

BASICS ON BAPTISM

Some thoughts from Bishop Michael on the teaching which should be covered in some way in a Parish, Cluster or Deanery Baptism Preparation Course.

What do you ask of God's Church for your child?

The parents are asked this question at the beginning of the Rite of Baptism, and it is perhaps a good place to begin a Baptism Preparation Course. What do the parents ask for their children through Baptism? What do they hope Baptism will do for their children? What does Baptism mean to them? Why do they want their children baptised? Such discussion can often help to focus on the key teachings which need to be drawn out in a particular group of parents. Each couple and individual will be at different stages of their own pilgrimage of faith. Usually one or other parent will not be a Catholic, but may be the more committed Christian. Some may not be baptised at all. 'Playing it by ear' will be important, but certain basics need to be got across.

'Washing away Original Sin' and 'Becoming a Child of God'

These two points will often come from the parents in one way or another. They can be affirmed as true, and then used as a starting-point for leading the parents into a richer understanding of Baptism, and its implications for their children and for themselves.

Baptism Preparation, and the Rite of Baptism itself, are wonderful opportunities for evangelisation, bringing the Good News of God's love to the parents themselves in a new and sometimes life-changing way. They are opportunities too good to be missed, and the most should be made of both. A good preparation course helps parents realise more deeply the meaning of their own baptism, and the extraordinary dignity and responsibility of being a son or daughter of God and a member of his family, the Church. Good preparation should lead to a more fruitful celebration of the sacrament.

Welcome!

The word 'welcome' lies at the heart of the meaning of Baptism as the first sacrament of Christian Initiation. 'Welcome' into the life of God, and 'welcome' into the life of the Church as God's own family. There is little point in going through with Baptism if parents do not want to accept these two 'welcomes' for their child from God and the Church. Whatever other ideas parents go away with, they must at very least grasp that having their children baptised commits them to nurturing their children's personal relationship with God and enabling their gradual involvement in the life, worship and mission of the Church. The parents' personal example and witness will be vital in this process. It is also crucial that parents experience a sense of warm welcome at the Baptism Preparation Course and the Rite of Baptism, with God's welcome 'made flesh' in our human welcome.

Welcome into the life of Jesus Christ and into the Holy Trinity

Baptism is our sacred gateway into the mystery of Christ. Through Baptism, the Holy Spirit unites us with Christ himself. As St Paul puts it, through Baptism we die and rise with Christ (Romans 6.3-11). We become 'in Christ', and living members of the Body of Christ. This intimate unity with Jesus Christ is central to Baptism. Parents commit themselves to lead their children into a living relationship with the Lord.

The Baptism of Jesus

One of the best ways of drawing out the meaning of Baptism is by focusing on the Baptism of Jesus. This is a good Gospel passage to use at the Rite of Baptism itself (Mark 1.9-11). Because Baptism unites us with Christ, what happened to Jesus at his Baptism happens also to the child being baptised. God the Father pours out his Holy Spirit – the Spirit of his Love – upon the child, and his silent voice says to the child, 'You are my beloved daughter/son. My favour rests on you.'

A time of prayerful reflection would be good at this point. Do the parents really think of themselves as God's own son and daughter? There should be a sense of wonder that the God who created the universe looks on us and says those extraordinary words: 'You are my beloved child'.

God will say those words to their child at the Rite of Baptism! No wonder the Church makes such a fuss about Baptism, and tries to prepare us for it as fully as possible. Baptism is not something to 'get done': it is a rite of joyful welcome into the very heart of God's life.

What kind of relationship do the parents want to have with their child in the years ahead? No doubt a relationship of affection, love, warmth, closeness. God the Father wants the same kind of relationship with their child (and with the parents).

Welcome into the life of the Church

Some parents come to present their child for Baptism happy with drawing the child into a relationship with God, but having little sense of the importance of drawing their child into the life of the Church.

And yet if they begin to understand that Baptism makes their child a son or daughter of God, then belonging to God's family is the obvious implication! They want their child to be part of their own family; God wants their child to be part of his family, the Church. They want their child to grow up to be a full family member, sharing family meals, close to any brothers and sisters, taking on family responsibilities, etc. God wants the same for their child as a member of the Church. This is a simple point, easy to make, but vital to the whole meaning of Baptism. There can be no adequate Baptism Preparation without a stress on the sacrament as incorporation into the Church of Jesus Christ. That may well challenge many parents about their own involvement.

Why is being an active member of the Church so important? Many ask, "Surely I can be a good Christian without going to church?" Here is an opportunity to give some teaching on the heart of the Gospel. What does it mean to be 'saved'? There is no adequate answer without showing that God comes to gather us together as one family, united in his love. Unity with each other and unity with God go hand in hand. Our personal relationship with God and our visible unity with each other in the Church are essentially linked. Again, this is easy to get across using their hopes for their own family life: how would they feel if their child wanted to be close to mum and dad, but wanted nothing to do with any brothers and sisters in the family?

