



## Policies of the Diocese of Kansas City ~ St. Joseph

**Policy # 120.10**

### **Infant Baptism**

Approved By: Most Reverend Raymond J. Boland, DD

Approved: May 2004

Effective: May 2004

Revised:

### **CHRISTIAN INITIATION OF CHILDREN**

#### **A. INFANT BAPTISM**

##### **1. Preparation**

The baptism of infants is a treasured practice dating from the earliest tradition of the Church. "Our Lord said, 'Unless a man is reborn in water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.' 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. This faith is proclaimed for them by their parents and godparents, who represent both the local Church and the whole society of saints and believers."<sup>(1)</sup> Perhaps even more so than in the case of adult baptism, the baptism of infants most clearly affirms that it is not we who choose God, but rather it is God who chooses us.

Thus, the baptism of infants is to take place within the first few weeks after birth.

A . Infant baptism is celebrated with clear expectations of the parents and families of the infants to be baptized, as well as of the Christian community. Such expectations are that they are all involved in preparing for the baptism of the children, for with the children, they will live out the life that is shared in baptism and they will gradually prepare for the next stage in the children's growth in faith.<sup>(2)</sup>

B. Preparation for the baptism of infants is a teachable moment for both parents and the faith community. It can encourage them to re-examine the meaning of faith in their own lives. The 1980 Instruction on Baptism and Canon Law both call for catechesis for parents and sponsors regarding the responsibility they take upon themselves when they present their children for baptism.<sup>(3)</sup>

1. Because sponsors may come from another locale or parish, this catechesis may take the form of some words of instruction or exhortation immediately prior to the rite.

2. Baptismal preparation centers on:

- God's love,
- the life, death and resurrection of Jesus,
- the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church
- the cleansing of original and personal sin.
- all life as a gift from God,
- our being created to the image and likeness of God
- the blessing we have in sharing life with God and with one another.

A. Parents should be helped:

- to nourish their own faith life so that they can support the gift of faith they share with their children;
- to see Baptism as a sacrament of initiation, a first step in a journey of faith made with other members of the Church; .
- to understand something of the history of the sacrament in order to grasp the Church's present appreciation of it;
- to be familiar with the baptismal ritual and symbols, namely: water as life-giving and cleansing; oil as protecting, strengthening and healing; light as driving out darkness; the community as the setting in which Christ is present.

2. Participants in the Rite

A. Parents

- **The Code of Canon Law directs parents to see to it that their infant children are baptized within the first weeks after their birth.**
- It urges them to approach their pastor either during the pregnancy or as soon as possible after the birth of the child so that they may prepare for the baptism in an appropriate manner.<sup>(4)</sup>
- Catholic parents have a most critical role in the baptism of their children. It is of great importance that they are moved by their own faith as they present their child for the celebration of the sacrament.
- In inter-faith marriages, this responsibility falls on the Catholic parent. The faith of parents who are Catholic, together with their intention to raise their child in that same Catholic faith, is a necessary prerequisite for celebrating this sacrament.
- The Sacrament of Baptism for infants is a "teachable moment" and also an opportunity to welcome parents back to the Church.
- However, if after dialogue between parents and pastor, there is no reasonable hope that the parents, or at least one of them, or the person who lawfully holds their place, are able or intend to raise the child in the Catholic faith, then the law of the Church stipulates that the baptism is to be postponed.<sup>(5)</sup> This postponement should not be presented as a refusal to baptize the child, but rather as a delay of baptism until such time as parents are ready to profess their faith and undertake the responsibilities entailed in bringing their children to the Church for baptism. Pastoral care and concern should characterize both the manner in which this decision is conveyed to parents and the subsequent follow-up to continue the preparation for baptism.
- In particular, parents who present their child for baptism and whose marriage is not recognized by the Church require special pastoral care. In such situations, the priest (or his representative) is obliged to sincerely welcome such couples back to the Church and give the

- couple every assistance they need in order to "regularize" their marriage in the Church.
- Great care also must be exercised lest too stringent requirements be imposed, especially with respect to new immigrants and undocumented aliens, and others in special circumstances. Infants born out of wedlock are to be treated with the same respect as infants born within a Christian marriage. Clearly, any child in danger of death is to be baptized at the parents' request.
- Parents, sponsors and the pastor are to see that a name foreign to a Christian mentality is not given.<sup>(6)</sup>

#### B. The Child

- It is understood that the child who is presented to the Church for Baptism is the child of at least one Catholic parent for the licit celebration of the sacrament.<sup>(7)</sup>**
- The Rite of Baptism for Children indicates that the rite is for infants or children who have not yet reached the age of discernment.<sup>(8)</sup> The age of discernment is generally interpreted as the age of reason or approximately the age of seven. They share in the faith of their parents and of the larger Christian community.

