

Parents: Don't Delay Baptism for your Infants!

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There is a trend that has set up for years now, and that is that Catholics are waiting many months to get their children baptized. I suspect that what we have here is a combination of a much lower infant mortality rate and, also, a less fervent practice of the faith by many. Further, there seems little sense among the faithful today that an unbaptized infant would be excluded from heaven.

As regards the last point, I think it is pastorally sound to trust in God's mercy for infants who die before baptism. However, I do not think it follows that we ought to disregard or substantially delay a sacrament which Jesus commands, and which the Church indicates ought not to be delayed. The Code of Canon Law says the following:

Parents are obliged to see that their infants are baptized within the first few weeks. As soon as possible after the birth, indeed even before it, they are to approach the parish priest to ask for the sacrament for their child, and to be themselves duly prepared for it. If the infant is in danger of death, it is to be baptized without any delay.
Can. 867 §1,§2

The Catechism also states: *The Church and parents deny a child the priceless grace of becoming a child of God were they not confer baptism shortly after birth.* (CCC # 1250) So it seems clear that a higher priority should be given to scheduling the baptism of babies within the first few weeks after birth.



Protestant practice departs from the received Tradition – Another factor for American Catholics is that many are influenced by the Protestants. Protestants, (though not all of them) disagree with our Catholic practice of baptizing infants. They usually wait until a child is between 8 and 12 to baptize, reasoning that the child will know and understand what is happening and be able to claim Christ for themselves.

But, I hope you see the supreme irony of this in the fact that the Protestants, who so emphasize that salvation does not come from works, delay baptism on the grounds that the infant has not achieved (i.e. worked up to) the proper level of maturity. To know, requires one to learn, which is a work. And we Catholics, who supposedly teach salvation through works (we do not), baptize infants who can work no work.

Novelty – Indeed, the Protestant denominations (mostly Baptists (another irony), Pentecostals, Fundamentalist and Evangelicals) who refuse baptism to infants, engage in a novelty unknown to the Church until recent times.

It is a simple historical fact that the Church has always baptized infants. Even our earliest documents speak of the practice. For example the Apostolic Tradition written about 215 A.D. has this to say:

The children shall be baptized first. All of the children who can answer for themselves, let them answer. If there are any children who cannot answer for themselves, let their parents answer for them, or someone else from their family. (Apostolic Tradition # 21)

Scripture too confirms that infants should be baptized if you do the math. For example

People were also bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." (Luke 18:15-17 NIV)

So the Kingdom of God belongs to the little children (in Greek βρέφη (*brephe*) indicating infants and little children still held in the arms, babes).

And yet elsewhere Jesus also reminds that it is necessary to be baptized in order to enter the Kingdom of God: *Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." (John 3:5 NIV)*

If the Kingdom of God belongs to little children, and we are taught that we cannot inherit it without baptism, then it follows that baptizing infants is necessary, and that to fail to do so, is a hindering of the little children which Jesus forbade his apostles to do. So both Tradition and Scripture affirm the practice of baptizing infants.

Many of the Protestants who do refuse infant baptism also water down (pardon the pun!) the fuller meaning of baptism, no longer seeing it as washing away sins and conferring righteousness *per se*, but more as a symbol of faith that they claim to have already received when they said the "sinners prayer" and accepted Christ as their savior. But what a tragic loss for them, since baptism and particularly the baptism of infants, says some very wonderful things about the complete gratuity of salvation and the goodness of God. Consider these points:

1. The baptism of infants is a powerful testimony to the absolute gratuity (gift) of salvation. Infants have achieved nothing, have not worked, have not done anything to "merit" salvation. The Catechism puts it this way: *The sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant baptism. (CCC # 1250)* The Church is clear, salvation cannot be earned or merited and infant baptism teaches that most clearly. Salvation is pure gift. How strange and ironic that some of the very denominations which claim that Catholics teach salvation by works (we do not) also refuse, themselves, to baptize infants. They claim that a certain age of maturity is required so that the person understands what they are doing. But this sounds like achievement to me. That the child must meet some requirement, seems like a work, or the attainment of some meritorious status wherein one is now old enough to "qualify" for baptism and salvation. "Qualifications....Achievement (of age)....Requirements....it all sounds like what they accuse us of: namely works and merit. To be clear then, the Catholic understanding of the gratuity of salvation is far more radical than many non-Catholics understand. We baptize infants who are not capable of meriting, attaining or earning.

