

The Signs of Baptism: A Shower of Gifts

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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.

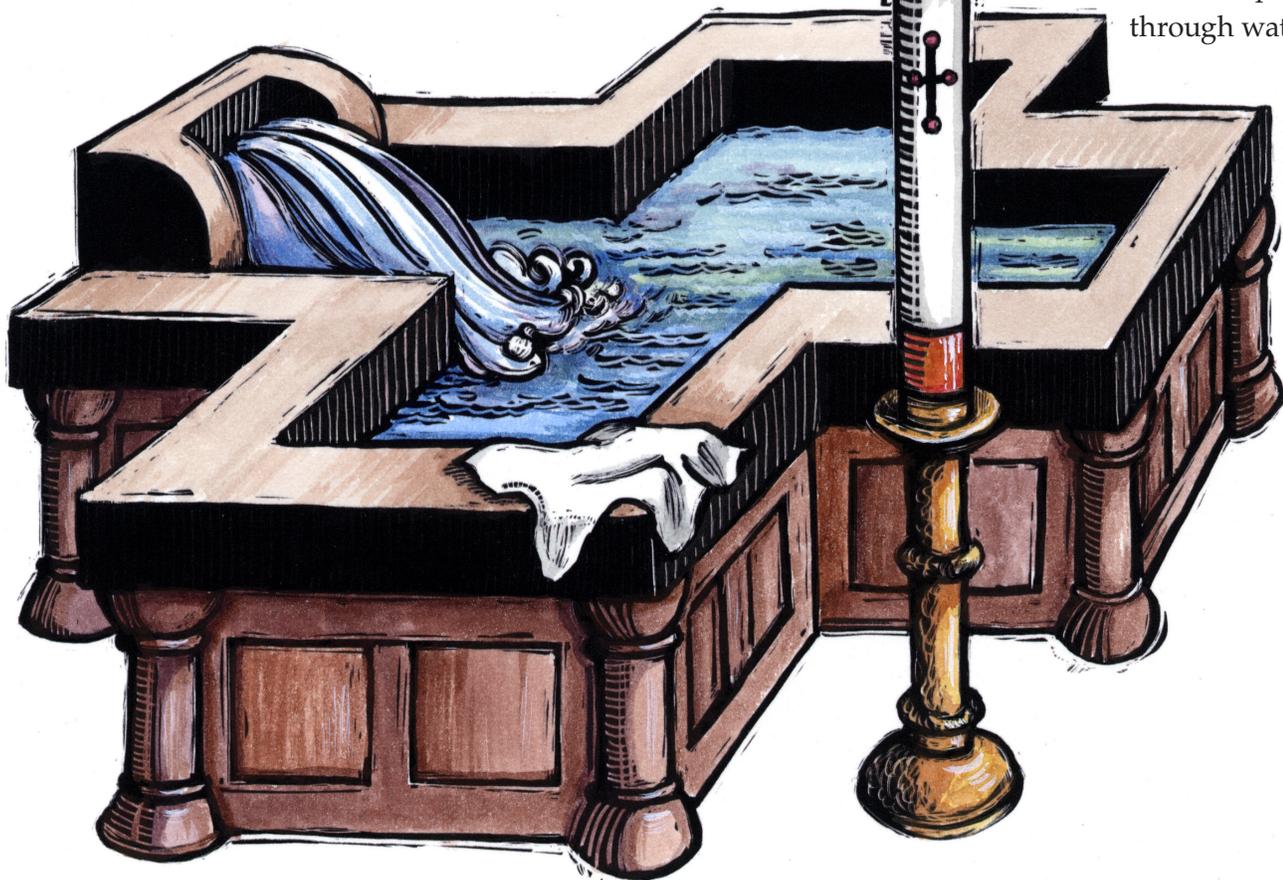
The Water

“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 Order of Baptism of 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 washed clean through the Sacrament of Baptism from all the squalor of the life of old, [and] may be found worthy to rise to the life of newborn children through water and the Holy Spirit. (*Order of Baptism of 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" (*Order of Baptism of 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 eternal life" (*Order of Baptism of 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.