that they will raise the child in the Faith, but are lying and don't actually intend to do so. It is very important for baptisms to be both valid and licit, making the form, matter, structure (baptismal promises, vows of the godparents, baptismal candle, etc.) and meaning (the "why" behind it all) of the sacrament of great significance.

What It Does

St. Paul describes baptism as the "first installment of our inheritance toward redemption as God's possession, to the praise of his glory" (Ephesians 1:14). According to aboutcatholic.com baptism does five things:

It forgives all sins that were committed before baptism including original, mortal, and venial sin.

It makes the baptized a new creature.

It turns the baptized into a newly adopted son or daughter of God and a member of the Church.

It brings them to share in the royal priesthood of Christ. (1 Peter 2:9)

It leaves a spiritual mark (or character) of belonging to Christ on the soul of the baptized.

It serves as the foundation of communion within the Church, and the initiation into Christ's Body the Church. With this initiation comes a sort of seal, St. Augustine calls it a "character." This character, which is the fifth thing that baptism does in the list above, is "like a brand imprinted on a soldier that cannot be removed." The Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks upon this character as well, saying:

"No sin can erase this mark, even if sin prevents baptism from bearing the fruits of salvation ... The baptismal seal enables and commits Christians to serve God by a vital participation in the holy liturgy of the Church and to exercise their baptismal priesthood by the witness of holy lives and practical charity" (CCC, 1272 and 1273).

Baptism orients the soul not only to worship God and serve him with their lives, but also to take part in his kingly, prophetic, and priestly offices.

Symbolism

Now that you know what a Catholic baptism is, you might be asking yourself, “what does it all mean?” Everything that is done during a baptism has a purpose, even the material objects used during the ceremony. Here are just a couple of the biggest areas of symbolism in a Catholic baptism:

Baptismal Font

The baptismal font is the large bowl of holy water where most baptisms take place. The word “baptism” itself means “to be immersed.” For the first few hundred years of the Church’s history, baptisms would be done in large natural bodies of water, such as rivers, streams, lakes, and oceans. The earliest baptismal fonts in the Western Church were found in the catacombs of Rome, where indoor baptisms would take place. Baptismal fonts were moved to churches in the fourth century A.D. Most are located at the front of the church, to signify the sacrament as being the “door to the Church.” In fact, we are reminded of our baptismal promises whenever we enter or exit a church. Small baptismal fonts are located at all doors within a church, which we dip our fingers in upon entering or exiting, blessing ourselves in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Water

Water is the essential matter within a baptism. It is so to symbolize that Jesus is living water, and as we are cleansed during the sacrament, we are welcomed both into the Church and into eternal life. Water is also a symbol of divine life, grace, new birth, growth, deliverance, power, and the covenant God established with his people, first through Abraham.

Baptismal Gown

A baptismal gown is the outfit worn by the one receiving baptism. Traditionally, the gown is white. This is to signify Christian dignity, and the act of becoming a new creature through the sacrament. The color white is also to symbolize being clothed with Christ, as we are cleansed from sin.

Baptismal Candle

The baptismal candle that is lit during the ceremony is also used as the Easter candle. The lighting of the candle represents the flame of faith, which is to be kept burning throughout the life of the baptized.

Additionally, the candle symbolizes the risen Christ, as he is the light of the world. The fact that the baptismal candle is also used for Easter is to remind us of Christ's passion and rising which made the gift of baptism—a full cleansing of original sin, the dwelling of the Holy Spirit within us, and the invitation into eternal life—possible.

The Sacred Chrism and Oil of the Catechumens

Two of the three holy oils are used during a baptism. The first is the oil of catechumens. This oil is used to bless the child before the actual baptism takes place, in order to strengthen the recipient and prepare them for the sacrament. The second oil used is the Sacred Chrism, which is considered the most important of the three holy oils. The Chrism is not only used during the sacrament of baptism, but also during confirmation, holy orders, and at the consecration of a church.

