

BAPTISM



Stepping into the Christian life

Introduction

Holy Baptism is the first step into the Christian life. It is the doorway through which we begin our resurrected life in Christ. However, baptism is not magic, nor is it a type of eternal fire insurance. While its effects are real, so are the responsibilities it entails. Our baptism and/or the baptism of our children require something of us.

This brief booklet seeks to define and clarify the important roles and responsibilities of those seeking to be baptized, along with parents and godparents interested in sponsoring infants and/or young children for Holy Baptism. It is written with the prayer that you and/or your child will be baptized into the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, and welcomed into the portion of Christ's Body – the Church – which is St. Michael's by-the-Sea.

The Christian Faith in the 21st Century

It is safe to say that we live in a post-Christian age. At the time of this writing, author Christopher Hitchens's book "God Is Not Great" is on the best-seller list and is outselling the pope's volume on Jesus Christ. On tour in support of his book, Hitchens made the insightful observation that, "Everywhere I speak, I find that the faithful go to church for a mixture of reasons, from social to charitable to ethnic, and take their beliefs a la carte or cafeteria-style, choosing the bits they like and discarding the rest."

This influential atheist has keyed in to the practical reality that there are a variety of reasons why people today "go to church". But be that as it may, there are very clear and definite biblical and theological reasons why baptized Christians participate in the life of the Christian community.

Membership

Membership is the state of belonging to a group or organization. Different organizations have various conditions for membership. Some require a fee, others require a pledge. Sometimes membership is simply a matter of showing up. But being a member of the Church is different than being a member of an organization. A Church member is really the member of a family – the family of God.

Just as we are physically born into our earthly families at the moment of birth, so are we spiritually born into our heavenly families at the moment of baptism. This is the new birth which Our Lord speaks in the Scriptures. Through the waters of baptism we are united with Christ. United with Christ, the Son of God, we become adopted as sons and daughters of God. What Jesus is by nature, we become by grace: children of God. Through baptism we are incorporated into the Body of Christ, and our mystical membership in his Church begins. Membership in the Church means that we have literally been grafted into the Risen Body of Christ, and are living members of that Body.

St. Paul explains that, just as each member of our physical bodies has an important role to play – the eyes, nose, etc. – so too does each baptized Christian have an important role to play within the Body of Christ. We are, each one, created and equipped to fulfill a very specific and integral function within the Body. And our unique roles as individual members are rooted, nourished, and sustained within the context of the one Body. Our membership in the Church, then, brings us quite naturally into fellowship with one another under the Head of the Body, Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, baptized Christians are not so much people who “go to” church as they are the Church. The parish sanctuary and grounds is simply the home where the Body gathers to worship God and fellowship with one another. Contrary to popular opinion, membership in the Church is not a matter of mandatory dues or obligatory participation. In truth, membership in the Church is a voluntary reception of the free gift of life God has offered to us in His Son Jesus Christ, and our desire to nurture that new life through our participation in that One Body.

The Baptismal Covenant

When a person is baptized, they voluntarily enter into a covenantal relationship with God. That covenant is expressed in the public vows which are made in the baptismal liturgy. Baptismal vows are like wedding vows: they are entered into freely, they are indissoluble, and they are not to be taken lightly. However, where wedding vows are made between a man and a woman, our Baptismal Covenant is between us and God.

The fundamental first steps toward baptism are the renunciation of Satan, repentance of our sins, and acceptance of Jesus as our Lord and Savior. The heart of the Baptismal Covenant is the Apostle's Creed, the ancient confession of faith which expresses belief in the saving acts of the Holy Trinity: One God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Baptismal Covenant concludes with our commitment to persevere in living the Christian life and professing the Christian faith.

Christian community is essential to the fulfilling of this commitment. Therefore, in accordance with the Diocese of San Diego, "When you choose to be baptized yourself or to have your child baptized in the Episcopal Church, it means you are choosing to live out the Baptismal Covenant in the context of an Episcopal Church community, taking your part in the worship, mission and ministries of the local parish."

What About Children?

Obviously an infant or young child cannot judiciously say that they accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. They cannot make this confession for themselves. How can they then be baptized?

