

# THE CHURCH OF ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS

(Anglican)

## PARISH OF EDGEMEAD

### “THE BAPTISM OF INFANTS”

A Booklet to help parishioners, and especially those seeking to bring infants or young children to the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, to grasp the significance of Baptism and to understand the guidelines that the parish follows in the preparation of parents and godparents for the Baptism of their children.

#### THE BAPTISM OF INFANTS

##### Introduction

Holy Baptism is a Sacrament of the Church, “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace” or, in other words, “an action we can see that affirms the reality of something that we cannot see”. An act of **Grace** on God’s part (what God has done and will surely keep doing) is met with an act of **Faith** on our part (what we do and promise to keep doing). Baptism joins one to Jesus Christ, to share in his death and resurrection, and makes one a part, a member, of the Church, the Body of Christ on earth.

Baptism is usually administered to adults who have come to faith in Christ and who declare this faith and their intention to live as Christians. The Baptism of infants, or of children too young to make a meaningful declaration of faith, is a special case, and should take place only when the parents are people openly and genuinely committed to Christ and actively sharing in the Church’s worship and witness. The Canons (Laws) of the Anglican Church state that, “**When infants or young children are baptized, it shall be the duty of the Priest to ensure that the parents or those responsible for the upbringing of the child receive such instruction in the Christian faith as will enable them to renew their own commitment to Christ and to promote the nurture and growth in the fellowship of the Church of the child or children in their care**”. (Canon 35:4)

Looking at this statement we can discern two things:

**1. It is required that parents be committed to Christ**, which clearly means to be in a relationship with him that expresses itself in faith and through obedience, and which is being lived out both in the life of the Church and in the world. (Where only one parent is Christian, the other parent would be required to give consent to the baptism and to undertake not to put obstacles in the way of the child’s development as a Christian).

**2. The understanding is that the child is being brought into and will be kept within the life of the Church**, to learn the duties of worship and active service by participation. Children learn by imitation and participation and there are no grounds here for having a baby baptized and thereafter keeping the child away from the experience of worship and fellowship that the Church expresses.

Where parents are committed to Christ, faithful at the Holy Eucharist and engaged in the ministry of the Church, the baptism and the subsequent growth in faith of their children is a delight to the whole congregation. But many practical difficulties do arise sometimes and it is necessary to talk about them.

### **Difficulties associated with the Baptism of Infants**

**1. “Membership of the Church”.** Some people have very hazy ideas of what it means to belong to the Church or, to put this another way, they do not really know, and have never deeply entered into, what their own Baptism means. Simply to have one’s name on the Parish Roll, or to be part of a family, some of whose members come to church, is hardly membership of Christ in the sense that Baptism implies. Children who grow up in families separated from the Church’s life and worship will not grow into the fullness of their own Baptism. For a child to be baptized, parents have to understand, and joyfully accept, the calling to active participation in the Church’s worship, ministry and witness. The **“right”** to have one’s baby baptized lies alongside the **“responsibility”** to bring the child up, through personal leadership and example, within the visible Church. Deep spiritual harm may be the consequence when parents or godparents stand before God and the congregation and make vows and promises without the intention of taking them seriously.

**2. “The Separation of the Sacraments”.** Over the centuries of the Church’s life, it happened that **Holy Baptism** (the Sacrament of Birth in Christ) and **Holy Communion** (the Sacrament of Growth in Christ) became separated. To know how and why this happened, you have to study carefully the history of the Church, just as to know how and why Apartheid was established in South Africa, you have to read carefully the history of our country and the world. Wrong practices creep in and they can come to be seen as normal, because people know no other way. So it was that our parents, and their parents and grandparents going back over hundreds of years, brought their babies to Baptism but were never permitted to lead them, as growing children, to the frequent meeting with Christ in Holy Communion. Children, even though they were baptized, were prohibited from receiving Communion. *(If you want to see just how unnatural this is, imagine what you would think if you heard that the couple next door had had a baby, but had decided not to feed it until it was a teenager!)*

The result of this rule has been that children have been growing up without any proper understanding of what the Church is, of what it means to be a Christian, and without the sacramental experience of Christ in the Eucharist. That is the main reason why so many teenagers have simply walked out of the Church after Confirmation, and why they have tended to fall victim to the 're-baptizing churches' which start off by telling them that their Baptism was invalid. Thankfully, the Church has come to see how wrong this separation of the Sacraments has been. Frequent Holy Communion is essential for the baptized, just as feeding is essential for the new-born infant.

