



Thinking about Baptism

First the Good News....

You may be wondering, "What will I be getting myself into if I accept Christian Baptism?"

The Good News is that God, who made all things, and who gives us the freedom to discover his purpose for the world as our true destiny, also offers us his friendship. God offers us love so that love may become the foundation of our life and the healing power in a confused and broken world. To be known, accepted, forgiven and cherished by the One to whom we owe our very life is an answer to our deepest longing, our hunger for life itself, our longing to be whole.

This promising possibility has come to light in the story of Jesus. He shows how entirely God is committed to us, and how completely we can belong to God. Though once misunderstood and rejected, Jesus now draws every kind of people into a solidarity of forgiving relationships. He does this by the power of his sacrifice upon a cross.

When we encounter this Jesus as one who is not dead by very much alive, we are drawn into the companionship of those who entrust themselves to his way of life. And baptism is the sacrament of entry to this way of life. The community of the baptised gathers week by week around the Lord's Table. There the healing power of God's love can continue its work. From there it can spread into the whole world.

Which brings us to baptism

Those who respond to this good news and wish to join the community of Jesus, sharing his mission of hope to the world, are invited to be baptized. To receive baptism is to receive the same Spirit which empowered Jesus. In baptism we are assured of acceptance as his brothers and sisters. We are set free from our old self-centredness and from all the powers of evil. We are forgiven our past failures, and ushered into a new existence as members of a new humanity.

This makes Baptism a crucial moment in life, a real turning point. It happens once and for all. It should be entered upon with eyes open, for there is no turning back.

In fact, entering the waters of baptism means letting go of the life you have clung to, in the confidence that God will give you a new life by his Spirit. It is characteristically described as an experience of "dying" to "rise again". It is just the path Jesus took through death to resurrection: in Baptism, his story becomes our story. Those who are baptized are "in Christ" from that moment on, learning as they grow how to share Jesus' commitment to God his Father and to our fellow humanity - becoming with him God's sign to the world. The company of the baptized is the sign God gives the world of God's kingdom and love.

But what about children?

The Baptism of infants is a daring extension of the offer of baptism. It is only appropriate under very special conditions. *If the faith and commitment of parents is such that their children cannot conceivably be left out of this covenant relationship with God, they will bring their children to be baptized; thus, from the very beginning they will be fully members of the community of faith in which they will grow up.*

Modern studies have made clear that children are deeply affected by the personal environment in which they grow up. Christians have always believed that the grace of God is not limited by the limits of our understanding, but only by stubborn or careless rejection. This is why, from very early in the life of the Church, Christian parents have sought baptism for their children "by water and the Holy Spirit". They have brought their children into the realm of God's grace, so that they may grown in grace.

But this extension of the offer of baptism to young children puts a heavy responsibility on those who bring them to baptism, and on those who receive them. And so we must spell out.....

Parish responsibilities

- ❖ The parish will provide instruction and preparation near the time of baptism, so that parents and other sponsors can make a sober and informed decision and commitment in good faith, and be better equipped to fulfil their responsibilities.
- ❖ The parish will normally ensure that there is a parish sponsor for each child brought to baptism.
- ❖ The parish will try to make every baptism an occasion of great celebration.
- ❖ Since baptism is the entrance to communicant life, the parish will assist parents in teaching their child the meaning of the gospel sacraments of baptism and eucharist.
- ❖ The parish will continue to provide opportunities for Christian education and celebration through all the ages and stages of life.

Sponsors' responsibilities

The special responsibility that falls on you, the parents or other sponsors, arises from the fact that you are making a life decision for another human being, without his or her consent. Such presumption is justified only in the following circumstances:

- ❖ Those who bring a child to be baptized will themselves be baptized people and able to profess the Christian faith. They will be prepared to affirm their allegiance to Christ and his Church and their rejection of all that is evil.
- ❖ Parents will make a solemn commitment to give their child a Christian upbringing within the family of Christ's Church. This includes helping the child to be regular in public worship and personal prayer - not only by their teaching but especially by their example and their prayers.
- ❖ They will accept the responsibility of bringing their child to take his or her place at the Table of the Lord.
- ❖ They will be prepared to cooperate with the community of the church as it attempts to fulfill its responsibilities of nurture and support.
- ❖ Godparents and other sponsors will encourage the family in fulfilling these commitments, and undertake to pray regularly for the child. From all this it will be clear that the baptism of children is really only appropriate when at least one parent is regularly a part of the worshipping life of the Church.

Thought to ponder

Do you desire for yourself what you are asking for your child? Can you commit your child to more than you are committed to yourself.

The "other reasons" for your child's baptism

- ❖ **To give thanks to God for my child's birth.**

Baptism is much more than this. There is a service of "Thanksgiving for the Gift of a Child", if thanksgiving is your real concern, then this is what you should ask for.

- ❖ **So that she can have the same opportunities we had to decide about religion.**

Baptism presupposes a decision already! And unless you have chosen the way of Christ for yourself, you can hardly choose it for your child.

- ❖ **So that he can go to Sunday School.**

Baptism is not a condition for attending Sunday School. No child is ever turned away because he is not baptized.

- ❖ **To protect her from going to hell if she dies.**

Any god who condemned children simply because they were not baptized would not be the God of Jesus Christ!

- ❖ **So he can be married in the Church.**

Whether he wishes to marry as a Christian or not will be his own decision when the time comes.

❖ **To save her the embarrassment of being baptized when she is grown.**

Adult baptism is not only the original form of Christian baptism; it is a profoundly significant experience for a person who decides on her own to enter the Christian life - something she should not be deprived of.

