Registration Form

Sacraments of initiation
Baptism - Chrismation - Eucharist

Has the child been churched? Yes___ No____

Name of Child _____

Residence _____

Telephone Number _____

Date of Birth _____

Place of Birth _____

Date of Baptism _____

Father's name (First & Last) _____

Religion of Father (please be specific) _____

Mother's maiden name (First & Last) _____

Religion of Mother (please be specific) _____

Were parents married by a Catholic priest? _____

Godfather _____

Is he a Catholic? _____

Godmother _____

Is she a Catholic? _____

Either Godparent represented by proxy? _____

Name of proxy _____

Was the child privately baptized? _____

Was the child adopted? _____

Name of Priest _____

Email Address: _____

The Sacrament of Holy Baptism in the Eastern Christian Church

Introduction

Why infant Baptism ?

Holy Baptism is the first of seven Sacraments in the Eastern Christian Church. Together with the Sacrament of Holy Chrismation, it joins the candidate to the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church. Some people argue that the only valid baptism is that of an adult who believes in Christ first. They argue that to baptize a helpless infant only a few weeks old who is unable to believe is meaningless. So, why baptize a baby when it doesn't know yet what is happening? Why not wait for the baby to grow and believe in Christ and ask for Baptism? If we were to follow this line of reasoning, we wouldn't inoculate the baby against diphtheria until he grows up and asks for it! But we know better. Baptizing infants before they know what is going on is an expression of God's great love for us. It shows that God loves us and accepts us before we can ever know and love Him. It shows that we are wanted and loved by God from before conception and at the very moment of our birth. Nothing shows the nature of God's grace more than infant baptism. The Eastern Church does not belittle personal faith in an adult who seeks baptism, but instead insists that the whole emphasis of Baptism is not on what the baby does or the parents or the godparents do, but on what God does. The fact that we are Christians is not due to any act on our part; it is due to the act of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Of course, Baptism demands a personal response on the part of the baptized child when it reaches the age of reason. The child must accept what God did for him or her in Baptism. Baptism is not a divine pass that will get us into Heaven automatically. It must be followed by a personal awareness or awakening to the many gifts of God's love bestowed upon us through this great sacrament. This can only be brought about by the commitment of the parents and godparents.

The institution of the Sacrament of Baptism

It was the Lord Jesus Who instituted Baptism.

> *"He who believes and is baptized will be saved"* (Mark 16:16).
>
> *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."* (Matthew 28:19).
>
> *"Truly. truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God"* (John 3:5).

The great model of our baptism, then, is the Baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan in the Syro-Palestinian area.

The purpose of Holy Baptism

1. To remove the consequences of the 'sin' from the fall of Adam and Eve.
2. To wash away all other sins committed before the time of Baptism if the person is over the age of infancy.
3. To unite the person to "The Body of Christ" (that is, the Church), and to open the door of salvation and eternal life to him or her.

Explanation of the Ceremony

The many gestures involved in the performance of the Sacrament of Baptism in the Eastern Church are not mere forms devoid of meaning. Christianity is life. Each action in the Sacrament of Baptism expresses what Christ is actually doing for us through this Sacrament.

As with all of the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments), there is a visible part, the actions taken by the Priest; and an invisible part, the sanctifying Grace that comes from the Holy Spirit, that fills the body and soul of the person receiving the Sacrament.

The Sponsor or Godparent

The use of sponsors in Baptism dates back to the days when Christians were persecuted by the Roman Emperor Nero. Parents were often massacred during these persecutions. Thus sponsors were provided to instruct the children in the Christian faith in the event the parents were martyred. The godparent promises to see to it that the child is raised and educated in the Orthodox Christian faith. For this reason, it is important that godparents be chosen not for social reasons, but because they are persons who love God and His Church. At least one sponsor must be Catholic and in good standing with the Catholic Church. Otherwise, they will not be able to bring up the child in a faith that is not theirs. Others of varying faiths may be good persons themselves but, logically, they cannot sponsor someone coming into the Catholic Church.

