

Homily on “The Baptism of Infants” -- Seven Questions, Seven Answers

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Question #1: Many non-Orthodox ask: Why does our Church baptize infants?

Answer: Our Church has always taken seriously the commands of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ Who tells us: “Unless one is baptized of water and the Spirit (that is, baptism and chrismation), he cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven” (John 3:5). And He Himself asserted to His Apostles: “Let the little children come unto Me, and do not hinder them, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven” (Matthew 19:14).

Question #2: Are there examples of infant baptism in Scripture?

Answer: There are, in fact, examples of whole households, whole families being baptized: Lydia and her household, the first converts in Europe, in Acts 16:15; the Philippian jailer and “all his family” in Acts 16:33; Paul himself baptizing the household of Stephanas in I Corinthians 1:16. “Household” means the head of the family, the spouse, the children and the servants. Nowhere is it mentioned that infants were excluded from this first mystery of salvation. Naturally in the first few decades of the Christian Church, which is the period of time chronicled in the New Testament, adult baptism was the norm; but it is clear from these examples that those newly initiated adult Christians did not hesitate to bring their children to be baptized.

Question #3: Shouldn't a child be baptized after he can confess Christ for himself?

Answer: Nowhere in the Scripture does it say that we “should not baptize anyone they reach the age of 7... or the age of 12... or the ‘age of reason’.” The notion of withholding baptism until someone is able to understand the faith and express one’s belief in a reasonable way comes from the Scholastic period of western church history – a school of thought which implies that the infinite mysteries, works, and mercies of God can be understood and categorized by the human mind. This Scholastic approach to the Christian faith is alien to the apostolic, Orthodox understanding of the Faith. Christ died for everyone; we baptize everyone, even infants and children, whom Christ came to save. This is expressly affirmed in the writings of the earliest Church Fathers, as we shall hear in a moment.

Question #4: What exactly is accomplished in infant baptism?

Answer: Holy Baptism is the entrance into the Church, and into the life in Christ. Just as circumcision was the rite of entrance into the community of faith in the Old Testament, so Baptism is the Christian “rite of initiation.” St. Paul wrote to the Colossians that Baptism is a “circumcision of the heart,” and he concluded that Christians are “buried with Christ in baptism, wherein ye are risen with Him through the faith of the operation of God, who has raised Him from the dead” (Colossians 2:12). If infants were welcomed into the Old Covenant community of Israel, why would the New Covenant community, the Church, be less generous?

It is important to understand that the Orthodox Church not only baptizes infants, She also communes them. After all our Lord said, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you; whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:53-54). No mother would deny her baby milk – or medicine – even though the baby is not capable of asking for milk or medicine. God forbid, then, that we should deny an infant the life-giving spiritual food and spiritual medicine of the Lord’s Body and Blood. The Church, our Mother, gives Her children what She knows they need – whether they have learned to ask for it or not. The criterion for membership in the Church is not age or mental capacity – it is Baptism.

Question #5: Was infant baptism really the practice of the ancient Church of undivided Christianity?

Answer: Yes. From as far back as anyone can determine, the early Christian Church always baptized the children of Orthodox parents. St. Hippolytus takes this for granted in his work *The Apostolic Tradition*, as he describes the rite of Baptism in the second century: “At the hour in which the cock crows, they shall first pray over the water.... the water shall be pure and flowing, that is, the water of a spring or a flowing body of water. Then they shall take off all their clothes. The children shall be baptized first. All the children who can answer for themselves, let them answer. If there are any children who cannot answer for themselves, let their parents answer for them, or someone else from their family. After this, the men will be baptized, and finally, the women ...” And Origen tells us “The Church received from the Apostles the tradition of baptizing even infants.” St. Polycarp, the holy martyr who was himself a disciple of St. John the Evangelist and Theologian, indicated that he was baptized very young when he said to his persecutors on the day of his execution, “Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” St. Irenaeus, writing in the second century, tells us: “For He [Christ] 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... .” And St. Gregory the Theologian, addressing Christian mothers, insists upon the baptism of infants: “Do you have an infant? Do not give time for harm to increase. Let him be sanctified in infancy, and from youth dedicated to the Spirit. Do you fear the seal because of the weakness of nature, as someone faint-hearted and small in faith? But Anna even before giving birth promised Samuel to God, and after his birth she quickly dedicated him and raised him for the sacred garment, without fearing human weakness, but believing in God.”

Question #6: If Baptism is also done to wash away personal sins – or the stain of “original sin” - then what sin can a baby possibly be guilty of?

Answer: An infant or a small child does not come to the font guilty of personal sins. The Orthodox tradition does not teach the notion of “original sin” in the Western sense that we share personally in the sin of Adam and Eve. Our tradition speaks instead of “ancestral sin”. We have inherited a broken human nature – broken by the consequences of the fall of Adam and Eve, our first ancestors, from the Garden of Eden. In Baptism, that brokenness is healed and the relationship with God that was ruptured in the Fall, is restored for the newly baptized person – whether a baby, an adolescent, or an adult -- with the potential to grow ever closer to Christ, nourished by God’s Word and the Sacraments, in His Household - the Church.

Question #7: Where does the practice of “godparents” come into the picture

Answer: It is vital that parents recognize their responsibility for the raising up of the baptized infant in Christian faith and virtue – and that they seek the help of a worthy sponsor. We read this instruction of St. Dionysius the Areopagite from his work, *On The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*: “It was pleasing to our divine instructors to allow infants also to be baptized, under the sacred condition that the natural parents of the child should entrust him to someone among the faithful who would instruct him well in divine subjects and then take care for the child as a father, given from above, and as a guard of his eternal salvation.” How important for us is this instruction which comes from the ancient Church. From it we see what responsibility the godparent or sponsor of the baptized person takes upon himself – and how careful parents need to be in choosing a sponsor! This indeed is our task, in the words of John Chrysostom: “to educate ourselves and our children in godliness.”