❖ **Because we believe in God.**

So do Jews and Muslims. Baptism is only for those who will follow Christ in the fellowship of his Church.

❖ **Because it is a tradition in our family.**

Some families have a tradition of baptism without any active commitment to Christ and his Church. Such a tradition is a betrayal of baptism.

❖ **His grandparents would be upset if he were not baptized.**

It is you, his parents, and not his grandparents, who must give him a Christian upbringing if he is baptized. The decision must be yours, no matter what others think or feel.

❖ **To give him or her a name.**

He/she will be named when their birth is registered with the civil authorities. This is not what baptism is for.

❖ **Because the rest of our children are baptized, and we can't leave this one out.**

If the rest of the family is already part of the worshipping congregation, then indeed you cannot "leave this one out". But if this is not the case, then they have all been "left out", and there is every reason to avoid one more desecration of baptism.

❖ **To give him a good start.**

If you follow through on the implications of baptism - your own as well as the child's - you will indeed give him a "good start". However, the ceremony on its own, without the "follow-through", would be a "false start". If you are at a loss for good reasons:

- ❖ don't give up; go and talk to your pastor;
- ❖ plan to attend Church and get to know people, and discover whether this is a community to which you could belong.

Find out the good reasons for baptizing your child, and then you can make up your mind if this is what you really want.

But why is "going to church" so essential?

Many people have difficulty with the present approach to baptism because they have allowed their impressions of the church to determine their understanding of baptism. What is needed is that baptism be allowed to shape our vision of the Church! If you are one of those who see the Church as an institution for cultivating religious sentiments, teaching good morals, and ensuring personal salvation, you haven't yet taken a look at the real meaning of baptism!

Baptism is the symbol-the sacrament- of entrance into a life of symbols: a life continually sustained by the symbol of the eucharist. Indeed, this communal life is itself meant to be a symbol and sacrament to the world at large.

What is a *sacrament*? It is an outward, concrete sign of God's gracious work within us and within the world, a sign that derives from Christ himself. God uses these concrete symbols to make his saving kindness real and active for us. It is God's characteristic way of coming into our life - as God did supremely by becoming flesh and blood for us in Jesus of Nazareth.

That is why the church is so committed to these outward, visible symbols - like water, bread and wine, gathering as a family of faith, sharing in acts of service and witness, and so on.

Anyone who asks for baptism, then, is asking to be a part of this community whose very life is *symbol*. So long as you are unwilling to take this step, to share in this *life of symbols*, it makes no sense

to ask for the symbol of baptism which is the entrance to that life. Better to wait until a genuine entrance can be made than to make an abortive entry.

And so, "going to Church" does not mean setting a good attendance record at the school for religion, but choosing to be a part of God's visible, tangible symbol in the world. And that's what baptism is about. Of course, there are people who hold many Christian beliefs and yet do not believe in going to Church; and their convictions deserve respect. But they in turn must respect the Church's conviction and not attempt to desecrate the sign of baptism. If you are one of those who feel that going to Church is often just a sham, be sure you avoid the sham of using baptism for something other than its real purpose.

If a couple were to request marriage and then reveal that they had no intention of living together, their request would be turned down - naturally! In a similar way, anyone who requests baptism into Christ, without the intention of following him into the community he formed, has missed the point of baptism.

So you will not be asked to attend Church "a number of times". Rather, you will be expected to decide about belonging to the community of the Church; and you will be expected to test your decision in practice. The Baptismal Covenant includes a promise to "continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers". No one should be asked to make such a promise before they have had ample opportunity to discover if that is what they intend.

Who sponsors this child?

Young children can only be brought to baptism by adults who will answer for the children, and for themselves as well. The first and primary sponsors are the parents; and when neither parent is in a position to undertake the responsibilities described on pages 2 & 3, then baptism is almost certainly inappropriate - until the child is old enough to take responsibility for this act.

If only one parent will undertake the responsibilities, that is quite acceptable, provided that this is made clear, and provided that only the one parent answers for the child in the ceremony. In some cases, of course, there will only be one parent.

If both parents intend to answer for the child, both will be expected to take part in the period of instruction and preparation.

Normally, a sponsor from within the congregation will also be appointed.

Godparents may be chosen by the parents, provided that they too are in a position to fulfil the responsibilities described earlier.

Traditionally there have been three - two men and one woman for a male candidate, and vice versa. The quality matters more than the number. It is desirable that Godparents, if there are any, be able to take part in the period of instruction and preparation.

Setting a date

The foremost occasion for Christian baptism is Easter - traditionally at the Great Vigil. As the Church celebrates the dying and rising to life of the Lord, new members are initiated into that death and resurrection.

Other preferred occasions are the Day of Pentecost, All Saints' Day or the Sunday after, and the feast of the Baptism of the Lord (the Sunday after Epiphany). Sometimes another Sunday is chosen when the bishop can preside. Although for many years, it had been the practice to schedule baptism for "next Sunday", it is the older, more serious approach that is followed today.

You may find that one or more dates have already been set, in order to make the most of these great occasions. Do not be surprised if you are expected to wait a few weeks or even months. Something so important deserves careful, deliberate preparation involving the whole community, and should not be rushed.

You may have your own ideas about a date, and you should certainly share your ideas, but don't expect the date to be adjusted simply to accommodate "great aunt Bertha's visit next month"! If it really matters to her, she'll adjust her schedule to be there. And don't ask for a private baptism. That's like asking to swim without getting wet!

******Thinking About Baptism by John W.B. Hill******

John W. B. Hill is the incumbent of the Church of St. Augustine of Canterbury in Toronto. He is also author of *Making Disciples* and *Into the Household of God*.