2. The Baptism of infants also powerfully attests to the fact that the beauty of holiness and righteousness is available to everyone regardless of age. To be baptized means to be washed. Washed of what? Original Sin. At first this seems like a downer, "Are you saying my baby has sin?" Yep. All of us inherit Original Sin from Adam and Eve. We are born into a state of alienation from God that is caused by sin. The Scriptures are clear: [S]*in entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned (Rom 5:12).* So even infants are in need of the saving touch of God. Now why would we wish to delay this salvation and resulting holiness for 7 to 12 years? The Catechism says this,

Born with a fallen human nature and tainted by Original Sin, children also have need of new birth in Baptism to be freed from the power of darkness and be brought into the realm of the freedom of the children of God....The Church and parents would deny a child the priceless grace of becoming a child of God were they not to confer baptism shortly after birth. (CCC # 1250).

St. Cyprian Bishop of Carthage in the 3rd Century was asked if it was OK to wait to the 8th day to baptize since baptism had replaced circumcision. He responded with a strong no:

But in respect of the case of the infants, which you say ought not to be baptized within the second or third day after their birth, and that the law of ancient circumcision should be regarded, so that you think that one who is just born should not be baptized and sanctified within the eighth day We [the bishops] all thought very differently in our council. For in this course which you thought was to be taken, no one agreed; but we all rather judge that the mercy and grace of God is not to be refused to any one born of man. (Epist# 58).

So then here is the beauty, that infants are summoned to receive the precious gift of holiness and righteousness and that they are summoned to a right relationship with God by having their sin purged and holiness infused. Infants are called to this dignity and should not be denied it. With this done, some of the holiest and most innocent days of our lives may well be our first years. Then, as the will begins to manifest, and reason begins to dawn, the grace of holiness gives us extra strength to fight against the sinful world that looms.

3. The Baptism of Infants also attests to the fact that faith is gift for *every* stage of development- To be baptized is to receive the gift of faith. It is baptism that gives the true faith. Even with adults, true faith does not come until baptism. Prior to that there is a kind of *prevenient* faith, but it is not the Theological Virtue of Faith.

Now faith is not only an intellectual assent to revealed doctrine. It is that, but it is more. To have faith is also to be in a righteous and trusting relationship with God. An infant relates to his parents long before he speaks or his rational mind is fully formed. He trusts his parents and depends on them. It is the same with God. Thus the infant can well trust and depend on God and be in a right relationship with God, in an age appropriate way.

With his parents, his or her relationship of trust with parents, leads the infant to begin to speak and understand as he or she grows. It is the same with God. As the infant's mind awakens, the infant's faith grows. It will continue to grow until the day he or she dies (hopefully) as an old man or woman.

That faith accompanies us through every stage of our life, and develops as we do, is essential to its nature. An infant needs faith no less than an old man. An infant benefits from faith no less than a teenager or an adult. To argue, as some Protestants do, that you have to be a certain age before faith can exist, hardly seems to respect the progressive nature of faith which is able to bless EVERY stage of our human journey.

I have some very vivid memories of my experience of God prior to seven years of age and I will say that God was very powerfully present to me in my early years, in many ways even more so than now, when my mind sometimes "gets in the way."

Too many Catholics are waiting months, even years to have their children baptized. Precious time is lost by this delay. Infant Baptism speaks powerfully of the love that God has for everyone he has created and of his desire to have everyone in a right and saving relationship with Him. Surely baptism alone isn't enough. The child must be raised in the faith. It is the nature of faith that it grows by hearing and seeing. Children must have faith given at baptism but that faith must be explained and unwrapped like a precious gift for them.

Don't delay. Get started early and teach your child the faith they have received every day.