Early on in Church history, this olive oil was used for several different functions, such as welcoming guests into a home, cooking, medicating the ill, preparing a body for burial, and many other practices. The earliest formula of blessing the oils for sacramental use was first found during the fourth century in the Prayer Book of Serapion. The use of the three oils comes from the instructions of Jesus himself, as we see him asking the apostles to anoint the sick (Mark 6:13). The apostles passed this custom on throughout the years (James 5:14-15), giving us the practice of using them still today.

Many of the Church fathers have written on the importance of blessing the newly baptized with sacred oils. The oils are held in vessels called stocks and are placed in an ambry (or cabinet) until they are needed. Chrism is used to consecrate persons, setting them apart for God, while the oil of catechumens is used for those seeking baptism, and the oil of the infirm is used while anointing the sick or dying.

Who Is Involved in a Baptism?

Baptisms are a family affair, not just for the individual but for the Church as well! The baptism is usually attended by the recipient's close family and friends, as well as those chosen to be their godparents, whom play a role in the ceremony. Today, most people are baptized as infants by a priest or deacon, though this is not strictly necessary (see below). The parents present the child for baptism while the godparents are present as witnesses.

Ordinary Minister of the Sacrament (Priest or Deacon)

Although any lay person can baptize in certain emergency situations, it is preferred to have a priest administer the sacrament of baptism. In the Catholic Faith, priests act in persona Christi Capitis, which means "in the person of Christ the Head." Pope Benedict XVI explains this in his letter, *The Priest's Three Duties*, saying:

“The priest represents Christ. What is implied by ‘representing’ someone? In ordinary language it usually means being delegated by someone to be present in his place, to speak and act in his stead because the person he represents is absent from the practical action.”

This does not mean, however, that Christ is absent in the Church and in the roles of the priest. Instead, it infers that:

“The priest, who acts in persona Christi Capitis and representing the Lord, never acts in the name of someone who is absent but, rather, in the very Person of the Risen Christ, who makes himself present with his truly effective action ... The Lord makes his own action present in the person who carries out these gestures.”

It is thus believed that the priest is the best member of the Church, given practical circumstances, to administer the sacrament of baptism. St. John the Baptist tells the people he is baptizing in Matthew 3:11:

“He who is coming ... will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

It is because of Scripture and the role of the priest as persona Christi that we are baptized through priests. Through their hands, which are to represent the hands of Christ himself, we are brought into the body of the Catholic Church.

If a priest is unavailable to perform a baptism for whatever reason, it is permissible for a deacon to perform one in his absence. Because a deacon is not a priest, there are limits to what they can do in the celebration of our faith. However, baptism is a sacrament they can administer. This is because the deacon is considered a cleric and an ordinary minister of the sacrament of baptism, just as a priest or a bishop is. Baptism is an action proper to his role, and if he has the approval and knowledge of the priest at his parish, he may baptize both validly and licitly.

Parents or Guardians

Parents (or guardians) take on the responsibility for raising the child Catholic when they ask for baptism. They are the ones responding to the baptismal promises on behalf of the child. When asking for a Catholic baptism, the parents or guardians must be able to say with confidence that the child will be brought up within the Faith. This includes taking the child to Mass, teaching them the Faith, praying with and for them, and making sure they receive the sacraments including reconciliation, first Communion, and confirmation. The role of the parents is a crucial aspect of any infant baptism, and must not be taken lightly. For more info, check out the FAQ below on whether you need to be Catholic to have your child baptized.

Godparents

The role of the chosen godparents is twofold. First and foremost, they are to act as a source of prayer and example for the child being baptized. Secondly, they are expected to assist in the formation of the child's faith throughout their life, and, if needed, are available to raise the child in the Faith if the parents cannot. This being said, the faith of the godparents is an extremely important factor in fulfilling the baptismal promise of being raised in the Catholic Faith.

Emergency Catholic Baptisms

Although most baptisms are celebrated by a priest or deacon, there are extreme circumstances in which someone can be baptized by even an unbaptized individual. All that needs to be done for a valid baptism is the cleansing through water and the spoken blessing of the Trinitarian baptismal Formula:

"I baptize you in the name of the father, and of the son, and of the holy spirit."

