Baptism as welcome

Teacher background

Baptism is a serious step—a step for which believers spend much time getting ready. Special clothes, a candle to light the way, water for growth, oil for strength, even companions for the journey are associated with Baptism. This is the beginning of a much longer journey of commitment and discipleship. The journey begins with an invitation, a call from God through the Christian community to live the gospel as committed disciples of Christ. Acceptance of the invitation follows and believers’ responses are ritualised and made visual and “real” in the celebration of Baptism.

Adult Baptism was the norm in the Church of the first three centuries. Those who were interested in Christianity were invited to join the Christian community on a journey of faith. Those who accepted the invitation became candidates for the sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist). The candidates were called catechumens and entered into a step-by-step process toward full membership in the Church. This process was called the Catechumenate. Joining the Church in the early centuries was no easy matter. The Baptismal commitment was not to be taken lightly.

The entire Church would pray for, and with the catechumens, instructing them in gospel values, sharing the faith life of the Church and celebrating the stages of the faith journey with special rituals of welcoming and belonging.

The final Lent before the initiation was a special time for catechumens. It was like a 40-day retreat including prayer, fasting and other forms of self-scrutiny as they prepared to accept the faith and be received in the Church. Lent started out as the Church’s official preparation for Baptism, which was celebrated only once a year at the Easter Vigil.

By the beginning of the fifth century, the catechumenate process itself had virtually disappeared. The sacraments of initiation became three separate sacraments celebrated at separate times. Soon adult Baptisms declined and infant Baptism became the norm.

Source: The Sacrament of Baptism: Celebrating the Embrace of God by Sandra DeGidio, O.S.M.