

A Question about Baptism and Children; and a Response

Hi Fr. Steve,

Bless!

I'm writing to you from St. Paul Minnesota where I currently attend Saint George Antiochian Orthodox Church.

I was baptized as an Orthodox rather late (at the age of seven) but my parents were not religious and I was not raised in the faith. From age 14 onwards I spent about 20 years as an evangelical. But In September of 2007 I started to attend St. George and I've finally come home. While after only 6 months I can't say I *love* the Church (I'm still learning many things and one cannot love that which one does not know well), I can say that so far, I feel more at peace with God in the Orthodox Church, than I have ever felt over the previous 20 years.

I was listening to your conversation with His Eminence Metropolitan Kallistos regarding infant baptism, on Ancient Faith Radio. I don't see anything wrong with infant baptism, but I think it actually takes something precious away. Let me explain. I am coming back to the Holy Orthodox Church after so many years (I feel like a prodigal son!), I would really have liked to have been able to go through the entire process of being received as a catechumen, and then baptism and chrismation (do I have the order right?). It would be so meaningful to me **today**, a real statement of personal and public commitment to our Lord and His Church. However, because the choice of baptism was made for me by my parents, when I was seven (and, let's be honest, these things didn't mean anything to me as a seven-year-old), I cannot be baptized today. An acquaintance of mine at our Church was just formally received as a catechumen and will eventually be baptized. I have wished on many an occasion that the entire catechumen/baptism/chrismation process (and the Divine Grace that attends these) were open to me as well.

Now all this is water under the proverbial bridge (soon I will receive confession and communion, and will be back in full standing) but it sets up my actual question for you & His Eminence: I have a 3-year-old daughter. Given what I've said above, what reason have I to have her baptized now instead

of letting her grow up and be baptized when **she** is ready? Clearly, baptism and chrismation would be more meaningful to her later when she is 12 or 16 whenever than it would be to her now at 3 years old. Is it **my** place to take that potential meaningfulness away from her by making this decision for her right now? And, how do you believe His Eminence would answer this question?

Thank you for reading and responding.

Your Blessing,
In Christ,

Thomas Katsampes

Thomas,

Glory to God that you have re-discovered the faith given to you in baptism! How wonderful! Please understand that I cannot possibly presume to speak for Metropolitan Kallistos, who is a far wiser man than I. I do not know what he would say in answer to your questions. All I can offer you are a few modest thoughts of my own in response.

First, it is most unfortunate that you were baptized by your parents (and Godparents, I presume) at such a young age *and then not raised in the faith*. Your baptism at the age of seven *presupposed* that you would be raised in the faith. The baptism of a child is *not* a magic wand, but more like the planting of a seed that needs to be nurtured to bear fruit.

Sadly, it is all too often the case that I encounter parents who want their children baptized but are unwilling to raise their children in the faith following baptism. Many of these parents want their children baptized "Greek" - and by this the sacrament of baptism is secularized and reduced to little more than an aspect of Greek culture instead of being what it really is: the great sacrament of our dying and rising with Christ, the receiving of the gift of the Holy Spirit and our entering the communion of the Church, His Body, in hope of eternal life. At this point in my ministry, I require that parents whom I do not know, who are not a part of this parish but are seeking the baptism of their children, attend Church here at St. Paul's for at least three months, become stewards of the parish and meet with me

several times to discuss the meaning of their child's baptism. Anything less than this dishonors the gift of the sacrament! If they will not commit to do this, I cannot, in clear conscience, do the baptism.

Second, while I understand your desire to give your three year-old daughter an experience that you believe you didn't have, I presume that once you have returned to the faith, you will baptize your daughter and raise her in the faith! The immediate benefits of that far outweigh the loss of whatever "potential meaningfulness" you think postponing her baptism might entail. Your daughter will die and rise with Christ, receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, enter fully into the life of the Church - His Body, as the apostle Paul says - and be able to receive the Eucharist, eating and drinking at the eschatological marriage supper of the Lamb. Nothing in this world compares to these gifts, gifts you would be denying her if you postpone her baptism. (After all, you don't wait until your daughter freely decides to go to school at the age of 12 or 16 to send her to school. She needs to begin her education!) As she grows older, you and your wife - and her Godparents, who must be chosen wisely - will teach her how to pray, to fast, to go to confession and to worship the one, true and living God in everything she says and does. You will nurture the gift she has already been given and see it come to full bloom in her life.

Finally, let me remind you that, according to the apostle Paul, baptism replaces circumcision as the mark of the covenant (Colossians 2:11-12), something which in Judaism was given only to free Jewish males; but in Christianity, the new mark of the covenant may be given even to female Gentile slaves, "for all are one in Christ Jesus in whom there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male and female" (Galatians 3:28). In the Old Testament, circumcision, as the mark of the covenant, could not be given to women. But in the New Testament, the mark of the covenant - baptism - can now be given to your daughter. This was a revolution in human understanding of what it means to be marked out as one of God's people! And as circumcision was bestowed on infants in the Old Testament, so we have no problem bestowing baptism on infants in the New Testament. Please do not deny your daughter the fullness of life in the Church!

God keep you!

Father Steve