Baptism of children is not simply a transaction between the child, the priest, and God. It requires the express support, cooperation, and participation of parents and godparents. Just as it is every parent's responsibility to feed and nurture their child's physical and emotional needs, it is the responsibility

of the Christian parent to feed and nurture their child's spiritual needs. This is the commitment every parent makes when they choose to have their child baptized.

The confession and promises in the Baptismal Covenant are made for the child by their parents and godparents. The parents and godparents guarantee that the child will be brought up within the Church, to know Christ, and be able to follow him.

They are asked: "Will you be responsible for seeing that the child you present is brought up in the Christian faith and life? Will you by your prayers and witness help this child to grow into the full stature of Christ? Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?", to which they respond, "I will with God's help."

It is the responsibility of all baptized Christians to continue – with God's help – in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. But as a parent or godparent of a baptized child, not only do we assume that responsibility for ourselves, but we assume it for another soul as well!

Parents and godparents "go to church" to fulfill their own Baptismal Covenant. But they also actively participate in the Body of Christ to fulfill that same covenant on behalf of their children and godchildren.

The Desire of the Christian Heart

It is the desire of the Christian heart to grow into the full stature of Christ.

Parents and godparents raise their baptized children within the life of the Church in order to nurture this desire in them. The hope and prayer is that when these young souls have reached the age when they can make spiritual decisions for themselves, they will indeed voluntarily confirm the Baptismal Covenant made for them. They will choose to renounce Satan, confess their sins, and continue to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

When a child confirms for him or herself the Baptismal Covenant that was made for them, they are ready to receive the sacrament of Confirmation. Confirmation for the child is the chief aim of the parent and/or godparent.

Baptism at St. Michael's by-the-Sea

Holy Baptism is appropriately administered within the Eucharist as the chief service on a Sunday or other Feast. The Church has always reserved Holy Baptism for the special feasts of the Easter Vigil, the Day of Pentecost, All Saints' Day, and the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord. St. Michael's continues to observe this ancient tradition.

If you have accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, and feel called to be baptized, or if you feel God is calling you to have your child baptized, the first step is to attend a local parish regularly.

Adult candidates for baptism at St. Michael's by-the-Sea are asked to undertake intentional preparation through participation in the Catechumenate course. This comprehensive introduction into the Christian life runs periodically throughout the year.

In accordance with the Episcopal Diocese of San Diego, "Infants and children should be baptized only when their families have demonstrated an active and supportive commitment to the Episcopal Church and to the congregation in which they are seeking baptism. Each infant or younger child is to have at least one sponsor, called a godparent, who will make the baptismal vows on behalf of the child. Such a godparent must, therefore, be a member of the Episcopal Church and of the congregation that the candidate will be joining. In each of these two cases, other persons whose presence is desired by the family or by the candidate can be witnesses to the baptism, even if they are not members of this church."

If neither parent attends St. Michael's, but are active members of another congregation, a recommendation for baptism is requested from the clergy of the parents' home church to the clergy of St. Michael's.

As stated above, it is the express responsibility of parents to raise their baptized child in the Body of Christ. If, as a parent, you are not an active and supportive member of the Body of Christ, it is, frankly, unrealistic to expect you to raise your child in the life of the Church. In this circumstance, if neither parent belongs to a local congregation, it is our hope that you will prayerfully consider St. Michael's by-the-Sea as your new church home. If, as parents, you decide God is calling you to a life in Christ at St. Michael's, we invite you to attend the Catechumenate course and become members of this parish.

Prior to baptism, parents are required to attend a preparation class. Here a priest instructs the parents and godparents as to the significance of Holy Baptism and the importance of their role in the baptized child's life. The class is 90 minutes and covers the biblical and theological understanding of Baptism as well as the practical aspects of the liturgy.

Conclusion

Holy Baptism is quite literally a life-changing event! It is the beginning of life as a member of the living Body of the Risen Christ. In it we are sealed with the Holy Spirit, and marked as Christ's own forever.

It is the great privilege and blessing of all clergy to rightly and duly administer this holy sacrament. The clergy of St. Michael's by-the-Sea look forward to meeting with you and welcoming the newly baptized into the family of God!

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.



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