

BAPTISING YOUR CHILD IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH



"As many of you
as were baptised
into Christ, have
put on Christ.

Alleluia."

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BAPTISM AS A HOLY MYSTERY

What does it mean to say that baptism is a 'mystery'? To put it simply, we call baptism a 'mystery' because something mystical, something that cannot be explained in merely rational terms happens when a person is baptised. Through baptism we become participants in the Church's sacramental life. 'As God permits ... the mind is illumined and the heart is energized and made pure. Those who are Christ's, live and walk in the Spirit and the Spirit bears fruit in them: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal. 5:22-25).'¹

'The Sacrament of Baptism incorporates us into the Church, the Body of Christ, and is our introduction to the life of the Holy Trinity. Water is a natural symbol of cleansing and newness of life. Through the three-fold immersion in the waters of Baptism in the

Name of the Holy Trinity, one dies to the old ways of sin and is born to a new life in Christ. Baptism is one's public identification with Christ Death and victorious Resurrection. Following the custom of the early Church, Orthodoxy encourages the baptism of infants. The Church believes that the Sacrament is bearing witness to the action of God who chooses a child to be an important member of His people. From the day of their baptism, children are expected to mature in the life of the Spirit, through their family and the Church.'²

PREPARATION FOR BAPTISM

To begin preparing for the Baptism of a child, the parents should first talk to the priest. He will explain to them about the service, as well as answering any practical queries. This is also a good opportunity to check the church diary and fix a date for the baptism.

CHOOSING A BAPTISM DATE

Parents should seek to baptise their child as soon as possible after the child's birth that he/she may become a member of the Kingdom of God and the Church family. Families are encouraged to select several options for a baptism date before discussing with the priest. Certain seasons of the year are busier than others, so it is helpful to have several choices, allowing for the possibility of some conflicts on the Parish Calendar.

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SELECTING A SPONSOR OR GODPARENT

Infants are baptized in the Orthodox Church with the participation of an adult sponsor. The words "sponsor" and "godparent" are used interchangeably; however, in today's society the word "godparent" often has a connotation that does not accurately reflect the Orthodox perspective. In other traditions, the godparent is often a close friend/relative to the parents, and is relegated to being an honorary aunt or uncle who does little more than send occasional cards and gifts to their godchild.

The Orthodox sponsor plays a much more significant role in the child's life, and continuing into adulthood- Baptism is only the beginning. At Baptism, "the sponsor assumes a lifelong commitment to care for the spiritual aspects of the life of his or her godchild."² The godparent should be encouraged to go to confession before the baptism and to receive communion with the godchild on the day of baptism or at the next Liturgy after the Baptism.

The sponsor is charged with nurturing their godchild's life in Christ and contributing to their spiritual growth as an Orthodox Christian. In practice, this means attending church with their godchild, praying for and with him/her, teaching him/her the Orthodox Christian faith, and much more. Because of the very nature of this special relationship, the sponsor for an Orthodox Baptism must be an Orthodox Christian – it would not make sense to charge someone with leading a child by example in the Orthodox faith when the person himself or herself is not Orthodox.

FILLING IN PAPERWORK

Different Orthodox churches may require you to complete forms or produce birth certificates for the baptism to take place. The information provided by this helps the priest to complete the certificate of baptism and the register of baptisms kept by the church or the diocese.

GUEST CLERGY

Some parents may wish to have additional Orthodox clergy taking part in the service, for example, a priest from a former parish, or a family friend. Proper protocol requires the parents to make such wishes known to the priest when they first discuss the baptism arrangements, as it is he who will need to extend the invitation to any guest clergy, after having received the blessing from the diocesan bishop, as well as the guest's own bishop.

ON THE DAY

The following list contains items families may be required to bring for the Baptism service. It is sometimes customary that the sponsor provides some or all of these items.

- 1 white hand towel
- (1 small bar of soap)
- 1 white bath towel

(1 small bottle of olive oil)

1 set of new white clothing and/or a baptismal robe (christening gown)

1 gold or silver cross and chain or ribbon

1 white taper candle

(Items in brackets are usually required in Greek and Arabic-speaking churches, but not necessarily in other Orthodox traditions)

OFFERING

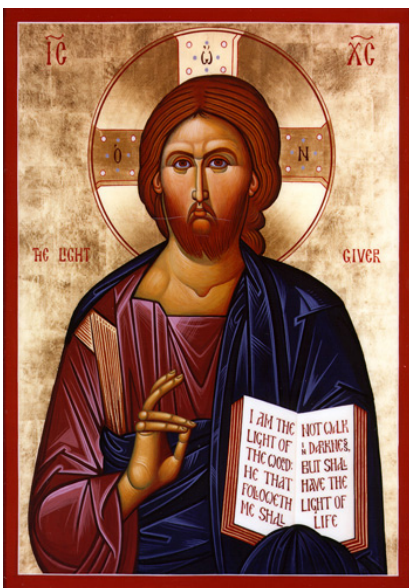
The offering which is given for a sacrament is sometimes wrongly described as 'fees'. It should be seen as a thanksgiving offering to God to mark the joyous event. Such an offering is also a way of sharing in the Church's responsibilities and work.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IN THE SERVICE?

The Orthodox service or baptism is very ancient and is made up of various distinct parts. Each of these is rich with symbolism which speaks to us of the new relationship with God that the person being baptised is entering into:

THE RITE OF MAKING A CATECHUMEN

In the Ancient Church, the first step in membership was to become a student, or "catechumen" of the Church in preparation for baptism. During this time, one would be taught the basic truths of the Faith. As the catechumens are no longer a formal order in the Church, this rite is now usually celebrated as the beginning of the Baptism service.



