

Infant Baptism

And [the prison guard] called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out and said, "Men, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ... and he was baptized at once, with all his family. ~ Acts 16:29-31, 33

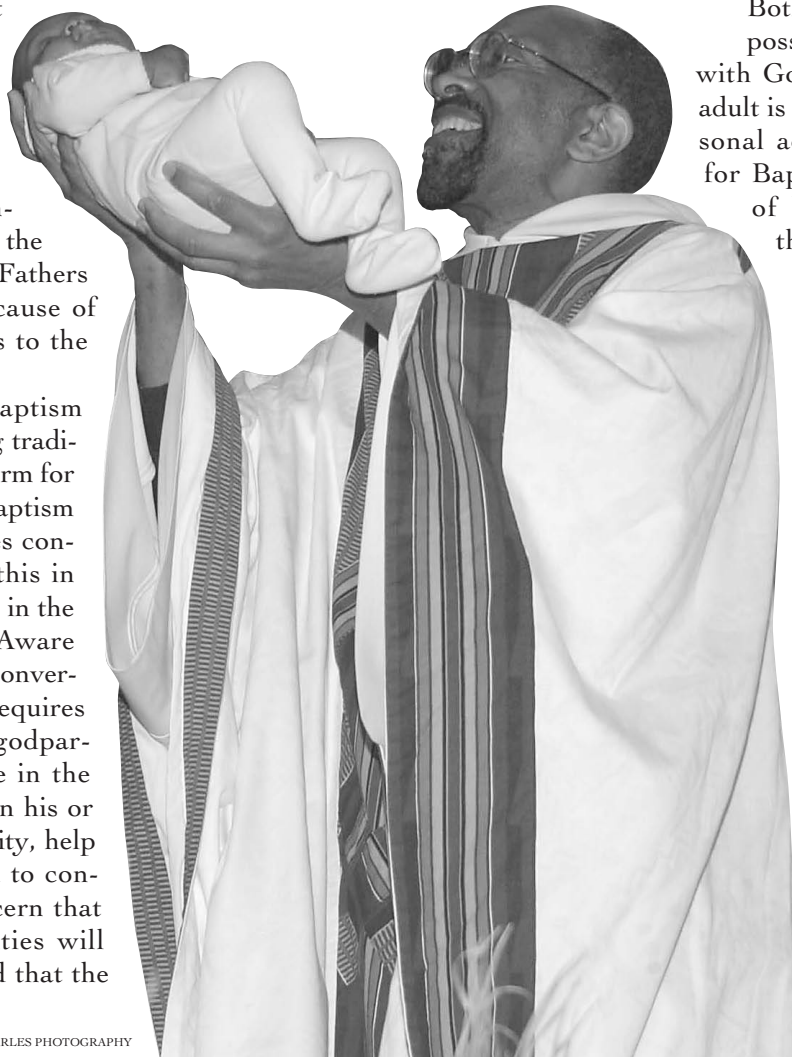
THE BAPTISM OF INFANTS and children who have not reached the age of reason has been practiced since the beginning of Christianity. Scripture provides implicit evidence of this practice when it mentions the Baptism of entire households, which most likely included infants and children (see Acts 18:8; 1 Cor 1:16), and also when the faith of a parent brings about healing of their child (see Mk 9:17-27; Lk 8:41-42, 49-56). Explicit references to infant Baptism are found as early as the second century in the writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Polycarp, and others like them whom the Church honors as Fathers of the Church because of their contributions to the Christian faith.

While infant Baptism has a long-standing tradition, it is not the norm for this sacrament. Baptism rightly presupposes conversion. We see this in countless examples in the New Testament. Aware of the necessity of conversion, the Church requires that the parents, godparents, and all those in the community, each in his or her role and capacity, help to bring this child to conversion. The concern that these responsibilities will not be fulfilled and that the

child will never be brought to conversion is far outweighed by the spiritual advantages of this practice — that the child, once baptized, has God's life in him or her and can begin to grow in holiness immediately.

Baptism of infants and children demonstrates the necessity of the community to provide the faith required for Baptism (see Mk 16:15-16). Just as we cannot give ourselves life, we cannot give ourselves faith. Both faith and life are possible only after and with God's initiative. An adult is able to make a personal act of faith needed for Baptism only in light of having witnessed the faith of someone else. Furthermore, an adult cannot live and grow in faith in isolation — they, having become "members of Christ" (1 Cor 6:15), live and grow in faith in the community, the Body of Christ, the Church. For an infant or child, the parents make this act of faith as part of their divine responsibility of nurturing and educating their children. Faith, like life itself, is something that parents with

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the help of God enable their children to have. They provide the first faith community in which the infant or child will live and grow in faith.

Responsibility of the Parents

The parental responsibility of nurturing and educating their children in the faith is repeatedly mentioned throughout the Rite of Baptism. The rite begins with the naming of the child, followed by the parents requesting Baptism for the child. The priest or deacon tells the parents that by their request they are “accepting the responsibility of training him (her) in the practice of the faith” (*Rite of Baptism for Children* 77). This includes the parents’ responsibility to see that this child receives the rest of the sacraments of initiation (Confirmation and Eucharist).

Later in the rite the priest or deacon tells the parents, “[Y]ou must make it your constant care to bring him (her) up in the practice of the faith. See that the divine life which God gives him (her) is kept safe from the poison of sin, to grow always stronger in his (her) heart” (*Rite of Baptism for Children* 93). In order to carry out their obligations, the parents are then asked to renew their baptismal vows to “reject sin” and “pro-

fess your faith in Christ Jesus” (*Rite of Baptism for Children* 93).

Next, the infant is clothed in a white garment, which represents Christian dignity. The priest or deacon proclaims that the words and examples of the infant’s “family and friends” are to help the child bring this Christian dignity “unstained into the everlasting life of Heaven” (*Rite of Baptism for Children* 99). Finally, a candle is lit to represent the light of Christ. The priest or deacon reminds those gathered, “Parents and godparents, this light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly” (*Rite of Baptism for Children* 100).

Responsibility of the Church

Although the parents have the primary responsibility of being examples of faith to their children, the Church assists in this duty. This obligation is also mentioned in the Rite of Baptism, most clearly in the community’s profession of faith when children of catechetical age are baptized during the Easter Vigil: “[A]ll of us who have in any way prepared them to meet Christ today must always be ready to assist them” (*Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* 312).

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