**3. The Choice of Godparents.** Godparents are witnesses to a Christian baptism who take on specific and serious responsibilities for the growth in Christ of the child. They share with the parents in the vows of renunciation of evil, of faith and of obedience, which they make at the font for themselves and on behalf of the child. The promise that both parents and godparents make is that they will lead the growing child to Christ **"by their prayers, by their example and by their teaching"**. In our day, very great cultural pressures are being brought to bear on the Church in the matter of the choice of godparents. It often happens that people are presented to be godparents who have no solid link with the Church at all, who are not committed members of any congregation and for whom the Sacraments have no relevant meaning. Often they have been chosen on the basis of family considerations alone, and the requirements of the Church are regarded as an intrusion on what the parents wrongly see as their right to choose whomever they like. In some cases, obviously inappropriate choices have been made and settled on before the parents even approach the Church to discuss the intended baptism. Such events place the parish priest in an almost impossible position and the result may be hurt that is never healed.

### **How does the Church cope with these difficulties?**

When young adults who have not been active in the life of the Church bring their babies and ask for Holy Baptism, the parish priest is faced with some difficult choices. This is especially so if the couple concerned have been in a sexual relationship outside marriage, with the news of the pregnancy often coming as an unwanted shock and the birth of the baby adding complications to a relationship that perhaps was never properly grounded beforehand. Sometimes pressure from the couple's parents adds to the strain and tension. The Anglican Church does not lay down rigid rules about how a priest must deal with these situations. Its ethos is to maintain the truth of the Christian Faith in its worship and teaching and to deal compassionately and wisely with those who come seeking its ministry. In practice, priests may follow different pastoral procedures, depending on the circumstances of the couple concerned, the particular customs of the parish and the priest's own convictions about how growth in Christ may best be fostered:

- A priest may decide to carry out the Baptism without delay and in spite of difficulties still to be worked through, on the basis that, once the Baptism has been done, there will be grounds to insist that the couple must now be faithful at worship
- Another may insist that the couple come faithfully to worship for a specified period (three months, six months or one year) before the Baptism is performed
- Yet another may decide to wait until clear evidence of the parent's repentance and real faith in Christ begin to be visible to the congregation, before moving to the Baptism.

None of these choices can be considered to be right and the others wrong. They are, each of them, possible ways of moving through what may be a very sensitive and difficult matter.

### **How do we approach the Baptism of Infants here at St Michael's?**

As I said earlier, when the parents bringing children to Holy Baptism are committed to Christ, faithful participants at the Holy Eucharist and deeply involved in the life and ministry of the parish, there is nothing to be weighed up. The Baptism is performed, the congregation rejoices and the newly baptized child takes his or her place at the table, to share and grow in the Lord with us all. But how do we proceed when we are approached by parents only loosely connected with the life of the parish, and find ourselves facing some of the difficult matters which I have been describing? Here are some answers to this question.

The guidelines which I use, and which are explained below, are the result of my own experience as a parish priest and are drawn, also, from what I have learned from priests wiser and more experienced than I. They have been discussed with people in positions of leadership in the parish and have received the approval of Parish Council. They are not rules which can be used to solve every problem and make every decision simple, but they are wise and sensible directions for all of us to have in mind as we approach together the issue of the Baptism of infants and young children.

**1. Holy Baptism and Holy Communion belong together.** We hold the Sacrament of Birth in Christ (**Holy Baptism**) and the Sacrament of Growth in Christ (**Holy Communion**) in the closest embrace. The Holy Eucharist is the act of celebration of all the baptized together and it is at the Holy Eucharist that we discover and enjoy what our Baptism signifies. We expect to find a mature attitude to the Holy Eucharist in parents who bring children to Holy Baptism. It is at the Eucharist, leading their children, that parents will teach them what their Baptism means. No effective teaching could be done if children, after their Baptism, were not permitted and encouraged to be frequent participants in the Eucharist.