The Exorcism

The first act of the Baptismal service begins in the narthex (entrance) of the church. This is to show that the one being received is not yet a member of the Church. The purpose of Baptism is to bring him/her into the Church. To enter into the temple of God is to be with Christ, to become a member of His Body. The Priest then calls upon the sponsor to renounce the devil and all his works on behalf of the child,

> *"Do you renounce Satan, and all his angels, and all his works, and all his services. and all his pride?"*

The exorcisms announce the forthcoming Baptism as an act of victory. The renouncing of Satan is done facing West because the West is where the sun disappears, and was regarded by the ancient Greeks as the place of the gates of Hades. Then, the priest faces East whence the light of the sun rises and asks the godparent to accept, for the child, Him Who is the Light of the World

"Do you unite yourself to Christ!"

The renunciation of Satan and the union with Christ express our faith that the newly-baptized child has been transferred from one master to another, from Satan to Christ, from death to life.

The Sign of the Cross

The priest then makes the sign of the cross on the child's body. This is repeated often during the service. Essentially the cross is the sign of victory which puts the devil to flight. In the old days, slaves were branded, as are animals today, to show to what master they belonged. Today, the sign of the cross brands us as belonging to Christ.

The Creed

The godparent is then asked to confess faith in Christ in behalf of the infant and reads the confession of faith contained in the Nicene Creed, the faith to which the Church professed early on and to what we hold today. The Creed was a symbol or sign of recognition among the early Christians; it was like a password that distinguished the true members of God's family. By reading the Creed, the godparent confesses the true faith that will be passed on to the infant in time.

The Naming

From the moment the child is received into the Church, emphasis is placed on his/her individuality. He/she is given his/her own particular name by which he/she shall be distinguished from every other child of God. This new name, the Baptismal name, expresses also the new life in Christ now received. Ideally, the name chosen is that of a Saint, recognized by the Church, who becomes the patron/patroness of the child and whose life is recommended to be known and followed by the child through Holy Baptism. In addition to our own individual name, each person receives the name "Christian" at Baptism. From that moment on we bear the name of Christ.

The Candles

However dark may be the night that surrounds us, Baptism remains the Sacrament of entrance into light. It opens the eyes of the soul to see Christ, the light; of the world (John 1:19). It makes us sons of light (1 Thess. 5:5). In the early Church, the baptismal candle was always kept by the one baptized and brought to Church for major events in the person's life. This is why, the candle is kept sacred as a remembering of the child's new life.

Even as the final hour of life approached, in the early Church, it was lit again as the soul went forth to meet its Divine Judge. It was a constant and visible reminder for the Christian to live and die by the light of Christ. Thus, the Baptismal candle becomes a symbol of the perseverance of the baptized soul until Christ's return. Ideally, this Baptismal candle should be kept by the person to be placed in their casket upon their death.

The Baptismal Font

The baptismal font, in the language of the Church Fathers, is the Divine Womb from where we receive the second birth as children of God. Baptism is truly a new birth.

> *"But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God"* (John 1:12-13).

When a person is baptized, he/she descends into the baptismal font. As the water closes over the head, it is like being buried in a grave. When the newly baptized emerges from the water, it is like rising from the grave. Baptism represents our old, sinful nature dying and then being resurrected again by Christ in a new and cleansed form. As St. Paul says, *"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father we, too, might walk in newness of life"* (Romans 6:3-4).

The Water

Water is used for cleansing. It is medicinal. It refreshes. It is life-giving. In Baptism, water expresses the fact that through this sacrament, Christ cleanses us of all sins. The Priest blesses the Baptismal waters in the Font by calling on the Holy Trinity,

> *"Do You Yourself, O loving King, be present now also through the descent of Your Holy Spirit and hallow this water".*

Then, he makes the sign of the Cross three times over the water saying,

> *"Let all adverse powers be crushed beneath the signing of Your most precious Cross".*

The Naked Infant

The infant is baptized in its naked state to denote that, just as we came out of our mother's womb naked, so we emerge naked out of the womb of God, that is, the baptismal Font. The removal of all clothes also signifies the putting off of the 'old man', which will be cast off entirely through Baptism.

Anointing with Holy Oil

Olive oil is blessed by the Priest and then applied by him to the child's forehead, breast, back, hands, feet, ears, mouth, in order to dedicate them to the service of Christ. Sometimes, the godparent then covers the entire body of the infant with olive oil in order to express our prayer that with Christ's help, the infant may be able to elude the grip of sin and the evil one.

