

Baptism

(A Catholic response to Protestant objections)

The Baptism of infants is an Apostolic Tradition that goes all the way back to the Bible, regardless of what some may have you believe. As you will read, the Early Church knew from the beginning that Baptism was more than a mere symbol but that it was a Sacrament of regeneration in which the baptized person was spiritually reborn.

St. Paul compares Baptism in the New Covenant with Circumcision in the Old Covenant. When infants were circumcised in the Old Covenant, it was done so by the faith of their parents to raise the child in accordance with the Laws of the Jewish faith. Likewise, the Catholic Church teaches that infant Baptism in the New Covenant is done so by the faith of the parents to raise the child according to the Church.

Many Protestants claim that circumcision was meant to be nothing more than a sign and a seal – again – simply an outward symbol of the inward reality of faith. Likewise, the classic Protestant position on Baptism is that it is merely an outward symbol of the inward reality of faith. Infant Baptism is rejected by many, though accepted by some.

St. Paul uses the terms, “*circumcision of the heart*” and the “*circumcision of Christ*” (**Romans 2:29, Col. 2:12-17**) to describe the reality of circumcision being a spiritually inward act, not merely an outward sign. The Old Testament type that *was* circumcision is *now* baptism.

Baptism was foretold in the Old Testament. **Ezekiel 36:25** states, “*I will sprinkle clean water upon you to cleanse you from all your impurities, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.*”

When Nicodemus asked Jesus how a person is born again, he replied, “*Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit*” (**John 3:5**). The importance of the effects of Baptism is echoed by St. Peter in **1 Peter 3:21**, in which he speaks of the 8 people in Noah’s Ark who were saved through water. He goes on to say, “*This prefigured baptism, which saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*”

When St. Peter baptized Cornelius the Centurion, he baptized his **entire** household including children and servants (**Acts 10:1-49, 11:13-14**). We see the same thing in **Acts 16:23-24** with the household of the Philippian jailer and **1 Cor. 1:16** with Stephanas’ household. The plain fact is that households include children of all ages, **including** infants.

To distance themselves with the historic Catholic position as stated in **John 3:5**, some Protestant scholars have gone so far as to say that Jesus was speaking of the **amniotic fluid** in the mother’s womb when he said we must be “*born of water and Spirit.*” The problem with this claim is that **ALL** of us were in the womb of our mother at one time but not all are born **again**.

When the disciples rebuked the children from approaching Jesus, He told them “*Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.*”

(**Matt 19:14, Luke 18:16**). Those who would keep the Sacrament of Baptism from infants are doing *precisely* what Christ himself disapproved of.

Just as with the Old Covenant and circumcision, the faith of the parents/guardians will guide the baptized child in the faith with the help of the Holy Spirit in the New Covenant.

Early Church Teachings on Baptism

One needs to look no further than the writings of the Early Church on the matter to see the Apostolic teachings and Traditions carried on by the historic Christian faith regarding the Baptism of infants:

Irenaeus

"He [Jesus] came to save all through himself; all, I say, who through him are reborn in God: **infants, and children, and youths, and old men**. Therefore he passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, sanctifying infants; a child for children, sanctifying those who are of that age . . . [so that] he might be the perfect teacher in all things, perfect not only in respect to the setting forth of truth, perfect also in respect to relative age" (*Against Heresies 2:22:4 [A.D. 189]*).

Hippolytus

"**Baptize first the children**, and if they can speak for themselves let them do so. Otherwise, **let their parents or other relatives speak for them**" (*The Apostolic Tradition 21:16 [A.D. 215]*).

Origen

"Every soul that is born into flesh is soiled by the filth of wickedness and sin. . . . In the Church, baptism is given for the remission of sins, and, according to the usage of the Church, **baptism is given even to infants**. If there were nothing in infants which required the remission of sins and nothing in them pertinent to forgiveness, the grace of baptism would seem superfluous" (*Homilies on Leviticus 8:3 [A.D. 248]*).

"The Church received from the apostles the tradition of giving baptism even to infants.

The apostles, to whom were committed the secrets of the divine sacraments, knew there are in everyone innate strains of [original] sin, which must be washed away through water and the Spirit" (*Commentaries on Romans 5:9 [A.D. 248]*).

Cyprian of Carthage

"As to what pertains to the case of infants: You [Fidus] said that they ought not to be baptized within the second or third day after their birth, that the old law of circumcision must be taken into consideration, and that **you did not think that one should be baptized and sanctified within the eighth day after his birth. In our council it seemed to us far otherwise. No one agreed to the course which you thought should be taken. Rather, we all judge that the mercy and grace of God ought to be denied to no man born**" (*Letters 64:2 [A.D. 253]*).

