

## BAPTISING YOUR CHILD IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH



The Sacrament of Baptism (sometimes popularly known as 'christening') brings us into the Church, the Body of Christ, and is our introduction to life in God. Water is a natural symbol of cleansing and newness of life. Through the three-fold immersion in the water in the Name of the Holy Trinity, we die to our old life of sin and are born to a new life in Christ. Baptism is a public identification with Christ's Death and victorious Resurrection.

Following the custom of the early Church, the Orthodox Church baptises children from infancy. The Church believes that children are important members of God's people. From the day of their baptism, children are expected to mature in the life of the Spirit, through their family and the Church.

### **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.

The parents of the child should be Orthodox Christians in good standing with the Church. In cases of mixed marriages, one parent must be an Orthodox Christian.

### **Choosing a Baptism Date**

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 conflicts on the Parish Calendar.

### **Choosing a Sponsor or Godparent**

Infants are baptized in the Orthodox Church with the participation of an adult sponsor or godparent. The Orthodox godparent plays a very important role in the child's life. They are responsible for bringing their Godchild up in the Church, fostering their faith in Christ and contributing to their spiritual growth as an Orthodox Christian. In practice, this means that the godparent should attend church with their Godchild; they are bound to pray for and with their Godchild; help in teaching their Godchild 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.

If, as sometimes happens, the family have a non-Orthodox close friend or relative whom they wish to be involved in the Baptism service as an 'honorary godparent', it is sometimes possible to do this, though the role of the Orthodox sponsor must by no means be diminished as a result. The non-Orthodox person may hold the child at certain times; help dress the child after the baptism; hold the baptismal candle and participate in the procession around the font.

Traditionally, in the Russian Orthodox Church, the godparent is of the same sex as the child being baptised. Only one godparent is needed, though some families choose two. If there are two godparents, they should not be related to each other.

**On the day:**

The following list contains the necessary items families should bring to the church for the Baptism. It is usually customary for the sponsor to provide some or all of these items.

- 1 large new white towel (for the child being baptised)
- 1 small new white towel (for the priest - this is traditionally kept by the church)
- 1 set of new white clothing and/or a baptismal robe (christening gown)
- 1 gold/silver cross and chain
- 1 white taper candle

**An offering to the church/the priest**

It is customary to make a donation to the church/ priest as a thank offering for the great grace that has been received from God in the holy mystery of baptism, and in order to support the work of the Church and care for the clergy. The church does not 'sell' sacramental grace, so families should not delay the baptism from fear of the cost. Each offering should be a reflection of what the family can reasonably afford as their gift.

**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:

**1. THE RITE OF MAKING A CATECHUMEN**

In the Early 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 the devil***

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 in 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 pride.' To signify the candidate's rejection of Satan he/she is invited to 'blow and spit' upon the devil, an action performed by the sponsor if the candidate is an infant.

### ***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.

## **2. THE RITE OF BAPTISM**

### ***The Baptismal Candle***

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 candle is 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. 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.'

### ***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, 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 Holy Spirit, 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', a child of God, someone in whom the Holy Spirit lives and acts—as long as we want him and cooperate with him.

### ***The baptismal procession***

The priest leads the newly baptised and sponsors around the font three times. This procession reminds us 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.

**3. THE POST-BAPTISMAL RITES**

***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.

***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 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.

### ***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.