☐ The Exorcism Prayers and renunciation of Satan

The priest calls upon the Holy Spirit to expel Satan and all his angels from the presence of the candidate for baptism. He prays that the powers of evil may not lay hold on him/her and that he/she may be protected for all evil influence in his/her life. The priest blows on the candidate cross-wise three times to symbolize the power of the Holy Spirit.

The candidate and sponsors turn to face the west, which is symbolic of darkness, since the sun sets the west. Through this movement the devil, the "lord of darkness", is confronted and rejected, along with "and all his works, all his worship, all his angels, and all his pomp." Following their declaration of the

renunciation of satan, the godparents (on behalf of the child) spit three times on the floor, signifying their rejection of the devil.

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☐ The Acceptance of Christ

Turning back to face the east, symbolising the Light of Christ, the candidate and sponsors accept Jesus "as King and as God." They seal this acceptance by repeating the words of the Creed, the Symbol of Faith, which outlines the Church's basic beliefs about God, the Church, and salvation.



THE RITES OF BAPTISM

☐ The Baptismal Candles

One of the terms used in Orthodoxy when referring to baptism is "Holy Illumination," since it is through baptism that Christ, the Light of the World, enters in our hearts. The baptismal candles are a symbol of baptism as illumination.

☐ The Oil of Gladness

After the opening proclamation and litany, the candidate is anointed with oil. In ancient times oil was used as ointment to soothe wounds. The anointing with the "Oil of Gladness" reminds us that baptism heals our broken relationship with God. In ancient times, athletes were covered with oil before going into a contest or race. The oil reminds us also that baptism is a preparation for a Christian life, the race run for Christ.

☐ The Baptism

The candidate is immersed in the baptismal font in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is done three times. Entering the font, he or she joins Christ in His burial; coming up out of it he or she takes part in Christ's resurrection from the tomb. The font also symbolises a spiritual womb – the candidate is "born again," into a new life in Christ.

☐ The Robe of Gladness

After the baptism, the candidate is clothed in new, white clothes, usually including a special baptismal robe (or christening gown, as it is sometimes called) – another symbol of Christ. This act reflects the words of St. Paul: 'All of those who have been baptised in Christ have put on (been robed in) Christ' (Galatians 3:27).



HOLY CHRISMATION

The sacrament of chrismation is always performed in the Orthodox Church together with baptism and follows immediately after it. The priest anoints all parts of the person's body with the special oil called holy chrism. This oil, also called myrrh or myron,

is prepared by the patriarch and bishops of the Church on Holy Thursday. In chrismation a person is given the "power from on high" (Acts 1-2), the gift of the Spirit of God, in order to live the new life received in baptism. He is anointed, just as Christ the Messiah is the Anointed One of God.

He becomes—as the fathers of the Church dared to put it—a "christ" together with Jesus. Thus, through chrismation we become a "christ," a son of God, a person upon whom the Holy Spirit dwells, a person in whom the Holy Spirit lives and acts—as long as we want him and cooperate with his powerful and holy inspiration.

THE BAPTISMAL PROCESSION

The priest leads the newly baptised and sponsors around the font three times, while the choir chants: *'As many as are baptised into Christ have put on Christ.'* Thus the joyful reception of the newly baptised into the body of the Church is underpinned by the solemn reminder that our entire lives as Christians must be continually centred on Christ.

THE SCRIPTURE READINGS:

Romans 6:3-11 – All of those who are baptised in Christ share in His death and resurrection.

Matthew 28:16-20 – Jesus instructs His disciples to preach the Gospel to all peoples, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

TONSURE AND ABLUTION

☐ The Washing or Ablution

The priest washes the holy oil and Chrism off the candidate.

☐ The Tonsure

After the baptism and chrismation the person newly-received into God's family is tonsured. The tonsure, which is the cutting of hair from the head in the sign of the cross, is the sign that the person completely offers himself to God. In the Old Testament, hair was seen as a symbol of human strength. The hair offered stands for all the person's strength and potentials given over to God. In some Orthodox Churches the tonsure usually takes place immediately after the chrismation.

THE PRESENTATION OF THE CHILD (THE CHURCHING)

Together with being baptized and chrismated, the new-born child is also "churched." The child is presented before the altar by the priest, reminding us of the offering of male children in the temple in the Old Testament law, and especially the presentation of Jesus on the fortieth day after his birth (Luke 2:22). In the New Testament Church both male and

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female children are formally presented to God in the Church with special prayers at this time.

Also at this time, once more in imitation of Old Testament practice, the mother of the new-born child is also "churched." In the Orthodox tradition the churching of the mother is her re-entry into the assembly of God's people after her participation with God in the holy act of birth and after her separation from the Liturgy during her confinement. Thus, the mother is blessed to enter once more into communion with the mystery of Christ's Body and Blood in the

Divine Liturgy of the Church from which she has been necessarily absent. In some Orthodox Churches this service is not part of the Baptism, but it takes part on the 40th day, being a distinct service, while in other Orthodox Churches it is part of the Baptism.

COMMUNION

Orthodox tradition holds that the mysteries of baptism and chrismation are fulfilled when the newly-baptised person receives Holy Communion. The candidate should be brought to receive Communion at the Divine Liturgy as soon as possible after they are baptised. In some cases, the priest may give the first Communion at the time of baptism, as part of the service.

References & acknowledgements:

1. Calivas, A, The Sacramental Life of the Orthodox Church, 2003 Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America
2. Fitzgerald, T, The Sacraments, 1983-1996 Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America Department of Religious Education

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“BEING BAPTISED, WE
ARE ILLUMINATED;
BEING ILLUMINATED, WE
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BEING MADE CHILDREN,
WE ARE MADE
PERFECT; BEING MADE
PERFECT, WE ARE MADE
IMMORTAL”.

(ST. CLEMENT OF
ALEXANDRIA)