

# Why are babies baptized during Mass?

Kristopher Seaman



It was once quite common to baptize infants during a Liturgy of the Word on a Sunday afternoon or on a weekday apart from the regular Sunday eucharistic liturgy. Perhaps only the priest and a few family members with the godparents were present. One had the sense this was a family celebration, with little connection to the larger Church community of the parish. Today, many parish communities celebrate infant Baptisms within the Sunday eucharistic liturgy. Why?

First, sacraments are communal events. They are neither private moments nor individual celebrations. Sacraments are celebrations of and by the Church. Thus, sacraments are communal events that take place within the community of the Church. In particular, the sacrament of Baptism changes the status of the one being baptized. Generally speaking, Baptism has a twofold meaning. First, the Church believes that original sin is removed through the cleansing waters of new life. Second, one emerges from the font born into a twofold relationship with the Church and with the Trinitarian God. In Baptism, one “puts on” Christ and is hence called a *Christian*. Saint Augustine said Baptism makes one a “little Christ”—a Christian. The candidate for Baptism is immersed three times (for each member of the Trinity) while the presider proclaims, “[Name], I baptize you in the name of the

Father [dip into water or water poured over the head], and of the Son [dip/pour] and of the Holy Spirit [dip/pour].” The newly baptized is in communion, in union, in relationship with the Trinitarian God, as well as with the Church.

Celebrating Baptism during Sunday eucharistic liturgies heightens the rich theology of the Rite of Baptism. The baby is being incorporated (from the Latin *corpus*, meaning “body”) into the body of Christ—the Church that is in communion/union/relationship with the God of Jesus Christ. Sunday Eucharist is the primary event that the Church community gathers to hear God’s Word and to give praise and thanksgiving over Christ who becomes tangible in the very gifts of his Body and Blood. Sunday Eucharist is the repeatable sacrament of initiation. It is in this sacramental event that the community renews its membership—its identity—in Word and Eucharist. In Baptism one is given a new identity or status of Christian, and this status or identity is renewed in Sunday Eucharist. Therefore, celebrating Baptisms of babies during Sunday Eucharist signifies that baptism is incorporating the baby into both the Church and the life of Christ. The celebration is not minimal, but an event of the local Church community surrounding, praying over, and welcoming the baby into the Church and into the life of the God of Jesus Christ.

Another reason for celebrating Baptisms of infants during Sunday Eucharist is based in the ritual text itself. Not just the parents and godparents have responsibility for the new member of the Church, the infant, all the members of the Church have “an important part to play in the baptism of the child” (*Rite of Baptism of Children*, 4). The “faith in which the children are baptized is not the private possession of the individual family, but the common treasure of the whole Church of Christ” (#4). The community is present to help, support, pray, and nurture the faith of the child as he or she grows in communion with Jesus Christ and the Church itself. One comment I hear from godparents and parents who have had their child baptized during Sunday Eucharist is their appreciation of the community who joyfully sings “alleluia” following the Baptism. Parents and godparents have a sense that this child will be nurtured and supported in the faith as he or she grows in the life of Christ. ♦

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KRISTOPHER SEAMAN is the associate director of the Office of Worship for the diocese of Gary.