

The Signs of Baptism: A Shower of Gifts

Catherine Maresca

The Church is abundant in showering gifts on its newest members. Through Baptism, God gives the joy of the risen life of Christ, the strength of the Holy Spirit, victory over sin and evil, and membership in the body of Christ. The signs of Baptism, particularly the water, the paschal candle, and the white garment reveal to us the richness and meaning of this rite.

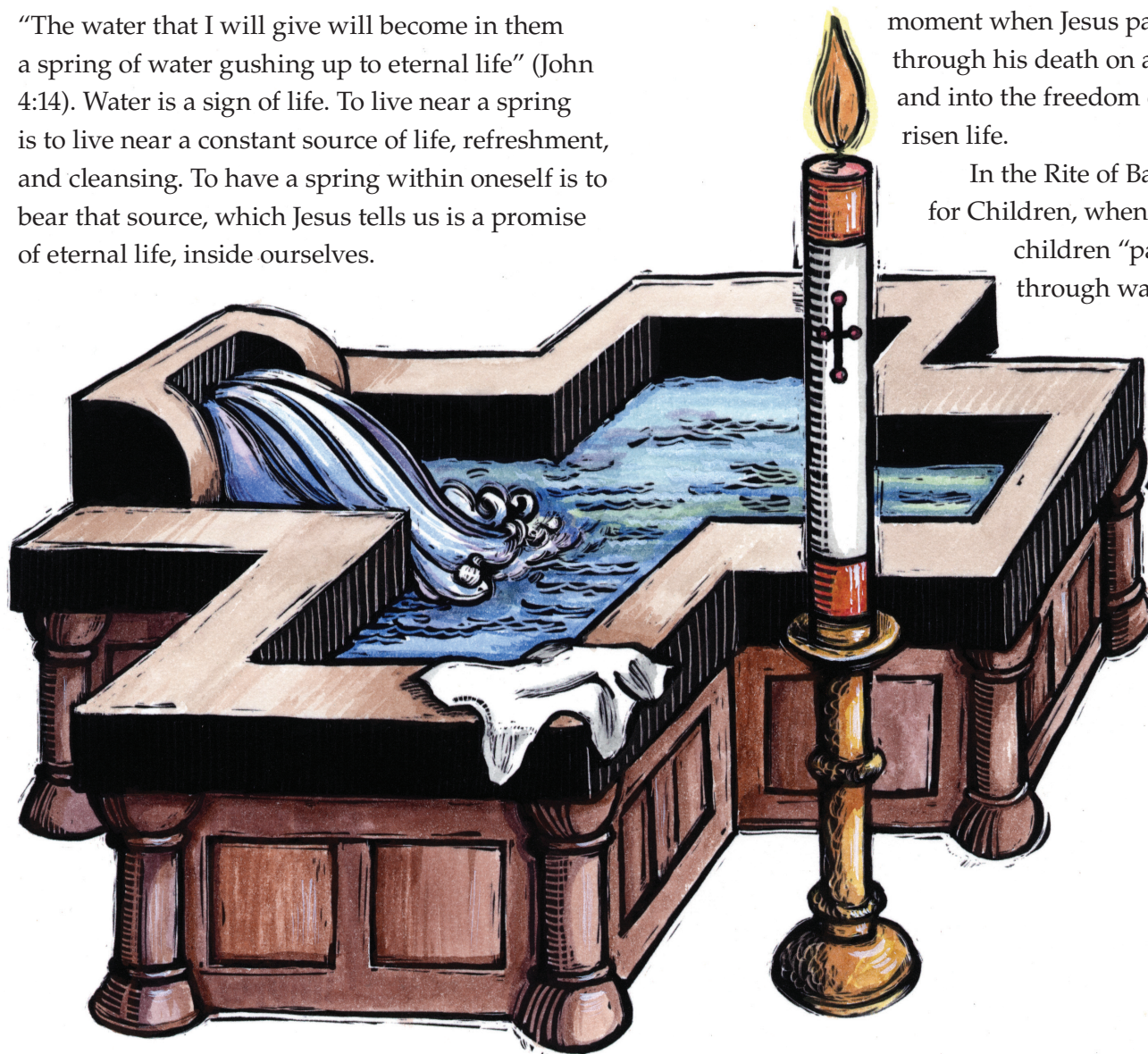
The Water

"The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14). Water is a sign of life. To live near a spring is to live near a constant source of life, refreshment, and cleansing. To have a spring within oneself is to bear that source, which Jesus tells us is a promise of eternal life, inside ourselves.

