



National Apostolate for
Inclusion Ministry

*Promoting the Full Inclusion of People with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities in the Life
of the Catholic Church*

What is Baptism

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**Sacramental
Preparation Baptism:
Individualizing
Lesson Plans**

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INTRODUCTION

On this tip sheet, preparation for the sacrament of Baptism will focus on catechesis of adults and youth with intellectual/developmental disabilities. According to Canon Law, if the person to be baptized is of catechetical age, the Rite of Christian Initiation may be adapted according to need. Since people have differing levels of faith, RCIA/RCIC offers excellent flexibility to prepare people who can never fully comprehend the intellectual aspects of Catholic belief but who can bring their special gifts of simplicity, humor, genuineness and prayer to the church community – qualities that people long for today.

Infants who are diagnosed with intellectual/developmental disabilities will be baptized in the manner typical for baptism of all infants (See section II, *Guidelines for Celebration of the Sacraments With Persons With Disabilities*, published by the U.S. Catholic Bishops in 1995).

The guidelines say that Baptism may be received by anyone who expresses a desire to be baptized, who is “properly disposed” (has a suitable inclination) and has not been baptized before. People with intellectual/developmental disabilities often possess a sense of the sacred yet lack the language skills to express that awareness. It is necessary that parents and associates of the person be consulted so that the intention to become a Christian is understood in the way that the person can best express it. If the person is so severely mentally challenged that the person is unable to make the choice for Baptism, at the request of a parent this person may be baptized because of the faith of the parent. If the person has been baptized before, the instruction about the meaning of Baptism is still appropriate but the sacramental rite is not administered. Rather, a procedure to welcome the person into the Catholic community should be arranged with the parish priest. This point is especially true for adults with intellectual/developmental disabilities since clear information about their background may be difficult to obtain.

It is right to defer Baptism only when it is apparent that no one is available to continue to support the person in their Catholic religion. Again, for the adult with intellectual/developmental disabilities, it is important to identify those people who will support the newly baptized in the growth of the faith. Therefore, the sponsors should be chosen with care and should be selected for their commitment to the person as well as to the Church.

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WHAT IS BAPTISM

Fundamentally, Baptism is initiation into the Church. The purpose of Baptism is to help a person gradually appreciate the love of God for the world which is shown through Jesus Christ and the life-giving Spirit. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments.” It is in Baptism that the person is united into the death and resurrection of Christ. This is brought about by incorporation into the world of Christians, a community that lives out that death and resurrection every day. Baptism provides the entrance into the activity of the Spirit of Jesus. The movement toward Baptism begins when the person is first called by the Spirit to become a Christian. This calling is lifelong because the faithful are constantly called to be re-energized in their Christian life. The faithful are continually called to conversion.

The *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* describe Baptism as the sacrament that incorporates people into Christ and into his Church: “They are formed into God’s people and obtain forgiveness of all their sins. They become a new creation and are called, rightly the children of God.” To understand this definition more thoroughly, we can break the definition into segments:

1. “*They are formed into God’s people...*” The purpose of Baptism has always been to teach the new Christian how to live a life in Jesus Christ. People with limited capacity for learning can still grow in their understanding of what God is calling them to be.
2. “*and obtain forgiveness of all their sins...*” These sins may be either personal sin or original sin. Personal sin means those committed during one’s lifetime (for the adult who understands what it means to sin). Theologians are now describing original sin as a “web” of sin into which every child is born, an absence of grace and a moral weakness that exists in society. Although the person with IDD may not be guilty of personal sin, there still can be a sense of wrong doing that is real.
3. “*They become a new creation...*” St. Paul describes the effects of Baptism as a “new creation replacing an old creation” (2Cor 5:17). The person is now different; he or she has a new beginning – a new relationship with God. People with IDD can understand that something new is happening; something different now exists in their life.
4. “*and are called, rightly the children of God.*” St. Paul says that the newly baptized are “adopted sons and daughters of God” (Gal 4:5-7) and “heirs of God and coheirs with Christ” (Rom 8:17). The baptized can now expect the love and generosity bestowed by God, their caring, nurturing parent. And likewise, the new Christian can now be expected to honor and love God as a parent. It must always be remembered that there is mutuality in the relationship between God and person and person and community. The possibilities for ministry by the person who is impaired are often overlooked

THE SYMBOLS AND RITUALS OF BAPTISM

Important aspects of Baptism include: the invitation to the potential Christian, bringing a new member into the community of believers and continuing education and support for the newly baptized person (following the sacramental act). Each aspect carries with it certain rituals and symbols. This section will focus on the sacramental act of Baptism. These rituals and symbols can be especially important to the person with mental limits because they offer physical and sensory experiences that bring the sacramental meaning to life.