Immersion into the Baptismal font

In obedience to Christ's words, the Priest Baptizes the child with the words,

> *"The servant of God (name) is baptized in the name of the Father. Amen. And of the Son, Amen. And of the Holy Spirit, Amen".*

After the invocation, the Priest either immerses the child or pours the blessed water over him/her and then raises the infant up again. After the Baptism the Priest places the child in a new towel, held by the Godparent.

The Sacrament of Chrismation

In the Eastern Church, the second Sacrament of Chrismation (known sometimes as Confirmation) is administered immediately following the Baptism as was done in the early Church. It is considered the fulfillment of Baptism. The Priest anoints the newly baptized infant with the Holy Chrism, that has been blessed by and received from our Patriarch, the head and father of our Church. saying,

> *"the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit, Amen".*

The whole man is now made the temple of God and the whole body is consecrated to the service of God. According to Eastern belief, every baptized lay person is consecrated by this Sacrament; he/she receives the gift of the Holy Spirit to become an ambassador for Christ in this world.

New Clothes

Following the Sacrament of Chrismation, the Priest then vests the newly Baptized child in a new robe or garment, saying,

> *"Clothed is the servant of God (name) with the garment of righteousness, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen".*

The new clothes signify the entirely new life that we receive after we are *"buried with Jesus in His death*" (Romans 6:4). Traditionally, the new white garment expresses the purity of the soul that has been washed from sin. It recalls also the shining robe in which Christ appeared at the his- torical event of the Transfiguration. There is now a likeness between the one baptized and the transfigured Lord. St. Paul calls it a putting on of Christ.

> "*For as many of you as have been baptized in Christ, have put on Christ*" (Galatians 3:26-27). *"Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come"* (2 Corinthians 5:17).

A Religious Walk / Dance

Then, together with the Godparent and the child, the Priest makes a sacred walk/dance around the Baptismal Font, three times while he chants:

> *"All of you, who have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ. Alleluia"* (Galatians 3:27).

This reflects the belief that at this moment, the angels in heaven are expressing their joy that a new soul is registered in the Book of Life. Tradition states that, during the service, God assigned a guardian angel to remain with the newly-baptized person until the end of their earthly life. Following the reading from St Paul's Epistle to the Romans (6:3-11) and the Reading from the Holy Gospel (Matt. 28:16-20) the Priest says to the child:

"You have been baptized, illuminated, anointed, blessed, you are washed clean, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen".

The Cutting of Hair / Tonsure (optional)

The Priest may cut four locks of hair from the child's head in the form of a Cross. This is an expression of gratitude from the child, who having received an abundance of blessings through the Sacraments of Baptism and Chrismation and having nothing to give to God in return, offers part of its hair, as a first-offering to God. In the Old Testament, hair is seen as a symbol of strength. The child, therefore, promises to serve God with all its strength.

The Holy Eucharist

Immediately following Baptism and Chrismation, the neophyte becomes a full member of the Eastern Church. As such, the child is now entitled to receive the precious Body and Blood of Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion (or Holy Eucharist). The new life in Christ, given in Baptism, is renewed again and again in the Eucharist. As nature provides milk for the nourishment of the infant after birth, so God provides Holy Communion for the infant immediately following Baptism, in order to provide nourishment for the spiritual life that the neophyte has received through Baptism. The newly-baptized should be brought to church every Sunday and feast day to be nourished with the Body and blood of Christ and to acclimate him/her into the his/her spiritual home on earth.

Summary

Summarizing what God does for us in Baptism, we may say that first, it tells us who we are. We are God's children. We are loved by Him from before conception and at the very moment of birth, when He takes us into His arms and bestows upon us the kiss of His love through Baptism, Chrismation and Eucharist. He makes us heirs of His riches. Thus, our existence is not like that of worms that exist for a short time until someone steps on them and crushes them into oblivion. We are not "nobodies" for whom no one cares. We are "somebodies" for whom the Supreme King of the universe cares enough to call us His own sons and daughters! And at the end of our brief pilgrimage through this world, He will address each one of us personally, by our Baptism name, and say, "Come, my son or daughter (name), inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world". This we know for certain because we have been baptized in His name.