Why Do We Have Them?

The question of why we have baptisms in the Catholic Faith is easily answered: to gain eternal life. As Christians, we are blessed by baptism. It is the door to the Catholic Faith and the first step we take to pursue eternal life in heaven. This is backed up in Scripture, most notably in John 3 where it is written:

"Unless you're born again in the water of the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

On these grounds, baptism is believed to be one of four things that are needed for salvation. This also plays into the reasoning of why we baptize our infants: it is to give them the gift of eternal life in heaven, and through our faith that we invite them into salvation.

Baptism isn't just a sign of faith either, it is a cause of it.

Nicholas LaBanca points this out in his article on infant baptisms, quoting from The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's "Instruction on Infant Baptism" (IIB):

"It produces in the baptized 'interior enlightenment,' and so the Byzantine liturgy is right to call it the sacrament of enlightenment, or simply enlightenment, meaning that the faith received pervades the soul and causes the veil of blindness to fall before the brightness of Christ."

It's through the graces we receive in baptism that we are saved for the glory of eternal life, making this first sacrament extremely essential to our Catholic faith.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. Why are Catholics baptized as infants?

This is a commonly asked question about Catholic baptisms in particular. The origin of infant baptisms goes back to the days of the Old Testament when God established his covenant with Abraham. Back in those days, male infants would enter covenant with God by being circumcised at just eight days old through their parents faith. St. Paul explains in the New Testament that circumcision is no longer needed since the coming of Christ and the institution of baptism. However, the practice of inviting infants into the Church through the faith of their parents still stands.

Just the same, St. Augustine recognizes infant baptism as a “tradition received from the apostles.” This can be seen in Acts 2:38-39 when Peter addresses the crowd, saying:

“Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him.”

When Peter would baptize people in the New Testament, he would often baptize them as well as their entire household, which would include babies of the family.

Baptism is never administered without faith, for it is the faith of the parents and of the Church who guide the infant in baptism. Even more so, given what we know of baptism being an essential part of gaining salvation, parents choose to baptize their son or daughter for the sake of their soul, not to impose any religious beliefs upon them. As LaBanca puts it:

“To consciously withhold that grace from my child, when I know it will remove original sin and incorporate my child into the Church, making him or her a son or daughter of God, would be to betray the very duties a parent has to the wellbeing of their child ... Since we believe in that supernatural grace given to us by God in the sacraments, we certainly want our children to take part in these graces as well.”

Q. Why was Jesus baptized?

If the purpose of baptism is to eliminate original sin and grant us the graces necessary for salvation, why did Jesus need it? This question makes a lot of sense; Jesus, being God, is perfect and therefore did not need to be baptized to remove any sin or secure a spot in heaven. However, Jesus, in being baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan, gave us a model for our own baptisms. It wasn't that Jesus needed to be baptized, it was that we needed to be.

Chris Mueller explains, “Jesus loaded the burden of all mankind's guilt upon his shoulders,” plunging them into “the depths of the Jordan.” When Jesus was baptized, he rose from the water bearing our sins with him, and carried them to the Cross. Mueller goes on:

“Just as Jesus’ public life and mission began in the waters of the Jordan, our lives begin through repentance and baptism as well. We should never forget that Jesus lived his life, not as some unattainable goal, but as a template of how we are called to live.”

Jesus was baptized to take on our sins and to give us a model for our own baptisms, giving us the means to accept our spot in heaven.

Q: How are godparents chosen?

Fr. Mike Schmitz says:

“You don’t have to be perfect to be a godparent! All you have to do is do your best to love Jesus, to love the Church, and to love this child.”

These requirements mentioned by Fr. Mike imply that you are a practicing Catholic. A godparent also needs to be at least sixteen, baptized, and confirmed. Godparents are expected to help the parents raise the baptized child in the Faith, and therefore need to be practicing it themselves.