But water can also threaten life. Peter's fear as he began to sink into the sea while walking on the water reminds us of its awesome power. We recall that though the Israelites passed through the waters of the Red Sea to freedom on the other side, those same waters engulfed the army chasing them. For Noah, his family, and the animals on the ark, the waters of the great flood were waters of life, but for those who perished, they were waters of death. These deaths through water prefigure the great

moment when Jesus passed through his death on a cross and into the freedom of risen life.

In the Rite of Baptism for Children, when the children "pass through water"



they participate in the death of Christ and his emergence into freedom. They are freed from the power of evil and original sin; the power of God's life and love will prevail in their lives.

Before the water is poured over the child's head or the child is immersed in the font, the priest holds out his hand and lowers it down over the water. With this gesture, the priest asks God to send the Holy Spirit into the water.

The Holy Spirit is powerful and active. The water, transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, becomes holy, filled with the grace of Jesus Christ. When the children pass through the water, they are "cleansed from sin and rise to a new birth of innocence by water and the Holy Spirit" (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, #91). They too become holy. The grace of Christ within them becomes a "spring of water gushing up to eternal life" and the source of the power of love in their lives.

The Light of Christ

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

A four-year-old boy asked his catechist to light the paschal candle with him one day. Before she did so, she asked him, "What does the Paschal candle tell us?" "That Jesus died and he rose," the boy said. "And what does the small baptismal candle tell us?" He replied, "That Jesus loves me."

At Easter, the paschal candle is lit as a sign of the risen life of Christ. This life is stronger than death and has overcome all evil. It cannot be put out but shines brightly in the world as a sign of hope and of the strength of love.

At Baptism, each child receives a small candle lit from the paschal candle. The priest says, "Receive the light of Christ" (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, #100). The child now comes to possess the



light of eternal life promised by Jesus. He or she now shares in the risen life of Christ and receives the gifts that his light offers. The night of sin and death has been conquered forever.

The dawn breaks; an interior light sheds its brightness and warmth. It is a light that will continue to shine in the darkness of life's challenges.

The White Garment

"Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him" (Luke 15:22). With these words of Jesus in the parable of the prodigal son, a loving father welcomes his son. The robe is a sign of belonging and of new life. As the father explains, "this son of mine was dead and is alive again" (Luke 15:24).

At Baptism the Church wraps new members in a white garment—a sign of belonging in the worldwide community of faith and of the brightness of the risen life of Christ. The brightness of the white garment is a sign of inner purity and sanctity. The "stainless" garment proclaims victory over sin. As the Church gives the white garment, she prays that family and friends will help the children to "bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven" (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, #99).

The gifts of Baptism are everlasting gifts. Long after the rattles are quiet and the baby clothes are outgrown, the signs of Baptism continue to shower God's gifts on the baptized.

As parents, we can take a little time to point out these signs, one at a time, to our children and say a few words about their meanings. In this way, young children can begin to participate in the Baptisms they attend at church and to appreciate their own initiation into these everlasting gifts.

For Further Reading

Baker, J. Robert. *A Baptism Sourcebook*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1993.

Ramshaw, Gail. *Words around the Font*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994.



Choosing Godparents in the Roman Catholic Church

Gabe Huck and Rebekah Rojcewicz

The General Introduction to the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* says this of godparents: "In the baptism of children, as well, godparents are to be present in order to represent both the expanded spiritual family of the one to be baptized and the role of the Church as a mother. As occasion offers, godparents help the parents so that children will come to profess the faith and live up to it" (General Introduction, #8).

What is important here? First, there is to be at least one godparent, and perhaps two, as the

parents desire and as local custom suggests. Second, the godparents are to be present at the rite so that they can make their commitment publicly. Third, the Church continues to understand that the bond between the godparent and the family is very close and asks that the godparent not only be ready to help the parents in the Christian formation of their child, when appropriate, but that the godparent also be a source of guidance, support, and inspiration to the child on his or her journey toward God.



Finally, the godparents speak not only for themselves but also for the Church.

In deciding on a godparent or godparents, then, you have some important directions set for you by this brief paragraph from the ritual. There is everything to suggest that it is a serious responsibility to choose well; it is a decision worth much thought, prayer, and discussion. When you have decided, it is appropriate that you tell the godparent-to-be what led you to your decision. It is a great honor, but it is also a great responsibility.

You are looking, certainly, for a mature member of the Catholic Church, one who has received the sacraments of initiation—Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. You are looking for someone who can share with you the task of handing on the faith, someone whose life demonstrates that faith in both great and small ways in everyday living. You are looking for someone you can call on for help. You are looking for someone who knows that being a Catholic has to do with regular attendance at Mass, with prayer, with justice toward the poor, with kindness for friends and strangers, and even with many things that are not so popular or common in our society. And you are looking for someone who is willing to have a special relationship with your child, a relationship that will include sharing faith with the child and enjoying the child's own developing faith and gifts.

