

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

CATHOLIC APOLOGETICS 101

Infant Baptism

As with the Sacrament of the Eucharist, the meaning and understanding of Baptism is intimately rooted in the Jewish tradition. Ancient Jews did not choose their faith; it was something into which they were born. A Jew became a Jew simply by being born into a Jewish family. In this way, Jewish parents not only gave their children the gift of life, but also the gift of faith.

Even as early as the Fourth century, the Church understood infant Baptism in reference to Judaism. Saint Augustine, in refuting the Donatist heresy, wrote, “We can form a true conjecture of the value of the sacrament of baptism in the case of infants, from the parallel of circumcision” (Against the Donatists, Book IV, Chapter 24-32). Circumcision marked a Jewish child’s entrance into the community of faith. It was not something he chose, but rather, something that was chosen for him. Just as his parents chose to bring him into the world and chose to feed him healthy food, they also chose to offer him the most important thing in life—faith. Faith is a gift freely given; it is not something we can demand or steal.

Infant Baptism helps us remember that faith is a free gift. Just as parents are co-givers with God in bringing forth the gift of life, they are also co-givers of the gift of faith. Children are physical, tangible expressions of the love that a husband and wife have for one another. Ideally, a husband and wife love one another so much that their love cannot be contained within themselves, but it overflows into the lives of their children. Faith works the same way. When parents bring their children to church to be baptized, we are recognizing that their faith in Jesus Christ is so abundant that it cannot be contained among them, but it overflows into the lives of their children.

Through Baptism, like in Jewish circumcision, children become members of the faith community. Having been given the gift of faith through baptism, it is the responsibility of the community to help the newly Baptized to unwrap that gift. Regardless of one’s age when receiving Baptism, each person must come to that point in life when he or she accepts the gift of faith they have been given and chooses to live it. The hope that is inherent in infant Baptism is that the gift of faith that has been freely given and that has been nurtured for many years will eventually be so strongly rooted in a Christian’s heart that he or she would never want to live without it.