

Introduction

Baptism in a Changing World

Seldom in its long history has the world changed more profoundly than it has in the past two generations. The technology, ideas, and values that had been quietly brewing in universities and laboratories since the end of World War II exploded into the lives of even the most sheltered people during the 1960s. Once that happened, we embarked upon a dizzying whirl of uncertainty that has left few of our traditions unquestioned and few assumptions about the meaning of life intact.

The church, like the rest of society, has been caught up in this time of rapid change. Parents who present their children for baptism today are very different from parents who did so even a decade ago.

Two generations ago, the impact of change had begun, but most couples who came to a parish to present their child for baptism were both Catholics who lived near their own parents and formed a kind of extended family. They had been raised in the Catholic church and rarely questioned its authority. Their child was usually no more than a few weeks old, because infant baptism was a rigid Catholic custom. At that time, the roles of men and women were well defined; the child's father worked outside the home while the mother devoted her full time to raising their children. Single par-

ents and adoptions of children whose background differed from their parents were most unusual.

Today all that has changed. There are no typical parents because each couple comes with a different set of experiences, a unique set of values, and its own way of understanding the world we live in. Many marriages are ecumenical and even couples who are both Catholic often bring with them very different experiences of church. Many live far from their extended families and do not rely on them for frequent advice and support.

Many parents have struggled with their faith for years and are unsure how they relate to organized religion. Some put off baptizing their child until these problems have been resolved. Most fathers and mothers must work and two-career families often seem the norm rather than the exception. Single parents are an accepted part of everyday life and many parents adopt children from different cultures and backgrounds.

Beneath these differences lies a fundamental change, common to almost all younger people. Our contemporary culture encourages them to believe they have every right to question people in authority. They expect the church to respond to their questions honestly and with patience. They insist that the decisions they make be their own.

Women more than men question our inherited way of talking about God as if God were male. This way of speaking, they insist, comes from an age in which women were considered inferior to men and were deprived of their rightful place in the world. They are quietly demanding that we change both our language and our customs to open ourselves to the full impact of Saint Paul's words, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Not all young men and women are at the same point in embracing these changes. Some are very different from their parents, while others are just beginning to leave the old ways and enter the new.

God's Own Child has served parishes well during these unsettled times. After years of trial and error in parish settings, it was first published in 1977. Since then, after forty years

of being used in parishes around North America, this completely revised text takes into account the many changes discussed above, from the different experiences of young parents to inclusive language, from the impact of the catechumenate (RCIA) to the growing restlessness with all authority, from a greater emphasis on service to a new appreciation of the value of tradition in our lives.

At the same time, we have kept the features that have made this book so popular: the discussion starters, the follow-up discussions, organization suggestions, the simple explanations of Catholic belief and practice, and the underlying invitation to become more involved in parish life.

Our hope is that this revised *God's Own Child* will be a useful tool for everyone working in the challenging ministry of inviting families into a closer union with the God through the sacrament of baptism.

USING THIS GUIDE

Fifty years ago, baptism preparation was largely unknown in American parishes. Today, it is taken for granted, a reality of American and Canadian Catholic church life. As church, we have come to understand that membership today is a matter of personal choice, since our culture no longer affirms the goodness of belonging to the church because it is our heritage. We now realize that we must help parents affirm their inherited faith and make it their own.

The purpose of *God's Own Child* is to help parish leaders prepare parents for the baptism of their child. It is both a call to per-

sonal faith and an explanation of the rite of baptism.

This guide has information about the baptism ceremony, and about ways your parish can help parents prepare for it through a renewal of their own faith. It also contains practical suggestions for group meetings and private sessions.

Our stress is practical rather than theoretical. To read the guide and the parents' book will take about one hour. Here you will find an easy-to-use way to introduce people to the sacrament rite as part of their spiritual renewal. They will feel welcomed

to this program of preparation and perhaps back to the Catholic church.

One writer has remarked that the baptism of a child is the parents' confirmation in the faith. This is the time when they make one of their most definitive and free decisions to enter active church life and affirm their belief in Jesus.

When a couple calls the parish office to arrange for their child's baptism, much is happening in their lives. To enter into the rite fully and with confidence they need help. That help is of two kinds. First, they need to become familiar with the ceremony so that they can move through it comfortably. Second, and more important, they need help in sorting out their own faith commitment.

In parishes where baptism takes place during the Sunday liturgy, there is little problem becoming familiar with the rite itself. Attendance at one of the regular baptism ceremonies will dispel any fears or awkwardness the parents may feel at the liturgy. In *God's Own Child* there is a short explanation of the ceremony and its symbolism. Even when parents are unable to attend a baptism ceremony before their own child is baptized, this explanation should prove adequate.

God's Own Child also contains instructions for making the baptism garment and decorating the ceremonial candle. These may be offered as options to parents who wish to become more involved in the preparation for the liturgy.

The fundamental need of parents is, however, not liturgical but catechetical, or in some cases even evangelical, awakening a long-lost or neglected faith. *God's Own Child* meets this need, too. In it are short chapters that cover fundamental tenets of faith and church tradition.

Each chapter begins with a short quotation from the rite of baptism, one likely to suggest a question or a problem to parents. This quotation is followed by separate pages for the fathers and mothers to express their thoughts, or if there is only one parent involved in the baptism, for this parent and a partner. In these pages the partners are challenged to assess their own understanding of the faith. A short explanation of the points of belief and custom raised in this questioning process follows. The final section of each chapter is a series of questions to help the partners reflect on what they have read, first alone and then together.