Remember, you will select your child's godparents, but it is not you they represent at the Baptism and thereafter. They represent the Church. The Church, as the body of Christ, is the worldwide



assembly of all baptized persons, living and dead. That Baptism, shared among all members of the Church, is now offered to your child. We ask one another to take Baptism very seriously. We ask that you be prepared to speak honestly when you say that you

understand and will do all that Baptism implies as this child grows up. When you ask people to be godparents, you are asking that they witness this promise of ours for the entire Church. More than that, you are asking that they bring the Church to life, that they embody the Church—at the Baptism liturgy and always afterward in the life of the child. That is what it means that godparents “represent Mother Church” at the Baptism.

All of this is not to say that a godparent cannot be a relative or close friend. The godparents most certainly can be relatives if they can answer to the qualities we have been discussing.

So enjoy this time to consider the possibilities. Talk it over with each other. Consider what will happen if you end up living far away from the godparents. Would this person continue to take an interest in your child, pray for the child, and be a presence in the child's life?

When you have decided and your godparents-to-be have accepted, you may wish to ask them to be more a part of the Baptism by making the baptismal garment or by selecting and buying a beautiful candle. It may become your custom in the years to come to invite them to your home on the anniversary of the child's Baptism for a special celebration of a most important event.

May you choose joyfully and well!



The Rite of Baptism in the Roman Catholic Church

Catherine Maresca

The celebration of the Rite of Baptism for Children is divided into five parts: the Reception of the Children, which takes place at the entrance of the church; the Liturgy of the Word, which takes place at the ambo; the Prayer of Exorcism and Anointing before Baptism; the Celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism, which takes place at the baptismal font; and the Conclusion of the Rite, which takes place at the altar. Each section is separated from the others by a procession, so the celebration of the Rite of Baptism may include as many as three processions. If a church uses them, these processions move the children from the doors of the church to the ambo, where the word of God will stir their faith as they grow, to the font where they are cleansed from the stain of original sin and are reborn into God's eternal life, and to the altar, where they will continue to be nourished with Christ himself, the Bread of Life.