Baptism is a Rite of Welcome into the community of the Church, into the Family of God, as a living member of the Body of Christ. Baptism is just the beginning. The parents will hope their child becomes more and more deeply involved in family life. God wants the same for the child in the Church: the child should get to know his or her brothers and sisters in the church over the years, get used to worshipping with them on Sundays, learn to live the Christian way of life. Receiving Holy Communion at about the age of 8 will be the next formal step into unity with the Church, but that needs to be prepared for by being part of the life and worship of the Church between Baptism and First Communion. Receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation around the age of 15 will complete their child's unity with the Church, and that should begin a lifetime of full involvement in the mission of the Church to bring the Good News of Jesus to the world.

Using the Rite of Baptism to teach its meaning

Once some basic teaching has been given, perhaps the best way of summing up the meaning of Baptism is by going through the Rite of Baptism and the various symbols with the parents.

1. The Questions to the Parents

The parents make very serious commitments here before God and his Church. They take on the responsibility of training their child "in the practice of the faith" and bringing them up to keep God's commandments. Do they really clearly understand and accept what they are undertaking?

2. The Question to Godparents

The choice of godparents can often cause friction, but we need to make it clear that every godparent at a Catholic Baptism represents the Catholic Church, and must therefore be a baptised, confirmed and practising Catholic. Committed Christians who are not Catholics may be 'Christian witnesses'. Parents need only choose one godparent, although two (a godmother and a godfather) is usual.

3. The Signing with the Cross

Here is summed up well what lies at the heart of Baptism: "The Christian community welcomes you with great joy." As far as possible, the parish community should be present at every Baptism to welcome the child with joy: this best happens at Sunday Mass. Certainly the parish should be invited to every Baptism.

The parents and others trace the cross on the child's forehead. What does this mean? The child now belongs to Christ, and the parents commit themselves to do all they can to make sure that this invisible sign remains there. [Perhaps comparing the now famous scar on Harry Potter's forehead and the invisible sign of the cross on the child's forehead can be fruitful here!].

4. The Intercessions

The intercessions given in many printed versions sum up well much of the meaning of Baptism: "By the mystery of your death and resurrection, bathe this child in light, give him/her the new life of Baptism and welcome him/her into your holy Church... Through Baptism and Confirmation, make him/her your faithful follower and a witness to your Gospel". Not only is this to be true for the child, but also for the parents. Their lives are to be "examples of faith to inspire this child." And so one of the key prayers is that God will "renew the grace of our Baptism in each one of us" – including the parents and godparents.

5. Invoking the Saints

The community the child is joining is not simply the local parish, but the diocesan family, the worldwide family of the Church, and the Church throughout the ages. We are united in faith and love with Mary, the Mother of God, and all the saints. Being baptised is about joining the Communion of Saints.

6. Anointing before Baptism

Baptism has a 'negative' meaning: it is about deliverance from sin and evil, freedom from original sin in particular. This 'washing' aspect of Baptism has been much stressed in the past and remains important. But we have not been so good, perhaps, at highlighting the 'positive' meaning of Baptism as welcome into the heart of God's life, into the living mystery of Christ, and into the life and work of his Church. There are still parents who bring their children for Baptism simply to get rid of something (original sin) rather than to ensure the greatest gift there is to receive, the Gift of God's life and love. The prayer for this anointing begins with the 'negative' and moves onto the 'positive'. The child is anointed with the 'oil of salvation': salvation is not merely deliverance from sin – it is above all the open-hearted welcome of the God of Love who draws us into his family, here on earth and eventually in heaven.

7. Prayers over the Water

Here is an opportunity to discuss the symbolism of water. Water 'drowns' and destroys (like Noah's Flood) but is also the great symbol of life. It not only cleanses, but renews, refreshes and restores. In a desert land, water means life! The waters of Baptism stands above all for the life of God which he longs to share with us.

The prayers over the water draw out well the deepest meaning of Baptism: "Make this water holy, Lord, so that all who are baptised into Christ's death and resurrection by this water may become more perfectly like your Son.... Lord, make holy this water which you have created, so that all those whom you have chosen may be born again by the power of the Holy Spirit, and may take their place among your holy people."

Being born again with a "new and spiritual birth", dying and rising with Christ, taking their place among God's people: this is the mystery of Baptism.

Baptism is our 'Exodus', the beginning of a life of pilgrimage. The Israelites escaped from slavery in Egypt through the waters of the 'Red Sea'. The baptised person escapes from slavery to sin through the waters of Baptism, and begins a life-long journey to the Promised Land of eternal life with God.

8. Renunciation of Sin and Profession of Faith

Once again, the parents and godparents are challenged here with their responsibilities, but in the setting of their own dignity as sons and daughters of God. They are asked to make it their constant care to bring up the child in the practice of the faith, the faith of the Church which we go on to profess together. Are they ready to accept this responsibility? If so, here is an opportunity for them to turn away from sin and to renew their faith. Their child is not going to be baptised in some private faith, but in the faith of the Church, a faith that we are proud to profess together.

