

BAPTISM AT ST. MARY'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body, the Church. It is a public statement of one's intentional decision to follow the way of Jesus. In the case of infant baptism, it is the parents' declaration of their intent to raise a child in the way of Jesus. The bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble, so baptism is only administered once. When you choose to be baptized yourself or to have your child baptized in the Episcopal Church, **it means** you are choosing to live out the Baptismal Covenant in the context of an Episcopal church community, taking your part in the worship, mission and ministries of the local parish. Baptism is open to all people, regardless of age or background. If you feel called to be baptized, or to have your child baptized, the **first steps** are to attend church regularly and to talk to the clergyman about baptism.

Baptism is the first step in the life of becoming a Christian. Why is this? Simply, baptism is an act of God upon the soul. An infant or an adult who receives the sacrament of baptism is transferred from a natural condition to a state of grace. It is the new birth! For Jesus says in John chapter 3 verse 5: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." But what does Jesus mean by the kingdom of God? Jesus means the kingdom of the Incarnation, the realm of grace. By Holy Baptism we are incorporated into the mystical body of Christ, for we are 'baptized into Christ.' (Galatians 3:27). Because of the fall of humankind in Genesis chapter 3, we all fall short of the glory of God. Our descent from Adam and Eve has polluted the world. But, here is the good news of God's plan for humanity: "Baptism which corresponds to this now saves you" (I Peter 3:21). Anglican theologian Vernon Staley rightly observes, "[Baptism] saves us from the ill effects of our natural descent from the first Adam: it places us in the a state or condition in which, if we continue, we shall finally be saved. The effect of baptism is threefold: 1) It remits all sin, original (the condition we're in at birth) and actual sin (acts of commission and omission). 2) Baptism bestows sanctifying grace 3) It makes the recipient a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven. Water is used as a symbol in the process of baptizing to signify cleansing and washing. It is literally the baptism of regeneration (new birth: Titus 3:5).

What does all of this mean? Baptism is the mark of the New Covenant. What this means, from the Church's perspective, is the parents, the candidate for baptism, and the local congregation are making a **promise**. We're promising an incredible arrangement with one another: parents, godparents, and the congregation are committing themselves to Christian nourishment by participating in the life, mission, and ministry of the Church; the kingdom of God.

Expectations concerning Baptism

Because Holy Baptism is full and complete admission into the Church, it is most appropriately administered within the context of the Holy Eucharist as the chief service on a Sunday or other festival occasion. There are five occasions each Christian Year, when the Prayer Book deems the sacrament of Baptism to be most appropriate: Great Vigil of Easter, Day of Pentecost, on All Saints' Day, the Sunday after All Saints' Day, and on the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord (First Sunday after the Epiphany). Since, the Bishop is the Chief Pastor of the Diocese, Holy Baptism is one of his particular responsibilities. Thus, when practical or possible, Holy Baptism should be withheld until the day of the Bishop's Visitation.

There is likewise, great concern that insufficient emphasis is laid upon the solemnity and importance of the promises and vows which are made by parents and godparents on the occasion of Holy Baptism. This, unfortunately, results in either the child never being returned to the Church, and the parents and godparents making light of their promises, or the person being baptized never truly understanding the commitment made. Thus, for each person seeking Holy Baptism at least one sponsor or godparent must be an active communicant in good standing in the Christian Church. By virtue of the service and the promises made therein, it is impossible for one who is either not baptized or who is not an active church member to act as a sponsor or godparent. Persons who are not members of Saint Mary' will be expected to provide a letter of qualification from their priest, pastor, or minister prior to the service.

Excepting cases of emergency or of great pastoral concern, the following shall serve as guidelines for the sacrament of Holy Baptism:

- 1. Private Baptisms** are not appropriate and are not performed at St. Mary's.

2. Prior to their baptism, all candidates or their parents and godparents should be instructed concerning the nature of Holy Baptism, the order of service, and the continuing commitments which are implied.

3. Holy baptism shall be administered as the principle service on the Lord's Day. Whenever practical, it shall be withheld during the seasons of Advent and Lent and, when practical, administered on one of the five occasions set forth by the Book of Common Prayer [see above].

4. All services shall be in accordance with the authorized Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church in the United State of America.

5. When possible, the Bishop shall assume his authority as Chief Pastor and officiate in the baptismal liturgy,

6. Each candidate for Holy Baptism is to be sponsored by one or more active communicants in good standing in the Church, who, by their presence, signify their endorsement of the candidate and their intention to support them by prayer and example in their Christian life.

7. It is fitting that parents be included among the godparents of their own children and thereby signify their understanding and endorsement of their duties to help the newly baptized grow in their knowledge and love of God, and in their responsibilities as members of His Church.

8. Persons who are baptized under emergency conditions should be recognized at a public celebration of Holy Baptism, with the person and their sponsors taking part in all but the administration of water. Some thoughts on the service: Remember, like Holy Matrimony, Baptism is a sacrament of the Church and witnesses need to conduct themselves accordingly. Photography at public services is therefore prohibited. Pictures can be taken after the service has formally ended.

Some thoughts on godparents and sponsors:

As the name implies, godparents assume a special role and position in the life of the baptismal candidate. Unlike other friends or relatives, the godparent is concerned about the spiritual life and spiritual nurture of the candidate.

The role of godparent is not just a privilege; it is a responsibility as well. The godparent assumes a position, not just among the family of the candidate, but within the spiritual community of the Church as well. A

godparent must not only be a loyal member of the family circle, but a loyal and responsible church member. Potential godparents should be asked to review the promises and vows listed on page 302 (Book of Common Prayer) of the baptismal service as well as the promises of the Baptismal Covenant beginning on page 304 (Book of Common Prayer). Those who are not from the Anglican tradition may need some help interpreting these. Should you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact either the rector or the church office.