Symbols

Water: The sacrament of Baptism is filled with symbols which celebrate the reality of truth within the life of the newly forming Christian. The overriding symbol of water is used in every Baptism. The richness of the symbolism is particularly enhanced when one understands that water had various ranks: from the lowest form of water (a mere puddle) to grand, flowing rivers of clean, clear water – true “living” water. Water gives life, relieves thirst and cleans.

In addition to water, there are many other symbols used in Baptism. Some other symbols used in Baptism and their meaning are:

Perfumed Oil: Oils was an important all purpose medium in the ancient Mediterranean world used for cooking, illumination, cleaning and cosmetics. It was used by application and by drinking for its sacred effects. It is used for anointing in many sacred rituals, including Baptism where it signifies the anointing by the Holy Spirit.

White Garment: This stems from the ancient rite in which the baptized in which the baptized removed their clothes before being immersed in water. After Baptism they put on a white linen robe to signify that they were now a new person, a pure person.

Salt: Salt has always been used as a preservative. This Christian interpretation of salt is that its use preserves the person from corruption.

Candle: In ancient Times the candle was important because without electricity, the night was dark. The candle brought light to that darkness. During Baptism, the candle which is lighted from the Easter candle communicates the triumph of the light of faith over the darkness of sin.

Rituals

In all sacred ceremonies, rituals of initiation dramatize the values of belonging and responsibility. In particular the water ritual expresses the value of life and purity. Baptism is grounded in a ritual cleansing away of impurity of sin – both personal and original sin. The water also symbolically “drowns” the person who is then raised to new life after the words of Baptism are said. These words are: “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Acceptance into Order of Catechumens: This ritual celebrates the beginning of a journey of faith

Enrollment of Names: Use of the person’s name to acknowledge readiness for sacraments of initiation.

Blessing of the baptismal water: The water is consecrated by a prayer, either during the Baptism or at the Easter Vigil. The prayer asks God to send the power of the Holy Spirit so that those baptized will be “born of water and the Spirit.”

Immersion in baptismal water: Bathing in middle Eastern and Roman culture was socially enriching and personally important. When the person is immersed in water it is like taking a bath. John describes a “birth bath” in which he says that a person must be born through water and the Spirit. (John 3:3-5). Paul describes the use of water as a sort of “funeral bath:” the person goes into the tomb with Jesus, joins him in death and then is raised to new life (Rom 6:4). Paul also writes of the baptismal bath as a “nuptial bath” in Eph 5:26 where water makes the bride holy and faultless.

Anointing with sacred chrism: The baptized person is anointed with holy oil with the sign of the cross. It is understood as a spiritual “seal.” This is a symbolic way to “mark” or “brand” the person to indicate that the person has received the Holy Spirit, has taken on Christ, and is now a member of the Christian Community.

WHAT DOES THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM DO?

Effects of the Sacrament for the Individual

The two principal effects are purification from sins and new birth in the Holy Spirit as stated in the scripture: “Everyone of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). Similarly John 2:5 states, “Unless a man is born through water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”



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Tradition states that Baptism confers sanctifying grace which means that the person receives the free and undeserved help to respond to God. It is a supernatural disposition toward life to life and act within the love of God. It enables belief, hope and love of God. Additionally, sanctifying grace enables baptized people to respond to the gifts of the Holy Spirit which, in turn, allows them to grow in goodness.

In addition to these principal effects, the person can now participate in all aspects of the Eucharistic liturgy. Also, the person receives the gifts of the Holy Spirit – the power to live and act under the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The person grows in moral virtues as the person continues to learn to live like Jesus. And finally, in a hidden and real way the person now is united to Christ in his death and resurrection.

Effects of the Sacrament on the Community

The sacrament of Baptism bestows the gift of a new member on the community of Christians in which the person is baptized. By virtue of this membership, the neophyte joins in the one People of God of the New Covenant as St. Paul proclaims, “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body (1Cor 12:13).

Baptism gives a share in the priesthood of all believers as described in 1Peter 2:5, which says that those who are new born are now part of the holy priesthood. They are like Christ, living stones that are forming a spiritual house.

The community now has a new member from whom they can expect service, respect and affection and to whom they will give support, and likewise, to whom they give the right to receive the sacraments, to be nourished with the Word of God and sustained by other spiritual helps.

In addition to becoming a member of the Catholic Church, Baptism confers membership in the communion among all Christians. All who have been properly baptized, whether or not in the Catholic Church, are now bonded into Christian unity.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Baptism, properly celebrated, occurs at a gathering of the community – either the Easter Vigil or Sunday Eucharist. The catechesis for Baptism is community and group oriented. The education occurs in a group (sometimes with one-on-one tutoring) and, the celebration occurs during a gathering of the faithful. The entire parish community is enriched by celebrating a person’s entrance into the “priesthood of all believers.”

Ongoing education after Baptism continues to nourish the person in a group gathering. This is especially important for people with intellectual/developmental disabilities who not only enjoy inclusion into the community but also bring their unique gifts and spirituality to the community.

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