

BECOMING CATHOLIC
SAMPLE BAPTISM

A practical guide for
parents and godparents

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INTRODUCTION



Congratulations on the birth of your child!

In presenting your son or daughter for Baptism you are preparing for a second birth – a birth into the Christian community. Unlike the Jewish tradition, where a person is born Jewish if their mother is Jewish, nobody is ever born a Christian. That is why the Baptismal Font is sometimes referred to as the ‘womb’ of the Church. Here we are reborn into the Body of Christ.

For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

1 Cor 12:13

THE BAPTISMAL FONT IS SOMETIMES REFERRED TO AS THE ‘WOMB’ OF THE CHURCH.

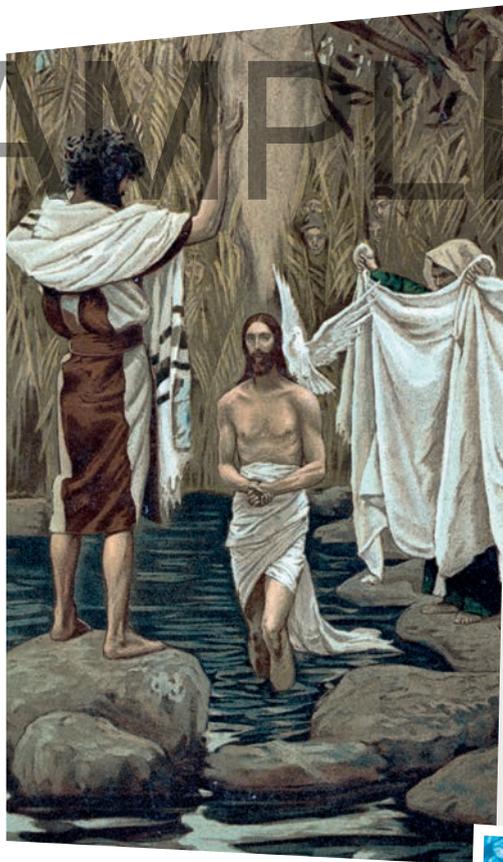
In the sacrament of Baptism your child is welcomed into the Catholic faith, and you make a promise to do all that you can to make that faith a lived reality in your home. According to the National Church Life Survey, parents are the most significant people in nourishing a child's faith. Faith is a gift of God that is encouraged by example and instruction; it is both lived and learnt.

Our children are only children for a short time, and during this time they are entrusted to us to raise as well as we can. We are to be their mothers and fathers, mentors, guardians, protectors, teachers and friends. The baptismal ceremony prays for you as parents, that you will be "the best of teachers, bearing witness to the faith by what you say and do."

The Baptism of Jesus

Before beginning his public ministry Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist in the waters of the Jordan. But why was Jesus, the sinless one, baptised, especially if baptism is for the forgiveness of sin? At his baptism Jesus expressed his solidarity with sinful humanity. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI: "Jesus loaded the burden of all mankind's guilt upon his shoulders; he bore it down into the

depths of the Jordan. He inaugurated his public activity by stepping into the place of sinners. His inaugural gesture is an anticipation of the Cross." By going down into the waters of the Jordan, Jesus symbolically enacted his future death and burial; emerging from the waters, he ritually proclaimed his rising from the tomb.



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THE SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

The word “sacrament” was originally the Roman soldier’s oath of allegiance to his commander and to the gods of Rome (it was called sacramentum in Latin). At some time during the second century Christians borrowed this term and used it to describe the ceremonies by which a person became a Christian.

The three rituals of initiation – Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist – were similar to an oath of allegiance, not to a military commander or to pagan gods, but to Christ. The local Christian leader (called a bishop, from the Greek word *episkopos*, meaning “overseer”) presided over this celebration, usually at Easter:

In time the word sacrament embraced other rituals that originated in the ministry of Jesus. Apart from the three sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist), there is the sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation (what Catholics used to call ‘Confession’), the Anointing of the Sick, Marriage and Holy Orders (the sacrament by which a person is ordained to ministry as deacon, priest or bishop).

These seven sacramental rituals make the saving work of Christ present for us through a free gift of God. A sacrament is therefore more than a sign or a symbol. Signs and symbols merely point to a reality beyond themselves. Take the example of a wedding ring. A husband and wife exchange rings immediately after

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THE SEVEN SACRAMENTS

Sacraments of Initiation



Baptism



Confirmation



Eucharist

Sacraments of Healing

Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick

Sacraments of Commitment

Marriage and Holy Orders

making their marriage vows. The rings are a symbol of a lifelong commitment they make to each other, but ultimately the ring – a band of metal – doesn't embody their love. They won't suddenly fall out of love if they take off their wedding rings. Sacraments take us beyond sign and symbol because they mediate, participate in and actualise the reality that they symbolise.

Once a unified ritual of initiation

Baptism and Confirmation were once celebrated in the Catholic Church as a unified ritual of initiation that culminated in the reception of the Eucharist. In other words, people were baptised, confirmed and received Holy Communion in the one ceremony.

In the Eastern part of the Roman Empire the local churches retained the unity of the sacraments of initiation, so if you were to attend a baptismal ceremony in an Orthodox church or in one of the Eastern rite Catholic churches (the Melkite or Ukrainian churches, for example), you will witness the Baptism, Confirmation and First Communion of the child as part of the one ceremony.



The churches in the Western part of the Roman empire took a different approach. They wanted to emphasise the role of the bishop as head of the local community, so they delegated the local priest to preside over the first part of the ceremony – Baptism – and reserved the final part of the ceremony – Confirmation, as it came to be called from the fifth century – for the local bishop.

In 1910, Pope Pius X decreed that children should receive their First Communion at the “age of discretion, that is, at about seven years of age. This meant that Eucharist, the final sacrament of initiation, was celebrated before Confirmation, thereby upsetting the traditional sequence of Christian initiation.

One United Ritual of Initiation

The Code of Canon Law prefers Confirmation to be conferred “at about the age of discretion” (Can 891), the time laid down by Pope Pius X for the reception of First Holy Communion. For that reason some Australian dioceses have restored the traditional sequence of initiation by celebrating Confirmation during the Mass at which children receive their first Holy Communion.