We strongly urge and recommend that you do not leave this explanation in the church, but rather, take it home with you. After all, we provided it for you; we know what is in it!

BAPTISM

Baptism is not an empty and meaningless event to be performed and then done with. It is the ongoing becoming one with Christ. It is dying to the old self and coming up in the waters of Baptism a new person. It is relinquishing the ways of the old and taking on the ways of the new.

First, the parents themselves need to be committed, or *perhaps* learn to re-commit themselves, to the Christian life, for their own sake and the sake of the child. E all teach by example. No matter what your past has been, we strongly urge the parent(s) to take this milestone in the life of their child and themselves very seriously.

It is expected that Baptism will be only the beginning of a life-long path in a real Christian upbringing. It makes no sense to give the gift of "new life" if the person is not going to be nourished constantly in spiritual food as we do with physical food.

No matter where we are, every attempt should be made for a regular and consistent attendance at church every Sunday. The first and most desirable preference, of course, would be to seek out a Melkite Greek Catholic Church. If none is available, then another Byzantine Catholic Church would be the second recommended choice. The third would be a Catholic Church.

The Godparents, whom we consider, should be chosen on the basis of who will really and faithfully be beneficial in sharing and assisting in the Christian upbringing of the child. Traditions, social obligations or family respect and honor should not be the reasons for choosing persons as Godparents. Godparents should be accompanying their godchildren to church at every opportunity they can. If persons themselves are not living the Christian life, it too makes no sense to consider them for this important and religious role. Presumably, they are good people but may not be fitting for the role of Godparent and what it entails. One of the parents, by Canon Law, MUST be Catholic to serve in this role. *"Godparent"* is NOT just a name. We may have non-Catholic friends and even relatives, who too may be good people, but cannot serve as Godparents, who are to sponsor, BY THEIR OWN FAITH and the LIVING OF IT, those coming into the Melkite Greek Catholic Church.

Baptism, in the Melkite Greek Catholic tradition, is given to a child/adult on the premise that it is to be understood NOT to be a one-day event. Nor is it relegated to merely a social tradition ("*everyone does it, so we have to also").*

The one baptized should be afforded every possible link, bond, frequency and resource re: the Melkite Church in the future. He/she should constantly be reminded of his/her spiritual heritage and roots. He/she should always identify himself/herself as *"Melkite Greek Catholic"* and not just Catholic and understand why. The newly baptized becomes a son/daughter and family member of this Church. (cont'd)

There are plenty of Byzantine resources readily available from which to teach and to learn (*re-learn*) ourselves.

The child/adult will be given the three *Holy Mysteries* (Sacraments) *of Christian Initiation*: *Baptism, Chrismation (Confirmation) and Eucharist*. The three are not to be separated from each other at the time of a Baptism. By our Byzantine theology and ritual of Baptism, they are connected to each other.

At a Baptism, this is really the person's *"First Communion"*. He/she is allowed to receive the Holy Eucharist every Sunday from that day forward at any Catholic church. The priests and religious educators of where we attend church should be made aware of this <u>in advance</u> so that any possible misunderstanding/embarrassment may be avoided. If needed, your Melkite pastor can verify this with documentation.

Any future *"First Communion"* class in Catholic schools holds a religious, psychological and social event for a child. Although we do not state an avoidance of this participation because the reality for our children has realistically already happened in their lives, according to our tradition of giving the Eucharist at the Baptism, , we understand the related needs at their age. We do, however, very strongly suggest that the parent speak to the priests and religious educators <u>well in advance</u> and discuss the possibility of the Melkite child being named as a "junior sponsor" for the class. This certainly is an opportunity for catechesis for all attending the Baptismal ceremony. We would hope that the clergy and educators would welcome this as a catechetical moment of teaching to demonstrate to that class and the community attending the ceremony, the universality and richness of the Catholic Church and Faith.

The parents should be observed as regularly attending and recorded as financially supporting the church. We are not a "one time gas tank fill up" as we drive down life's highway!

The Melkite priest, who celebrates this important event in the life of the person, has a concern, rooted in a real investment in that person's life, spiritually and otherwise. He becomes linked to that person by the grace of Baptism as the person's first *"spiritual father"*.

