

“Let The Children Come To Me”: Why The Church Baptizes Babies

ISSUE: Why does the Catholic Church baptize infants? The Bible says, “He who *believes* and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not *believe* will be condemned” (Mk. 16:16; emphasis added). Isn’t active faith in Christ necessary for the Sacrament of Baptism to be valid?

RESPONSE: “Baptism has taken the place of circumcision. . . . Therefore, as ‘the soul of the circumcised did not perish from the people’ (Gen. 17:14), so ‘he who has been reborn from water and the Holy Spirit will obtain entrance to the kingdom of heaven’ (Jn. 3:5).”¹ Children, even babies, were not excluded from the Old Covenant. Likewise, the family of God in the New Covenant is for all people, including babies. As Jesus Himself said, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God” (Lk. 18:16).

DISCUSSION: Because of Original Sin, all men have lost the original holiness and justice given to Adam and Eve [Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), no. 405]. Just as He gives the gift of life, so God gives Baptism as the gift to bring us eternal life. Not only is this given as a gift, but God requires us to accept His gift in order to be saved. As Jesus Himself says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:5).

Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit (*vitae spiritualis ianua*), and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: “Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word.” . . . From the baptismal fonts is born the one People of God of the New Covenant, which transcends all the natural or human limits of nations, cultures, races and sexes: “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (CCC, nos. 1213; 1267).

Born with a fallen human nature and tainted by Original Sin, children also have need of the new birth in Baptism to be freed from the power of darkness and brought into the realm of the freedom of the children of God, to which all men are called. The sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant Baptism. The Church and the parents would deny a child the priceless grace of becoming a child of God were they not to confer Baptism shortly after birth (CCC, no. 1250; see also Col. 1:12-14).

From Circumcision to Baptism: God’s Covenantal Mercy Extends Even to Infants

Many Old Testament practices are shadows of the New Covenant, the reality practiced by the Catholic Church (CCC, nos. 1217-22). For example, in the Old Covenant, God set His people apart from pagan nations through a physical sign: circumcision. All males, even household slaves, had to be brought to the temple and circumcised on the eighth day after their birth (cf. Gen. 17:1-2; 9-14). God commanded that newborn infants be circumcised:

He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house, or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he that is born in your house and he that is bought with your money, shall be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant (Gen. 17:12-14).

Gen. 17:13 provides another important point to consider: “So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.” God’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants is for all time and somehow this covenant will always

be a “covenant in your flesh.” In speaking of the New Covenant, the great prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah affirm that God will transform the core of their being:

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances (Ezek. 36:25-27; cf. Jer. 31:31-33).

God establishes this New Covenant through the act of Baptism, which is a sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6:1-4). As circumcision sealed the Old Covenant with those who accepted it, so does Baptism seal the new:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with him in Baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised you from the dead. And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, having cancelled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him (Col. 2:11-15).

The Kingdom of God: Babes in Arms Welcome

Contrary to the impression some Christians have, Jesus never said or implied that little children would now be excluded in God’s perfected, New Covenant family. In fact, Jesus said just the opposite^{3/4}that His kingdom was specifically for the youngest of children:

Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him, saying, ‘Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it’” (Lk. 18:15-17).

The Greek word used in Lk. 18:15 is “*brephos*,” which is translated as “infants” or “newborns” (1 Pet. 2:2).² Jesus not only said that we must be born again by water and the Spirit (Baptism) to enter the kingdom of God (Jn. 3:5), He also said this same kingdom belongs to infants. Thus the practice of infant Baptism. It is “the circumcision of Christ,” incorporating the baptized person into the Body of Christ as a child of God.

No scriptural passage prohibits infant Baptism, and many imply that infants and small children were baptized. After telling prospective converts on Pentecost about the necessity of Baptism, Peter tells them that this promise is for you and your children (Act. 2:38-39). In Acts 16:15, we see that Lydia had her entire household baptized after her own conversion (cf. Acts 18:8; CCC, no. 1252). As noted earlier, in the Covenant with Abraham, God specified that Abraham’s household included not only his sons and immediate kin, but also all house-born slaves and foreigners acquired by payment (Gen. 17:12-14).

In the Hebrew culture, a household included all members. Thus, if Lydia’s household included infant children, they would have been baptized, just as those children would have been circumcised as infants if she had brought them up according to Hebrew tradition. The same thing happened to the jailer and his family in Acts 16:27-34 (cf. 1 Cor. 1:16). Such scriptural passages imply that infant Baptism is certainly not contrary to authentic Christian practice.