"If, in the case of the worst sinners and those who formerly sinned much against God, when afterwards they believe, the remission of their sins is granted and no one is held

back from baptism and grace, how much more, then, should an infant not be held back, who, having but recently been born, has done no sin, except that, born of the flesh according to Adam, he has contracted the contagion of that old death from his first being born. For this very reason does he [an infant] approach more easily to receive the remission of sins: because the sins forgiven him are not his own but those of another" (*ibid.*, 64:5).

Gregory of Nazianz

"Do you have an infant child? Allow sin no opportunity; rather, let the infant be sanctified from childhood. From his most tender age let him be consecrated by the Spirit. Do you fear the seal [of baptism] because of the weakness of nature? Oh, what a pusillanimous mother and of how little faith!" (*Oration on Holy Baptism 40:7 [A.D. 388]*).

"'Well enough,' some will say, 'for those who ask for baptism, but what do you have to say about **those who are still children, and aware neither of loss nor of grace? Shall we baptize them too?**' Certainly [I respond], **if there is any pressing danger. Better that they be sanctified unaware, than that they depart unsealed and uninitiated**" (*ibid.*, 40:28).

John Chrysostom

"You see how many are the benefits of baptism, and some think its heavenly grace consists only in the remission of sins, but we have enumerated ten honors [it bestows]! **For this reason we baptize even infants,** though they are not defiled by [personal] sins, so that there may be given to them holiness, righteousness, adoption, inheritance, brotherhood with Christ, and that they may be his [Christ's] members" (*Baptismal Catecheses in Augustine, Against Julian 1:6:21 [A.D. 388]*).

Augustine

"What the universal Church holds, not as instituted [invented] by councils but as something always held, is most correctly believed to have been handed down by apostolic authority. **Since others respond for children, so that the celebration of the sacrament may be complete for them, it is certainly availing to them for their consecration, because they themselves are not able to respond**" (*On Baptism, Against the Donatists 4:24:31 [A.D. 400]*).

"The custom of Mother Church in **baptizing infants is certainly not to be scorned, nor is it to be regarded in any way as superfluous, nor is it to be believed that its tradition is anything except apostolic**" (*The Literal Interpretation of Genesis 10:23:39 [A.D. 408]*).

"Cyprian was not issuing a new decree but was keeping to the most solid belief of the Church in order to correct some who thought that infants ought not be baptized before the eighth day after their birth. . . . **He agreed with certain of his fellow bishops that a child is able to be duly baptized as soon as he is born**" (*Letters 166:8:23 [A.D. 412]*).

"By this grace baptized infants too are ingrafted into his [Christ's] body, infants who certainly are not yet able to imitate anyone. Christ, in whom all are made alive . . . gives also the most hidden grace of his Spirit to believers, *grace which he secretly infuses even into infants.*** . . . It is an excellent thing that the Punic [North African] Christians call baptism salvation and the sacrament of Christ's Body nothing else than life. Whence does this derive, except from an ancient and, as I suppose, apostolic tradition, by which the churches of Christ hold inherently that without baptism and participation at the table of the Lord it is impossible for any man to attain either to the kingdom of God or to salvation and life eternal? This is the witness of Scripture, too. . . . If anyone wonders why children born of the baptized should themselves be baptized, let him attend briefly to this. . . . The sacrament of baptism is most assuredly the sacrament of regeneration" (*Forgiveness and the Just Deserts of Sin, and the Baptism of Infants 1:9:10; 1:24:34; 2:27:43 [A.D. 412]*).**

Council of Carthage V

"Item: It seemed good that whenever there were not found reliable witnesses who could testify that without any doubt **they [abandoned children] were baptized and when the children themselves were not, on account of their tender age, able to answer concerning the giving of the sacraments to them, all such children should be baptized without scruple,** lest a hesitation should deprive them of the cleansing of the sacraments. This was urged by the [North African] legates, our brethren, since they redeem many such [abandoned children] from the barbarians" (*Canon 7 [A.D. 401]*).

Council of Mileum II

"[W]hoever says that infants fresh from their mothers' wombs ought not to be baptized, or say that they are indeed baptized unto the remission of sins, but that they draw nothing of the original sin of Adam, which is expiated in the bath of regeneration . . . **let him be anathema [excommunicated]. Since what the apostle [Paul] says, 'Through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so passed to all men, in whom all have sinned' [Rom. 5:12], must not be understood otherwise than the Catholic Church spread everywhere has always understood it. For on account of this rule of faith even infants, who in themselves thus far have not been able to commit any sin, are therefore truly baptized unto the remission of sins, so that that which they have contracted from generation may be cleansed in them by regeneration" (*Canon 3 [A.D. 416]*).**