We are always available in the future to be contacted to assist in clarifying any matter and are happily willing to do so.

Together with you, we look forward to the blessed event!

(revised May, 2008)

GODPARENTS:

What Are They?

First of all, parents before choosing godparents, should ask themselves: "*Are we living up to the promises made by our own godparents?"*

If the parents themselves are not presently living a witnessed Christian and church life, what can be expected from godparents and the assumed, ongoing upbringing of the child in the church?

Then, parents choose persons to act as godparents or sponsors for their newborn into the Christian community. The godparents should ideally be taken from the membership of that community.

Membership is defined as "status or state of being as a member of an organization". This further is broken down into two types: *"in good standing",* and *"not in good standing".*

Simply put, in a religious context, a person is either in cooperation with the graces of God or he/she is not.

Hence, the title "godparent" is not just one of honor, family obligation or family tradition. It has depth and meaning to it. Its name presupposes value and responsibility.

"Parents should be encouraged to select as godparents those whom they know will support their own faith and assist in their own efforts to raise the children as believers." **(Melkite Diocesan Pastoral Handbook).**

The parents select true believers because they themselves are pre-supposed to be true and practicing believers. Again, I repeat, that the parents should first be living a good, witnessed Christian and church life.

The **godparents then must, in effect, be persons *"in good standing"* with the Church** and be in cooperation with the laws of God as interpreted by the Church. For example, a non-Christian, although a good person, is not in a position to serve as a godparent in a Christian Baptism. So too, a person, who does not live up to the laws of God, i.e., being married outside the Church, cohabitation with someone without being married in church, intentionally defying any of the Church's understanding and teaching of full and honorable membership in the Church, CANNOT and SHOULD NOT be considered as an acceptable godparent for the Sacrament. Moreover, parents should tell the priest, well in advance, the names of the chosen godparents to see if they are acceptable.

How can a person who is not living up to his/her own responsibilities sponsor another person desiring to enter into that community? If we are responsible to teach our young in the ways of our Faith, what then shall we communicate to them? Do we pick and choose those things that we like or agree with? What do these decisions say about our own faith? Our actions speak louder than our words in this instance.

As spiritual fathers, the clergy are exhorted very strongly by the chief teacher of the Diocese, the Archbishop/Bishop, as imitator of the Divine Teacher, Jesus Christ, to *"receive all persons with love ... (but to also) remind (parents) to give their children a Christian upbringing and every means to a renewal of their faith as well"* (Pastoral Handbook).

Baptism means to be healed, to be made whole again, to be restored to our original beauty as part of the Divine Plan. We, as believers (if we truly are) have no. other recourse except to recognize that *"sin takes its start in us when we are born; it grows with us and keeps us company 'till life's end"* (St. Gregory of Nyssa).

When we fall or turn our backs on the ever-extended, loving hand of our Creator, we need to repent, renounce the ways of sin and death and return to our day of Baptism and *"be buried and completely drowned. When we emerge from the water, the new man (woman) is risen from the dead"* (St. John Chrysostom).

To return to our original question:
Godparents: What are they?
The godparents themselves must be living an honorable, public Christian life and all that this entails. They are the ones who stand, not just for the day of Baptism, but every day of the child's life, assisting the parents in the proper Christian raising and education of the child, by teaching, sharing, practice and by example.

Persons who are not doing so should not be presented to the Church as good and valid sponsors. Let us not embarrass ourselves, family, friends or the priest, who may not give his permission. Please do not put the priest in an awkward situation.

At least one of the godparents logically needs to be Catholic in order to sponsor the child into the Melkite Catholic Church.

If they are not members of our Melkite parish, a letter, well in advance, is required from the respective pastor of their own Catholic church.

They, as are parents, are partners with God, Who nurtures, not with a diseased garment of body or mind, but in concert with Christ, Divine Founder and Foundation of Eternal Life; clothes, not with tattered or soiled garments, but with a clean and pure halo of warming and protective light; and guides, not with a weakened plan of sustenance, but with determined commitment to live in and with Him, to rejoin Him, our Source of life, Who is the Reason and Author of our existence.

Others, who do not fulfill the above requirements, can stand at the event's ceremony as "witnesses" but will not be considered being, serving or recorded as "godparents".

by Archimandrite John Azar