#### C. Godparents

- Godparents have a special role in Baptism. Along with the parents, they present the child to the Church.
- It is also their responsibility to assist the baptized person to lead a life in harmony with Baptism and to fulfill the obligations flowing from it.<sup>(9)</sup> The same prerequisites apply to godparents for infant baptism as apply for the godparents in adult baptism, namely that they are persons who:
  - ◊ are Catholics,
  - ◊ have been confirmed and who are currently receiving the sacrament of the Eucharist;
  - ◊ are at least sixteen years of age (an exception may be made by the parish priest for a just cause);<sup>(10)</sup>
  - ◊ lead a life of faith in harmony with the function they are undertaking and have the intention of undertaking this function;
  - ◊ are not parents of the child;
  - ◊ are not bound by a legitimately declared or inflicted canonical penalty.<sup>(11)</sup>

In light of the Code's directive that godparents are to lead a life of faith in harmony with the nature of this public office in the Church, Catholics who are in an irregular marriage are not to serve as godparents.

- There need be only one godfather or godmother, although it is common practice to have one of each.<sup>(12)</sup>
- A baptized person belonging to a non-Catholic ecclesial community may be admitted only as a Christian witness to Baptism; the function of the Christian witness in such a case is to attest to the actual celebration. There must always be at least one Catholic person who has the office of godparent.<sup>(13)</sup>

#### D. The Minister of Baptism

- The ordinary minister of infant baptism is identical to that of adult baptism, that is, a bishop,

priest or deacon.(14)

- All priests and deacons of the Diocese enjoy the faculty of baptizing infants and children.  
(15) Permission of the proper pastor (16) should be obtained.
- In a case of serious necessity (e.g., a child about to die) where no ordained minister can attend, any person with the requisite intention may baptize, using water and the proper formula. If they are living, aborted fetuses should be baptized insofar as possible.(17)
- Pastors should make it a point to instruct the laity, especially health care professionals, in the correct way to baptize.(18) Even in such cases, the baptism should be properly recorded. If the infant in such a case recovers, he or she should celebrate the Rite of Bringing a Baptized Child to Church. (Rite of Baptism of Children 165-185)

#### E. The Christian Community

- The baptized child is welcomed into a community of believers. This community will help the child, parents and sponsors to grow in their life of faith. Therefore, the celebration of the Baptism should involve the community of the faithful which witnesses to this faith by its presence.
- Through works of Catholic education, in Catholic schools or in catechetical programs, the community exercises a vital role in the faith development of the child. So also the community needs to be aware of its responsibility to give good example to the child as he or she progresses in years.
- The Rite of Baptism for Children describes the community of the faithful as having an important role in the baptism of children, since they express their assent to and support of the baptism.(19)
- The celebration of this sacrament in the context of Mass gives the community a privileged opportunity to reflect on the Paschal Mystery, to renew its response to the call to conversion, and provides the children, their parents, sponsors and families with the encouragement they have a right to expect. The inclusion of baptism within the Sunday Mass need not unduly prolong the Mass. When several children are to be baptized within the Sunday Mass, the directives given in the Rite of Baptism are to be carefully reviewed and implemented.(20)
- When baptism for children is celebrated outside Mass, the rite is to be followed. Insofar as possible, assisting ministers (reader or cantor) should perform the parts of the rite proper to them, that these roles not be assumed by the priest or deacon. Baptism in danger of death is an obvious exception.

