

## The Sacrament of Holy Baptism at Trinity Church in the City of Boston

### The Foundation of Christian Life

The Christian journey begins with a powerful, ancient act: a priest splashes water on the new Christian, whether adult or child, and in so doing announces, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” This declaration and this act have, for some 2,000 years, been the vehicle God has used to draw the seeker into the lifelong journey of growing in Christ and opening themselves to the mystery and love which God seeks to give them.

Baptism is the sacrament by which one becomes a member of the Christian Church. This momentous event embodies a wealth of meanings: of being washed of sin, of being born again, of entering the life and community of the Church, of being anointed by the Holy Spirit, of renouncing self-centeredness, of promising to live in Christ’s love and service. In it those who are being baptized make immense promises to God. But at the heart of it is not our act but God’s: in Baptism we are marked, claimed, and made God’s own. Baptism makes the rest of our lives and forever the long and sometimes difficult journey of learning to trust that immense gift and to shape our lives to reflect it. Baptism is, in short, the beginning of a whole new way of life in which Christ is our companion, model and savior.

We need to be clear that none of these meanings suggest in any way that God’s compassion and love is only for those who are baptized. Baptism is a rite through which we are claimed by God’s love and through which we may intentionally enter into, celebrate, and receive personally this immense gift. God’s love is indeed for all, and in Baptism we personally accept that love marking a major new step in our spiritual journey.

Central to the meaning of Baptism is that it draws us into the life of the Church. Aidan Kavanaugh, one of the most important writers on this subject in our time, has summarized the distinctive meaning of Holy Baptism:

*The Church baptizes a convert not upon the basis of the convert having been intrigued by some Christian doctrines, attracted by the Christian stance on moral issues, or pleased by the aesthetics of some ceremony. It baptizes in the conviction that the convert either has begun by the Holy Spirit to live in Christ already or shares a marked likelihood of coming to do so in at some future point in the fullest and most explicit ecclesial way. Faith, in this view ... is a way of life in Christ among his holy ones.*

One thing this implies is that baptism – whether for adult or child – is never a light or casual matter. It entails the great gift of being claimed as God’s daughter or son. It involves our own sacred vows to grow in Christian life.

## A Sacrament for Adults and Children

Because a person makes such immense promises in Baptism (see *The Baptismal Covenant* in The Book of Common Prayer pages 303-304), the Church, from its beginning, has felt that it was best for adults to make their own decisions regarding this important step in their spiritual journey. From the earliest days of the Church, infants were baptized when it was likely they would be brought up within a Church community. Parents and godparents make vows on behalf of the child. That fact underscores the importance of these persons in the child's faith journey and makes evident the need for at least one parent to be an active participant in the life of the Church. It is the sacred responsibility of the Church to prepare parents and sponsors for the crucial role they undertake.

## Baptismal Customs of the Church

### Requirements for Baptism

A step as momentous as that of Baptism should never be undertaken lightly. It is expected that adults who wish to be baptized will enter into a period of concentrated preparation and prayer in consultation with a member of the clergy, including the Trinity Inquirer's Class or other preparation as approved by a member of the clergy. This period of preparation will include regular worship and a deepening involvement in the Trinity Church community.

For a child to be baptized, at least one parent must be a baptized Christian and should be involved in the life of Trinity Church. Parents are expected to attend a preparation course and godparents are encouraged to attend.

### The Role of Parents and Godparents

The Book of Common Prayer states the following:

*Sponsors of adults and older children present the candidates and thereby signify their endorsement of their candidates and their intention to support them by prayer and example in the Christian life. Sponsors of infants, commonly called godparents, present their candidates, make promises in their own names and also take vows on behalf of their candidates.*

Given this definition of the role of a sponsor, it is important that these individuals be carefully and prayerfully considered and chosen. A traditional number of godparents chosen has been three, and some parents are choosing more than three in light of an increasingly mobile society and the parent's desire to assure the regular presence of godparents in their child's life. Godparents should be chosen for their willingness to commit themselves to caring deeply for the child and to nurturing the child's spiritual growth. They need not be Episcopalians, but they must be baptized persons and they should be active participants in this or some other church.

## The Time and Place for Baptism

The service in The Book of Common Prayer calls for a service of Holy Baptism to be (a) public, (b) held within the individual's local congregation and (c) held on one of the five principal occasions in the life of the Church. Each of these bears some explanation.

### *Why Public?*

To be baptized means to enter the life of the Church. There is no such thing as being a Christian outside the family of faith. In Baptism we become members of Christ's Body – the Church. The entrance of a new member into the Church is an important event in the life of a congregation as it welcomes new members of its family. Therefore, it is extremely important for Baptism to be held at the regular, public service of the Church. This allows the whole family of Christ to welcome and receive the new Christian, and provides an opportunity for all members to reaffirm their baptismal vows as part of their continued growth in Christian discipleship.

### *Why in the local Parish?*

As previously discussed, Baptism is performed with the expectation that the individual will live into the promises he or she makes (or in the case of infant baptism, made on his or her behalf) during the baptismal service. Therefore, it is most appropriate that these promises be made in the presence of those specific people (namely family members, fellow parishioners and the clergy person(s) serving in the individual's local parish). These people are, in a very real sense, the baptized person's Christian family, who will uphold them, pray and worship with them – all with the intention of supporting the newly baptized in fulfilling those promises made at baptism.

On rare occasions, someone who lives and worships elsewhere may be baptized at Trinity Church if deemed appropriate by a member of the clergy. In such cases, it is expected that the minister of the church in which that person normally worships will send a letter to the Rector giving assurance that the person and/or sponsors have been prepared for Baptism and that the newly baptized person will be properly received at a principal service of the parish where he or she is an active member. All of this is done on the fundamental assumption that those being baptized will enter into full participation in the life of the Church in the local parish where they live.

### *Why only on certain occasions?*

The Book of Common Prayer recommends that as far as possible, Holy Baptism be administered on one of five occasions, four of which are principal feast days of the Church: the Easter Vigil, the Day of Pentecost, All Saints' Day, the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord; and on the occasion of the visit from a bishop. The suggestion that Baptism is most appropriate on these occasions illustrates the importance of the sacrament and links it with some of the other major events in the life of the Church.

Baptism may also be scheduled in conjunction with other principal Sunday Eucharists in order to accommodate the needs of the congregation.

### For Additional Information

It may be helpful to review the service for Holy Baptism found in the Book of Common Prayer (pages 298 to 308) and those portions of the *Catechism* which deal with the sacraments and, specifically, Holy Baptism (pages 857-859 of the Book of Common Prayer). There are no charges whatsoever for the Sacrament of Baptism. It is a free gift of God's love channeled through the Church's ministry. However, on this as on any occasion of joy and gratitude, a gift of thanksgiving may be made to the church.

We trust that you will feel free to call upon a member of the Trinity Church staff for answers to any other questions you may have.

Best wishes as you explore this important step in your Christian Journey