



Reborn in the Spirit

An Infant Baptism Preparation Program

FOR THE LEADERS: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

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The story of the development of this process

We have both been involved with sacramental preparation in parishes for decades, catechetically and liturgically, and have found that the most challenging sacramental experience to prepare others for is infant Baptism. With the other sacraments, the person celebrating them is directly involved in both catechesis and the rite. Yet with infant Baptism it is the parents and godparents, and in actuality the rest of the family, who are the ones needing preparation. For a couple to take on the role of evangelizing their own children for decades is truly a challenging yet blessed undertaking that deserves respect and support.

For years we prepared packages of hard copy articles and booklets about Baptism and mailed them to parents to prepare for an in-person session. Then new parents got busier and we got smarter. We were inspired to create a set of digital sessions that could be sent electronically—more efficient, more “green,” and more accessible not only to parents and godparents, but to siblings and the rest of the family as well.

During the early years of our evolving process, the content we provided focused on sacramental theology in general and the meaning of the symbols of Baptism in particular, accompanied by a page of specific instructions for celebrating the Rite itself. As we got smarter, we also got wiser. We realized that the best preparation would be to “break open” each part of the Rite in sequence. We chose to let liturgy lead catechesis.

We have created seven digital sessions, each one focusing on a segment of the full *Order of Baptism of Children* plus one for mystagogy. This approach helps the parents to understand the seamless flow of the rite, to anticipate and learn the language of the presider, to be more alert to their own words in the dialogue, and to be more mindful of the steps in the sacramental action in which they and their child are involved. This approach is much more empowering for the parents, equipping them to be “full, conscious, and active” participants during this foundational sacrament.



Steps in the process: face-to-face and digital

Intake can take many forms. With a couple new to the parish or to parenthood, an actual interview with the Baptism coordinator allows everyone to become familiar with one another, for the couple to receive the information needed for the process, and for the coordinator to discern the couple's level of faith development and commitment (Cf. Canon 868. #1, 2). For a couple in the parish who have gone through the process before, a simple phone call or email to the coordinator is sufficient to begin the process. Yet even these parents are expected to go through the whole process for this child. Not only do they have a new baby, their experiences with their older children make them different. (We re-send the digital sessions to these "veteran" parents, encouraging them to take a fresh look at them. This is a new moment in their lives with a new child, so it is an opportunity for a new discovery of faith in this new Baptism event in their family.)

For those long-distance situations in which a couple is bringing their child "home" for Baptism, Skype or Zoom or another of the videoconferencing services enables a "face-to-face" interview to take place.

Whatever form of encounter initiates the process, three key items of information need to be communicated. First, what is the date of the ritual; second, the desire of the parish to be available to help in any way; and third, the correlative expectation on the part of the parish that the couple will be serious about the process.

Determining the date is relatively easy. At our parish, we baptize infants seven times a year at regular Sunday Masses that are announced far in advance and published on the parish website. We began this practice over four decades ago so it has become well-known; as a result, 80 percent of the children we baptize celebrate the sacrament as part of a group. Since there are always complications, accommodations are made for the other 20 percent. The parents also need to be informed of the date of the single, final, joint preparation session for parents (and hopefully godparents) held shortly before the ceremony. (Again, for a long-distance situation some form of videoconference can allow the couple, if not to engage to some degree in the joint session, to have at least a real conversation with the coordinator before the event.)

After they have scheduled both the Baptism and the joint session, we immediately email them the seven digital sessions. Each session, except for the seventh, includes:

1. the text of a portion of the rite along with an exposition of what those particular gestures and words are meant to signify and accomplish,
2. the scriptural and historical background that provide the foundation of that significance,
3. questions for individual reflection and mutual conversation, perhaps including the godparents (and their older children), and
4. ways to enact an appropriate prayer with their child at the end of each session.

The seventh and repeatable session of this process is meant to be mystagogy—reflection on the Baptismal experience—both in the short and in the long run. Hopefully the prayer gestures that are part of each of the first six sessions will make the parents comfortable not only with the reflective part of that session but also with its gestures.



We point out to the parents that, depending upon how far along the pregnancy is, they need to devise a schedule in order to complete the preparation process without being rushed, especially since the last few weeks before the ceremony are usually filled with other concerns.

We also explain that the process involves *each* parent first taking the time to read and reflect upon the material before they *both* engage in about forty-five minutes of mutual discussion, sharing, and prayer—hopefully sometimes including the godparents and older siblings. We emphasize how important it is not only that they reflect individually but also articulate to one another (and to others) the faith that each brings to this sacred event in the life of their family.

Two examples make clear why such preparation is essential. First, during the ceremony, only after the presider has asked the parents what they wish for their child does he trace the sign of the cross and say: “In [the Church of God’s] name I sign you with the Sign of the Cross of Christ our Savior.” By this signing with the cross, the presider claims the child for Christ. This claiming is not simply his action but that of parents, godparents, family, and the entire Christian community. This claiming does not mean that this child will never suffer illness or injury, will never experience hardship or loss. What it does mean is that even in enduring these human experiences, this child will be protected from loss of spirit, from hopelessness, from abandonment—for he/she is forever in relationship with Christ and his Body. To make such a commitment for a child demands preparation!

Second, we do not mince words about the prayer and gestures of exorcism. We acknowledge that each child is born into a world and a family with a vulnerability and even a predisposition to a particular darkness, to generational physical and emotional illnesses, to addictions, and so on. The exorcism provides another chance for the parents and the Christian community to *claim* the power of the risen Christ’s victory over all these human and generational realities. Only with preparation, though, will they be able to claim this victory boldly and confidently.

We also periodically schedule after every Sunday Mass a brief meeting for couples in the process with the Baptism coordinator and team, both to check in with them and find out if the parish can support them in any way, and to sort of gently remind them about their schedule. Each gathering ends with prayer for them. (The *Book of Blessings* has a blessing for parents before childbirth that can be used for such an occasion, or you might adapt your own prayer.)

Babies are cute, and Baptism can be a fun time, but we must not trivialize the ceremony. Our great hope is that, by using this process, the actual celebration of Baptism will not be just an *occasion*, like a birthday party, but an *event*, like a wedding, in which the participants really experience that this child has now been reborn in the Spirit.