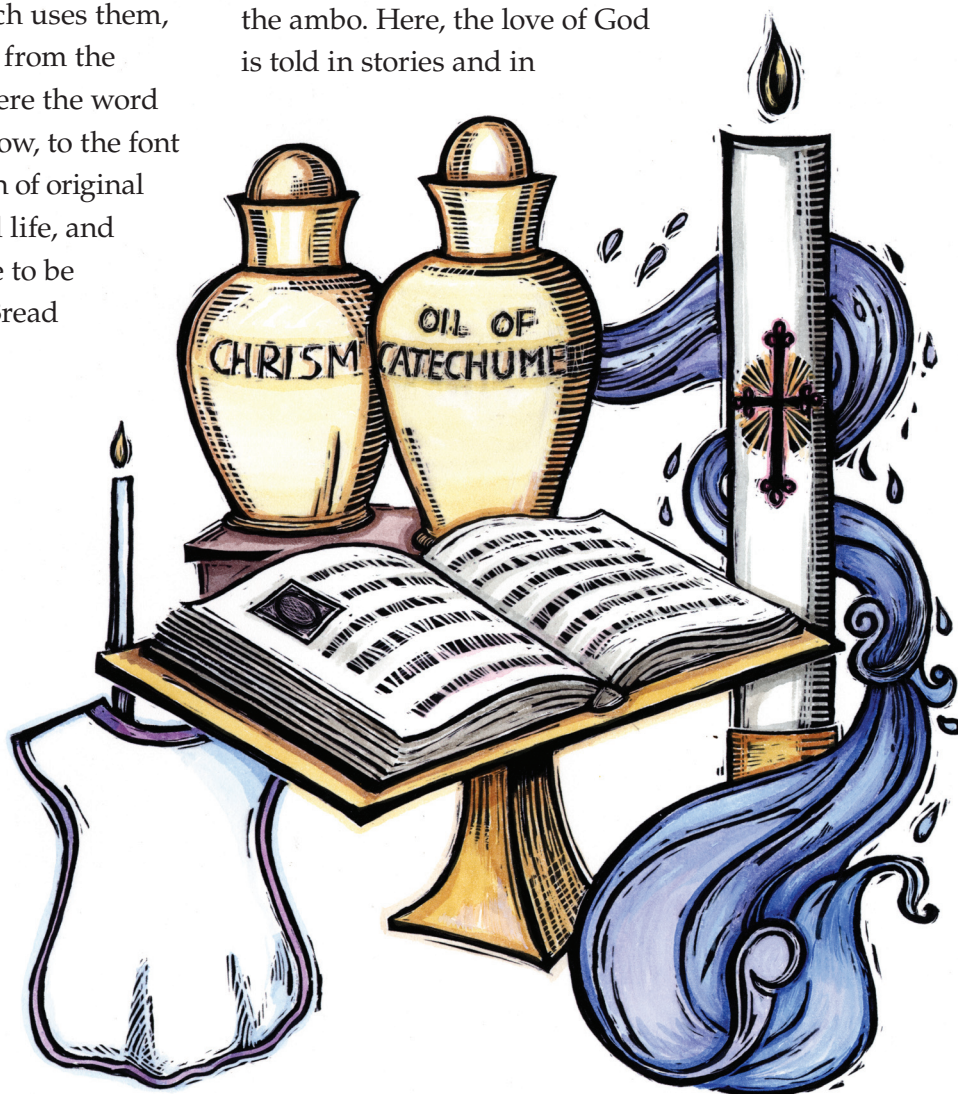
At the Entrance

When people knock at our door, we open to receive them. Likewise, the Church begins the Rite of Baptism for Children with welcoming words and actions. The celebrant greets the children and their families and then asks them to name the children being baptized. These children will not be strangers in the community but will be members who are known and called by name, as the Good Shepherd knows and calls his sheep by name.

After the parents ask for Baptism for their children, the celebrant welcomes the children into the Church by speaking each child's name and making the Sign of the Cross on each one's forehead. Parents and godparents repeat the gesture (sometimes brothers and sisters do, too). The children belong to Christ, who holds them in his arms through the love of all the Church.

At the Ambo

With the first procession, the assembly moves to the ambo. Here, the love of God is told in stories and in



psalms, in prophecies and in parables. Here, miracles are revealed, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is proclaimed, the kingdom of God is announced, and its meaning is explored. God's word will nourish the children throughout their lives. Through the word, God gives us life, hope, and guidance.

If there is no homily, then the prayers of the faithful follow, with special prayers for the children receiving Baptism. Then in the litany, the saints—especially the children's patron saints—are asked to join us in praying for them. The community gathered in support of these children is both local and universal, from heaven as well as from earth, from this time as well as from all times. Then the children are anointed with the oil of catechumens to free the children from sin and evil and to confer the strength of the power of Christ.

At the Font

When the celebrant and the children with their families and godparents process to the font, the whole congregation may also go. Having heard the word of God, the community is ready to celebrate the sacrament of Baptism. Now the water, too, is made ready, with a prayer recalling how God has used water—in Creation, in the great flood, in the Exodus, in the Baptism of Jesus and again in Jesus' death—to bring life. This prayer continues, asking God to send the Holy Spirit upon the water so that it might be a source of new life for those who will be baptized in it. Finally, the congregation prepares itself by renewing the promises to reject sin and believe in the faith of the Church.

All is ready. As the children are immersed in the water, they are cleansed of the stain of original sin and receive from God the risen life of Christ. Each one is called again by name and baptized with the following words: "I baptize you in the name of



the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, #60).

Three more signs of the children's new life in Christ follow the Baptism. The children are anointed with chrism, which is oil mixed with perfume. Chrism seals the children as members of Christ (whose name means "the anointed one"). A white garment is then presented to each child. This garment serves as a sign of the child's new life in Christ and his or her membership in the Church. Finally, a small candle for each child is lit from the paschal candle. As the godparents light the candles on behalf of the children, the celebrant says, "Receive the light of Christ" (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, #64). The lit paschal candle proclaims that Jesus is risen. The small candle says that these children now share in his risen life. Sometimes, this is followed by the Prayer over Ears and Mouth in which the priest or deacon touches the ears and mouth of the child with his thumb and asks that the Lord Jesus would touch the ears of the newly baptized to receive his word and the mouth so that the child might proclaim faith in Christ and thereby give praise and glory to God.

At the Altar

By virtue of their Baptism, the children may participate in every other aspect of life in the Church. We process with them to the altar in anticipation of this participation. We are aware that it is here that they will be nourished throughout their lives with Christ in the bread and wine of Eucharist.

The celebration concludes at the altar with the Lord's Prayer and with blessings for the mothers and fathers, godparents, family members, and the parish community. Together they will nurture the children's lives as well as receive the particular blessings that each of them brings to the Church.

