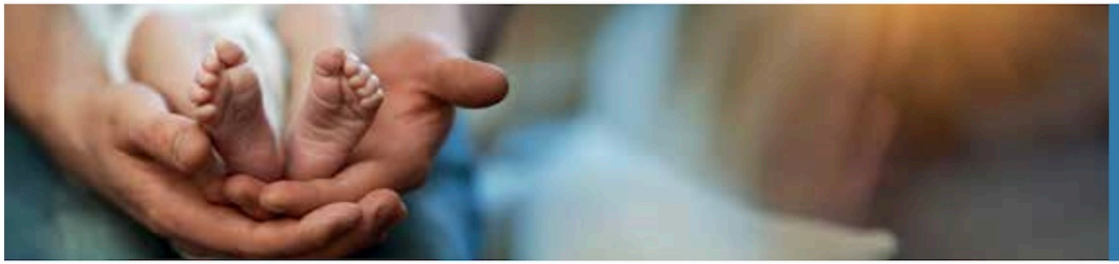
What baptism means



"Baptism is the door of faith, the moment we are born into a new life with Christ."

The word

In the course of his preaching, John the Baptist proclaimed, "Someone is following me, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to kneel down and untie the strap of his sandals. I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit."

It was at that time that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised in the Jordan by John. No sooner had he come up out of the water than he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit, like a dove, descending on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you with you." Mk 1:7-11

The context

It's probably safe to say that almost all of us making this novena do not remember the day of our baptism. Because we were infants at the time, we have absolutely no recollection of the event. Even though we were at the centre of the drama that day, the entire celebration went over our heads.

We didn't choose to be baptised. We weren't consulted about it. Our parents made that decision for us.

And that's a major disadvantage of infant baptism. Precisely because it's something that happened so long ago, our baptism can be something we don't think about very much or very often.

Until recently, almost every newborn child in Catholic Ireland was baptised. Parents just took it for granted. Within days or weeks of the birth, the family and godparents of the newborn gathered in their local church to formally initiate the child into the Christian community. The child's name was added to the long list of names in the parish baptismal register as the newest member of the church.

Today, some parents choose not to have their child baptised. It's a very deliberate decision. For one reason or another, they want no formal association with the church. Instead, many organise a 'naming' ceremony for their child; an opportunity to introduce their newborn to family and friends and to formally announce the choice of name. The name is not inscribed in the parish baptismal register, thus breaking the link with the generations that have gone before.

Baptism, properly understood, isn't a religious version of a naming ceremony or an excuse to party. Nor is it just about maintaining a tradition, a kind of rite of passage, without much thought for its deeper meaning. Baptism is a serious commitment, a public statement with profound implications. Through baptism, we become part of the Body of Christ, the church, called and sent to preach the Gospel. Baptism is nothing less than a way of life.

That is why those preparing for the assembly of the Irish church have placed such emphasis on the importance of baptism. "Every initiative, ministry, and encounter of welcome, formation, and service in the church," they say, "is rooted in the grace and calling received at baptism." Everything starts with our baptism.

The challenge

We all know the date on which we were born. We celebrate it every year. It is recorded in our passport, driver's license, PPS/social security card and other official documents. But do you know the date of your baptism? Do you know it without looking it up?

Pope Francis often said that the date of our baptism should be celebrated like a birthday. Baptism, he said, is a new birthday, because it is the day we become members of the church and receive the greatest gift of all: the gift of faith.

Baptism is the foundation of our life as Christians. Through baptism, we are welcomed into the Christian community as members of the church. We symbolically die to sin and rise to a new life in Christ. It marks the beginning of our journey of faith and discipleship.

Baptism is the sacrament of belonging because it makes us part of the church, the Body of Christ. We are no longer individuals but members of the community of faith, called to play a full and active part in the church's life and mission. Belonging brings caring, mercy, compassion and love. It is at the heart of who we are.

The significance of the sacrament is powerfully symbolised during the baptism ceremony when the priest or deacon anoints our head with oil, saying, "As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as a member of his body, sharing everlasting life." All the baptised share in the priesthood, prophetic mission, and kingship of Jesus.

We share in the priesthood of Jesus through our life of prayer, worship and participation in the life of the church. We share in the prophetic mission of Jesus by witnessing to the Gospel with courage and conviction in all we do and say. We share in the kingship of Jesus through our concern for the poor, the sick, and those in need.

Living as priest, prophet, and king affects every aspect of our lives as Christians. Through baptism, we are called and sent with courage and energy to build God's kingdom and make a difference in our world.

The connection

Baptism is the door of faith, the moment we are born into a new life with Christ. It is the foundation of the Christian life, of all that we are and do.