#### 3. Opportunity for Celebrating Infant Baptism

- **As mentioned above, the law of the Church requires that parents see to it that infants are baptized within the first weeks after birth.**
- Any Sunday is an appropriate time to celebrate baptism, since it is the day that commemorates the Resurrection of the Lord. On Sundays, baptism may be celebrated during Mass, so that the entire community may be present, and the necessary relationship between Baptism and Eucharist may be clearly seen.(21) Inter-faith considerations or other reasons may suggest the celebration of baptism outside of Mass.
- Some pastoral considerations are to be noted in determining when the actual celebration will take place:
  - ◊ If possible, the preparation of the parents should be provided by the pastor (or his representative) before the birth of the child. Advance publicity to parents to participate in such a program should also welcome new parents and the new child into the parish community. Sufficient guidance and time should be given to parents at

- this important time in their lives;
- ◊ The health of the mother must be considered to assure her presence, if feasible, at the celebration of the sacrament. Her faith, along with that of her husband and of the wider Christian community, is being celebrated and shared with the child;
  - ◊ The Rite of Baptism for Children notes that the Easter Vigil is a particularly appropriate time for the celebration of baptism in order to highlight the paschal character of the sacrament. However, practical considerations such as the length of the vigil and the late hour in which the Vigil is to be celebrated might well indicate that infant baptism be celebrated at another time.
  - ◊ With regard to the frequency with which a parish schedules baptisms, they should be so scheduled that the parents have the opportunity to celebrate the baptism within the first few weeks of the child's birth.<sup>(22)</sup>
  - ◊ Baptism is to be conferred either by immersion (which is the preference of the rite)<sup>(23)</sup> or by pouring.<sup>(24)</sup> Baptism by immersion does not require the total submersion of the head of the infant or child.

#### 4. The Place for Celebration

- Because baptism signifies entrance into the Church, a parish church is the proper place for its celebration.<sup>(25)</sup>
  - As a rule, and unless a sufficient reason suggests otherwise, children are to be baptized in the parish of their parents.<sup>(26)</sup> Pastors are also to be sensitive to the desire of many parents who wish to return to the parish where they grew up and/or where the grandparents still reside for the baptism of the child. In such cases, the permission, oral or written, of the pastor of the parish where the parents regularly practice the faith, is to be obtained.
  - Except for true emergencies, such as danger of risk to health or danger of death, baptisms at home or in any place other than a Catholic church are not permitted in the Diocese of Kansas City - St. Joseph.
- 

<sup>1</sup> Rite of Baptism for Children [RBC], 2.

<sup>2</sup> A fuller explanation of these expectations is given in the Rite of Baptism for Children, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Instruction on Baptism, 25, 29-30; canon 851, 2<sup>o</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Canon 867, §1.

<sup>5</sup> Canon 868, §1, 2<sup>o</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Canon 855.

<sup>7</sup> Canon 868, §1, 2<sup>o</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> RBC, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Canon 872.

<sup>10</sup> Canon 874, §1, 2<sup>o</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> Canon 874, §1, 4<sup>o</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Canon 873.

<sup>13</sup> Canon 874, §2.

<sup>14</sup> Canon 861, §1.

<sup>15</sup> Canon 863; Faculties for Priests of the Diocese of Kansas City - St. Joseph, 1.

<sup>16</sup> See canon 857, §2 to determine the proper pastor. Cf. Faculties for Priests and Deacons #1

<sup>17</sup> Canon 871.

<sup>18</sup> Canon 861, §2.

<sup>19</sup> RBC, number 4.

<sup>20</sup> RBC, 29.

<sup>21</sup> RBC, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Canon 867, §1.

<sup>23</sup> General Introduction, Rite of Baptism for Children, 22

<sup>24</sup> Canon 854.

<sup>25</sup> RBC 24.

A suitable place for celebrating the liturgy of the word of God should be provided in the baptistry or in the church. The baptistry is the area where the baptismal font flows or has been placed. It should be reserved for the sacrament of baptism, and should be a worthy place for Christians to be re-born in water and the Holy Spirit. It may be situated in a chapel either inside or outside the church, or in some other part of the church easily seen by the faithful; it should be large enough to accommodate a good number of people. After the Easter season, the Easter candle should be given a place of honor in the baptistry, so that when it is lighted for the celebration of baptism, the candles of the newly baptized may easily be lighted from it.

**26.** In the celebration, the parts of the rite which are to be performed outside the baptistry should be celebrated in different areas of the church which most conveniently suit the size of the congregation and the several stages of the baptismal liturgy. When the baptistry cannot accommodate all the catechumens and the congregation, the parts of the rite which are customarily performed in the baptistry may be transferred to some other suitable area of the church.

26 Canon 857, §2.