Q. Are there any exceptions?

You may be asking yourself, “Are there any exceptions to the graces received in baptism? Is one automatically bound for hell without them?” The Church recognizes that baptism is an essential element in the salvation of a soul, however, there are some extraordinary circumstances that could grant a soul salvation without having received baptism.

The two exceptions are these: martyrdom and an untimely death. For example, if someone dies for the Faith but never was baptized, their act of martyrdom can grant them the same graces one would receive in baptism. Likewise, if one is truly seeking to be baptized, but is unable to due to extreme circumstances (such as dying before they could receive the sacrament) those graces can be bestowed upon them as well. These two circumstances are often called baptism by blood and baptism by desire.

In the case of infants, there is a theory that infants who die before receiving the gift of baptism are placed in limbo, a place that lacks the beatific vision, but does not inflict any punishment on its residents. This theory has never entered dogmatic definitions, and the mention of limbo has yet to be seen within the Catechism of the Catholic Church, although limbo remains a possible theological hypothesis.

Q. Do I need to be Catholic to get my child baptized?

While you don’t need to be Catholic to get your baby baptized, due to the nature of the sacrament as an initiation into the Catholic Church, the parents or legal guardians of the infant must agree to raise the

child in the Faith upon being baptized. If the parents refuse to raise their child in the Catholic Faith, in most circumstances the infant may not be baptized.

Now, there are certain scenarios where a baby can be baptized without their parents promising to raise them in the Catholic Faith. An example of this situation would be if the baby is in serious danger of death, and someone in the family wants to have the baby baptized in fear that the child will not reach heaven without it (since baptism is one of the four things needed for salvation), then the baby can be baptized even if the parents don't agree to raise the child in the Catholic Faith. For this instance, the faith required for the baptism would be coming from the Church and whoever wants the baby to be baptized, and it becomes a direct concern for the salvation of the infant's soul rather than the responsibility of the parents.

Q. How can I get my child baptized?

The short answer to this would be to go to your parish, or a church you trust, and meet with the priest.

Choose a Church: If you are already enrolled at a parish, you would most likely go there for your child's baptism. However, if you are not yet enrolled in a parish, you'll want to choose one in your area and schedule a baptism. The church you choose will probably have a set of classes for the parents and godparents to go through before the child is baptized. This is to help those involved better understand the sacrament, and to dive deeper into the meaning of what baptism really is.

Set a Date: Talk with your parish about what dates are available to have your child baptized, keeping in mind that the prep classes will take some time. It is preferred to have a baptism on a Sunday, but many baptisms are performed on Saturdays as well.

Ask the Godparents: Next step is to ask the godparents. It can be tricky business when choosing a godparent for your child, but ultimately, the godparents should be in communion with the Church, love your child, and be an active part in their Catholic upbringing.

Buy a Baptismal Gown: Although tradition states that the godmother buys the gown and the godfather buys the cake, you can absolutely buy your child's gown yourself. The benefit of this, of course, is that you can choose something you would love to see passed down from generation to generation.

If you still have questions about scheduling your child's baptism, we suggest you contact your parish priest, or talk to friends who have baptized their kids.

Q. Emergency baptisms?

When it comes to emergency baptisms, it's not as simple as just saying the words and blessing the individual. There are, of course, certain rituals that must be respected, the most important of these is to keep the matter of the sacrament, the water, intact. If the baptism does not use water, then it is not believed to be a valid baptism. As explained by Colin B. Donovan from EWTN:

“If it’s called something else it’s not water (e.g. IV fluids). Even something so predominantly water as tea or coffee is doubtful matter. One could baptize conditionally with doubtful matter IF that was indeed all there was available and time was of the essence.”

When it comes to the form of the sacrament, the words said, it must be the Trinitarian baptismal Formula:

“I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

This must be said out loud, even if it cannot be heard by others. As faith is a necessary component in any baptism, a person in the age of reason must want to be baptized. You can’t just go around baptizing whoever you like. If the person is a child who has yet to reach the age of reason, then the faith of the baptizer is sufficient, as is the case when baptizing infants.