

# Exploring the Rite of Baptism for Children: What happens at a baptism and what does it mean?

*Kildare and Leighlin Diocesan Commission for Liturgical Formation*

THE SHAPE OF THE RITE OF BAPTISM FOR CHILDREN
<b>Reception of the Children</b> Welcome; Naming of Child; Sign of the Cross
<b>The Liturgy of the Word</b> Scripture readings; Intercessions; Litany of the Saints; Anointing with Oil of Catechumens
<b>Baptism</b> Blessing of water; Profession of faith; Baptism
<b>Explanatory Rites</b> Anointing with Chrism; White Garment; Candle; Ephphetha
<b>Concluding Rite</b> Our Father; Blessing and Dismissal

This chart shows the shape of the celebration of baptism. We can see five parts to the celebration:

- The reception of the children
- The liturgy of the word
- Baptism
- Explanatory rites
- Concluding rite

This is the typical structure of baptisms in our parishes. Each of these parts has a special role to play in telling us something about what is happening when we celebrate the baptism of a child - what is happening for the child, the family of the child and the Christian community.

This leaflet will guide the reader through these different parts, highlighting and noting what is happening. As a family prepares to celebrate baptism, they might like to explore these pages and reflect on the wonderful gift the sacrament of baptism is for their child.

## *THE RECEPTION OF THE CHILDREN: What does it tell us about baptism and our faith?*

The first action of the Church in the Rite of Baptism is one of **welcome**. Following the example of what Jesus did in his life and ministry, the priest or deacon, in the name of the Church, welcomes the parents, godparents, families and, of course, the children for baptism. This welcome typically takes place at the door of the church. It marks a welcome of the child not just to this sacrament but to the life of the Church itself and the sacraments of the Church.



During the Reception of the Children, parents share the **name** of their child and state their commitment to sharing the gospel and their faith with their child. From this day on the child will go by this name and also by the name, Christian. Having declared their wish to have their child baptised, parents and godparents publicly make the **sign of the cross** on their child's forehead. The sign of the cross is the sign of our faith. It is the sign of the depth of God's love for us. It is a sign that accompanies us for the rest of our lives.

The Reception of the Children shows us that through our baptism we are people welcomed by God, named as Christian and marked by the sign of the cross.

## *THE LITURGY OF THE WORD AND ANOINTING WITH OIL OF CATECHUMENS: What do they tell us about baptism and our faith?*

Let's take a look at the next part of the celebration of baptism, the Liturgy of the Word. Families will generally move at this point from the door of the church to take their places to listen to a number of **scripture readings**, read from the ambo. There can be no celebration of the sacraments without the proclamation of the Word of God. This suggests that scripture is central to our faith. And this is true. Because through the texts of scripture God speaks to us today.



The Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that to be a Christian means to unite oneself ever more deeply with the life of Christ. If we want to come to know and be followers of Christ, then we have to read and live the Gospels. In them we get to meet Christ, the Word of God, who has come to speak with us, in his own words and by his own life.



As a family prepares for baptism one of the really useful things they can do for themselves is to make sure they have a family copy of the bible in the home. The next thing to do is to get into the habit of taking it up and reading from it.

When we gather to welcome a new member into the Church through baptism, one of the essential steps, then, is for us to read from the scriptures and listen once more to the Living Word of God amongst us. This word instructs, inspires and nourishes us in the ways of the Christian life.

The Liturgy of the Word concludes with our **intercessions** to God and a **litany of the saints**. These elements remind us that God continually listens to our prayers and that on our Christian journey we have the witness, and support of the saints who have gone before us, having lived lives of faith.

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### *What about the Anointing with the Oil of Catechumens?*

Before baptism a child is **anointed with the Oil of Catechumens** (the name for those preparing for baptism). This is olive oil blessed by the Bishop. The prayer that precedes the anointing reminds us that the world we are born into is one where the condition of sin and its consequences exist. The Church calls this Original Sin and we see its presence in our world every day in terrible events. But through the love and grace of God, we are freed from the reality of that condition.

The prayer and the anointing express this truth and God's care and protection of us at every step in life's journey. From our baptism onwards we are strengthened to live as God wants us to through the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit.



### *THE CELEBRATION OF BAPTISM: Gathered around the font*

Having welcomed the children and their families at the door of the church, listened to God's Word and anointed the children with the strengthening Oil of Catechumens, the children are brought to the font for baptism.



This is what we are here to do, to baptise them so that they may share in the faith of the Church and have new life with Christ through water and the Holy Spirit. The font is only used to welcome new members. Just as Jesus went down into the waters of the Jordan and heard God say, 'This is my beloved on whom my favour rests', so every child brought to the font is a loved child of God.

Before baptism a **PRAYER OVER THE WATER** is said. The prayer recalls the great moments of salvation history such as the water at the dawn of creation, the great flood, the exodus through the Red Sea, the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, and the water that flowed from the side of the crucified Christ. Together, the water and the prayer, remind us of who we are through baptism: a new creation, freed from the slaveries of this world, made in God's image, gifted with the Holy Spirit, and sharers in Christ's resurrection. Baptism is not a casual step on life's journey. It sets us firmly on a definite path which these children now share.



and support to grow and flourish. This is what happens in the family.