On the one hand, we need to be very sensitive to the fragility of some parents regarding their faith and situation, taking care not to 'break the crushed reed nor quench the wavering flame' (Isaiah 42.3). On the other hand, we should not tone down the very serious commitment involved in presenting a child for baptism. Bringing a child into the world is a 'big deal' as any mother will agree, and changes the priorities and life-style of the parents. Bringing a child into God's family through Baptism is just as much of a challenge, and we do the parents a disservice if we play down what it involves.

Why are the parents there? "Dear parents and godparents, you have come here to present this child for Baptism. By water and the Holy Spirit, he/she is to receive the gift of new life from God, who is Love."

9. The Baptism itself

The word 'baptise' comes from the Greek word for to 'immerse', 'dip', 'soak', 'plunge'. The meaning of Baptism is most clearly signified when a child is fully immersed three times in the water, rather than have water poured three times over his or her head. The approved Rite of Baptism for Children states: 'As the rite for baptising, either immersion, which is more suitable as a symbol of participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, or pouring may lawfully be used' (*General Introduction*, n. 22). Whether or not a child is to be baptised by immersion, discussing the symbolism of full immersion can be a very effective way of helping parents to understand what Baptism means. The three-fold pouring of water can suggest simply a rite of washing. Three-fold immersion most powerfully symbolises the heart of Baptism:

(1) Immersion into the life of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In the early Church, flowing water (the local river, perhaps) was blessed by the Bishop to be a symbol of the Living God. Being totally immersed three times into the river – in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – signified being plunged into the Holy Trinity, into the life and love of God. From the moment of his or her Baptism, a child should live soaked, plunged and immersed in God. How will parents and godparents help to ensure this happens?

(2) Dying and rising with Christ (the Font as Tomb)

In Baptism, we go down into the watery tomb with Christ, dying with him. Our old sinful self is 'drowned'. And then we rise up out of the water as Christ rose from the dead. Baptism is an Easter Sacrament, bringing us to life in the Risen Christ. (See Romans 6.1-11)

(3) A new and spiritual birth (the Font as Womb)

St John teaches the same as St Paul, but uses the idea of 'new birth' to get across the newness of life which Baptism brings. (See St John's Gospel, 3.1f). Again, a mother will understand his point all too well. Her baby lived in her womb for nine months, alive and kicking! Birth brings the child out into the open to live life to the full, emerging from the 'waters' of the womb. The Baptismal Font is the womb of the Church: from the waters of the font, a child emerges to begin life in its fullest form on earth, as an adopted daughter or son of God within his family.

All three teachings are far easier to 'see' when Baptism is by immersion, but this is what the Baptism of their child involves even if it is carried out simply by the pouring of water. Are the parents and godparents ready to 'take the plunge' on behalf of the child, knowing what it means?

10. Anointing with Chrism

One day the child will be anointed with chrism in the Sacrament of Confirmation, sealing and completing what has been begun in Baptism. The anointing with 'the chrism of salvation' at Baptism is a sign of the extraordinary dignity that comes with being a child of God, 'freed from sin, given a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and welcomed into his holy people.' Baptism makes us members of God's priestly and prophetic people, members of the ultimate royal family called to share Christ's throne in heaven (Revelation 3.21).

11. Clothing with the White Garment

Again, the white garment stresses the Christian dignity of the newly-baptised as someone 'clothed in Christ'. The parents will always make sure their child is properly clothed every day. How will they make sure their child is daily 'clothed in Christ'?

12. The Lighted Candle

Lighting the baptismal candle from the Easter Candle is a sign that the child has been "enlightened by Christ", but also of the vocation of every Christian to bring the light of the Risen Christ to the world. A sacred calling of parents is to walk with their children in the light of Christ, to keep the flame of faith alive in their hearts, and to prepare them for their Confirmation when they will be sent into the world to proclaim the Good News. A baby cannot carry the candle, and so the light is entrusted to the parents and godparents "to be kept burning brightly". It is quite easy to do that to a candle, but it is the living flame of Christ himself which is entrusted to them. It is above all by doing this that parents live out their own Confirmation.

13. The Concluding Rite

When Baptism does not take place during Mass, the Rite ends by moving to the altar. Why? Because Baptism is just the beginning of the path of initiation into the Church. It remains incomplete without taking a full part in the Mass through Holy Communion and without the sealing of the Holy Spirit in Confirmation. The concluding rite reminds us once again that being a Christian is not a private affair between the child and God. The newly-baptised is 'the child of God' as a member of God's family, and calls God his or her Father 'in the midst of the Church'. For the first time, we say together the 'Our Father' (not the 'My Father') united with the child who now belongs to the family of God.

14. The Blessing of the Parents

The Rite of Baptism ends with the blessing of the parents. Here is another opportunity to reaffirm the sacred vocation to parenthood, a call to bring up God's own children in his name, in his ways and in his love. Husband and wife are to be together "the first teachers of their child in the ways of faith. May they also be the best of teachers, bearing witness to the faith by what they say and do." By living out their vocation to parenthood, they respond to the grace of their own Baptism and Confirmation.