**2. The Eucharist is the Setting in which Baptism Preparation takes place.** This clearly follows from point 1 above. The Holy Eucharist is the supreme moment of meeting between God and his people, and it is the setting in which the Sacrament of Holy Baptism is administered. It is also the setting in which everything that the Church believes and teaches about the Holy Trinity is presented to us. It is an event during which the great saving act of Christ's death and resurrection is made visible to his people. We touch Christ in the Eucharist. If parents are participating in that event, they are being prepared to lead their children into it as well. If they are not, then no teaching we can do in a classroom or group session can make up for that lack. This means that we will not call parents together for final Baptism Preparation in a group, nor take their infants to Holy Baptism, without being reasonably satisfied that the parents are growing in their faith at the Holy Eucharist.

**3. The Parish Priest acts as a Representative of the Congregation.** Because it is the priest who normally meets with parents seeking to bring children to Holy Baptism, people tend to think that it is the priest who must decide whether or not a particular child should be baptized. But the priest, in this matter, is a **representative** of the congregation, and it is the congregation which must give approval for the baptism. This can be clearly seen in the Service of Baptism in the Prayer Book where, after the parents and godparents have affirmed their intention to bring the child up as part of the Body of Christ, have renounced sin and publicly declared their faith, the congregation

responds with the words, **“This is our faith”**. The congregation affirms that the faith of the parents and godparents is seen to match or fit with its own and therefore the Baptism may proceed. The priest, throughout the period of preparation and in the moment of Baptism itself, is a representative figure. It is the congregation which authorizes the Baptism. No congregation should be expected to authorize the baptism of a child of parents whom it does not know and may never see again. Conversely, no priest would be permitted to deny or withhold baptism to the child of parents who were known to the congregation as faithful and committed Christians, sharing its worship and life.

**4. We see the Congregation as Godparents to the Child.** Godparents are required to be active and committed members of the Church because they represent the Church at the font. Their promise, to lead the child’s growth in Christ by their prayers, their example and their teaching, is a model and a focus of what the congregation undertakes to fulfil every time a child is baptized into its fellowship. The congregation makes its own vows around the font, and expresses them in the part of the Service of Baptism called **“The Welcome”**. It is within the congregation, alongside its parents, that the child learns to live the faith. You could say that there are two sets of promises being made here: the parents, promising to hold the child continually within the life of the congregation; and the congregation, promising to provide an environment which will help to lead the child towards a living faith in Christ and active Christian fellowship. Every member of the congregation has a part to play in the Christian upbringing of every child, and the congregation is damaged if, having made its vows round the font, it is unable to fulfil them because the child is not faithfully brought to worship. The vows of parents, godparents and congregation are no light matter.

**5. We ensure that the Parish Church provides proper Facilities and Opportunities for the Ongoing Growth in Christ of the Child.** This is one of the priest’s specific responsibilities. The Sunday School of the Church is there to support and confirm the teaching of the parents. The Sunday School teaches the meaning of the Sacraments and shares in the Eucharistic life of the congregation, to enable the children to be at Holy Communion, with their parents, every Sunday. This early training of our young people continues towards, and beyond, Confirmation. It is expected of parents bringing children to Holy Baptism that they will give them every encouragement to continue to grow towards maturity as Christian disciples. This is part of the vow that parents make at the font in the presence of the congregation, and it is an ongoing and costly commitment.

## Conclusion

As I work with parents towards the Baptism of their children, I hold these guidelines before me and I encourage the parents to be conscious of them as well. Some parents, because of where they are in their faith lives and their involvement with the Church, can move to the Baptism of their child very quickly, and it would be most unfair to expect them to delay the event. Others, for one reason or another, may need plenty of time and pastoral care before the Baptism can meaningfully take place. In all of this, I look for signs of growth in faith in the parents and I pray continually that God would give me the gift of discernment, so that I may be able to offer wise counsel based on sound judgement. It can be difficult sometimes, both for parents who might feel that they are being discriminated against, and for me when outsiders, not knowing the full facts of the situation, suggest that I favour some and do not care for others.

In the end, I have to take responsibility for the way in which I counsel parents through these matters and I do so willingly, because it is before the Lord, not before parents or anyone else, that the integrity of my heart is examined. Sometimes, looking back on these events, I find myself thinking that perhaps I should have done things differently. That is how we grow, and none of us is immune from error. All that matters in the present moment, though, is that I should do the best I can in the situation, using my experience and judgement, open to the advice and wisdom of others, and with a conscience that does not accuse me.

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