The Testimony of the Early Church

To resolve disputes about Scripture, we always turn to the early Church, i.e., the Church leaders closest to Christ and His apostles. Infant Baptism is an immemorial tradition of the Church (CCC, nos. 1252; cf. 84-87). The Fathers of the early Church understood the necessity of Baptism for all persons, noting that infant Baptism was a practice handed on from the Apostles themselves. Writing in the late second century, St. Irenaeus wrote, “He came to save all through Himself, — all, I say, who through Him are reborn in God, — infants, and children, and youths and old men. Therefore He passed through every age, becoming an infant

for infants, sanctifying infants; a child for children, sanctifying those who are of that age, . . .”³ Other Church Fathers affirmed the practice of infant Baptism, including St. Cyprian of Carthage and his colleagues in the mid-third century.⁴

There is no record of early Church authorities condemning infant Baptism. In addition, the anti-Christian Roman Empire, which one would expect to record and exploit any apparent differences among Christians, is silent on the matter. The Council of Trent went so far as to anathematize those who would deny the Sacrament of Baptism to infants.

Some Christians mistakenly persist that Baptism is not a sacrament but simply an ordinance, a mere symbolic washing and public witness for those who have already accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. However, Jesus reiterates the necessity of being baptized (born again) to become His disciple and be saved (Mt. 28:18-20), and Peter and the Apostles follow suit in their evangelization beginning on Pentecost (Acts 2:37-42).

But How Can Babies Believe?

Faith is a necessary part of the Sacrament of Baptism. Opponents of infant Baptism typically argue that infants have not reached the age of reason and therefore cannot make a faith decision to enter the Church (1 Jn. 5:10-15). However, just as the Israelite children did not choose to belong to the faith community, so the children of Christians need not choose to belong. In both cases, the children are incorporated into God’s family through the faith of their parents. In addition, “The faith required for Baptism is not a perfect and mature faith, but a beginning that is called to develop” (CCC, no. 1253). We should not overemphasize our response to God versus his gracious gift of salvation (Eph. 2:8-9). This would mistakenly make our works seem more important than God’s gift. After all, “We love, because He first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:19), and this scriptural truth is especially true for infants. Any believer who prays for an unbeliever is also using his own faith to stand in for the faith of someone who lacks the capacity or disposition to believe (1 Cor. 7:12-16). We know that such prayer is not only licit, but encouraged. Infant Baptism reflects and deepens that truth.

Faith must continue to grow after Baptism because none of us, whether baptized as a child or adult, was baptized with a full and mature faith. Baptism is the source, the start, from which God’s graces become available and begin to flow to us (*Ibid.*, no. 1254). While Christ said Baptism is essential for salvation, He did not say it guaranteed one salvation. An infant who grows up must, like any other believing Christian, persevere in faith and charity to be saved (Mt. 10:22).

Our Heavenly Father Knows Best

If parents understand the need to provide for all their children’s needs, how much more our heavenly Father? And what could be more important than providing freedom from the devil’s dominion? God doesn’t want children to languish in Original Sin until the age of reason, let alone adolescence or adulthood. He wants to extend His saving grace, love and mercy from a child’s earliest days:

What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (Lk. 11:11-14).

Seven chapters later (Lk. 18:15-17), Christ illustrates His heavenly Father’s infinite love, exhorting parents to bring even their little infants to Him,⁵ for God’s kingdom is for all!

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¹ Pope Innocent III, *Letter to the Archbishop of Arles*, translation in: *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy Deferrari, Marian House, p. 160.

² *Brephos* is also used to describe John the Baptist as a pre-born infant leaping in the womb (Lk. 1:41) and the newborn Christ (Lk. 2:12) wrapped in swaddling clothes. In Lk. 18:17, a more inclusive term meaning children in general is used.

³ St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2, 22, 4; as cited in William A. Jurgens, ed. *The Faith of the Early Fathers, Vol. 1*; Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1970, p. 87 (no. 201).

⁴ St. Cyprian of Carthage, Letter of Cyprian and of His Colleagues in Council to the number of 66: To Fidus, 64 (59), 2; as cited in Jurgens, ed. *The Faith of the Early Fathers, Vol. 1*, p. 233 (no. 585).

⁵ Cf. Mk. 10:14; Mt. 19:13-15, 8:14.