Faith is nourished by prayer in the home but also by the Christian values and beliefs that guide a family as they live and grow together. This is why the **PROFESSION OF FAITH** is a necessary step in the celebration of baptism. Parents and godparents make this profession as part of accepting the responsibility and the privilege of sharing their faith with these children. The profession of faith is two-fold, involving a **renunciation of sin** and a **profession of faith**. This highlights that when we *turn towards* God we also actively and consciously *turn away* from evil in our lives. The Profession of Faith contains the central elements of our Christian faith. It is this faith that we renew our commitment to every Easter, having done our Lenten preparation.

Sacraments are not magic! To reach their fullness, sacraments presume faith and faith presumes and needs an ongoing and growing relationship with God. The *practice* of our faith that flows from baptism is a daily habit. Along the way it needs guidance

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Now we are ready for the **BAPTISM** of the children in water and in the name of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These children are now part of the family of God. This is the water of life that washes us clean from sin and the human condition; this is the water that leads us into a new life, a new relationship with God and with the Christian community.

### What is the meaning of the EXPLANATORY RITES?

Following the baptism, we experience a series of rites that begin to unfold the meaning of what we have just done in baptism. Each of these simple yet profound rites consist of a **symbol**, an **action** and a **prayer**. Together these express something of the meaning of baptism and its implications for who we are as Christians.



#### Anointing After Baptism

After baptism the crown of the infant's head is anointed with **Chrism**. This is olive oil, perfumed with balsam. It was consecrated by the Bishop at the Chrism Mass. Perfumed oil was very precious in Old Testament times and was used on special occasions, such as the anointing of priests, prophets and kings, those chosen by God to lead God's people. The word 'Christ' means 'anointed one' and so when those who followed Jesus recognised him as the Messiah, the one sent from God, they began to call him 'Christ'.

This anointing confirms our baptism with water and signifies our sealing with the Holy Spirit. Through baptism each of us has been joined more closely with Jesus Christ and are called to share in his work as **priest** when we pray, **prophet** when we share the good news of the Gospel and **king** when we love and serve one another. Every Christian is capable of doing all this because we have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Just as the oil of Chrism is absorbed into our skin and becomes part of who we are, likewise through baptism we are absorbed into the Christian family and are members of the Body of Christ, the Church.

### Clothing with White Garment

In the early Church people took off their old clothes, entered the baptismal pool for baptism and were wrapped in new garments when they emerged – their old way of life was shed for a new way, a new life in Christ. The prayer in today’s rite reminds us that through baptism we are a new creation, clothed in Christ. Through baptism we are invited to wrap ourselves in Christ and to live in dignity as children of God. That is what a parent is doing when they wrap their child in a white shawl or garment at this point.

### Lighted Candle

The Paschal candle stands as a sign that Jesus is the light of the world living among us. It was first lit from the fire at the Easter Vigil and is lit at our baptism and at our funeral, encompassing the span of our earthly Christian journey. The Paschal candle is used to light the baptismal candle, which is entrusted to parents, the first teachers of faith. As parents receive this lit candle they are taking on the privileged task of supporting their child as they grow and mature in faith, helping the child to keep the light of faith burning brightly in their lives.

### Ephphetha (meaning ‘be opened’)

The priest or deacon blesses the ears and mouth as a powerful reminder of the mission we each are given in baptism: to open our ears to receive God’s word and to open our mouths to share it with others.

## CONCLUDING RITE



The newly baptised, their parents and godparents gather around the altar with the presiding priest or deacon. This represents the final stage in the journey of baptism, having travelled from the door of the church, to the ambo and, then, to the font. One day these children will complete their initiation into the Church through the sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist. For now, from this day forward, the newly baptised are invited to gather around the table of the Lord with the Christian community, primarily in our Sunday celebration of Mass.

The rite begins with the praying of the **Our Father**, the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray. It is a prayer that has held a very special place in the life of the Christian community from the very beginning. And it can hold a special place in the daily prayer of every Christian family. Through baptism we are children of God and can turn to God as our Father. This prayer reminds us that God wants a loving relationship with us. It tells us that our deepest hunger can only be satisfied by God – our daily bread. And it calls us to be people who seek and give forgiveness. This prayer, then, draws us closer to God but also to one another in our daily actions of love and forgiveness.

The **Blessing** and **Dismissal** at the end of the baptism remind us that we go about the world with the blessing and company of God. Here, we pray in turn for the mother, the father and all who have gathered. The prayers remind us that it is in the home that faith will be taught (or caught!) and shared through word and action. They invite us to welcome God’s blessing into our lives and to live as faithful members of the Christian community.

*From this celebration, we are sent to live the faith we have professed and handed on to our children, bringing the peace and love that only God can give to our homes and to our lives.*

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