

Have you been saved? Have you ever been asked that question? Let me take an informal survey here. How many people were baptized as infants? How many were baptized as older children or adults? How many were baptized in a church other than the Catholic Church? How many have ever been told infant baptism doesn't count--you need grownup faith to be baptized?

Baptizing babies has long been a practice of the Catholic Church. We admit it's hard to justify from Scripture. There's no clear infant baptism there, but the Acts of the Apostles records instances where a household was baptized, and we assume that included children and infants. We believe that a child born into a Christian household already shares the Christian life--just as we are born an American, or into an ethnic culture, or a neighborhood, or a family with certain customs. Babies of Christian parents have Christianity in their genes, so we baptize them. We give them the gift of faith--just as we give them the gifts of food, shelter, and clothing.

Baptism is about membership; it incorporates people into the Body of Christ. When I was a kid all we learned about baptism was that it took away original sin. And that's true, but we looked so hard at what it took away that we ignored what it gave. It gave Christ; it gave us the reign of God. After we baptize babies we anoint them with chrism. Chrism is a perfumed oil we use on rare occasions in the church--like baptism, confirmation, and ordination to the priesthood. The word "Christ" means "anointed one," and it's related to the word "chrism". When the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus at his baptism, he was figuratively anointed. When we anoint with chrism we pray that the new Christian may live as a member of Christ's body, sharing everlasting life.

The baptism of Jesus frequently puzzles people. If baptism takes away original sin there should be no reason for Jesus to be baptized. But Jesus' baptism is quite unique. In baptism, Jesus unites himself to John's proclamation of God's plan. When the water is poured the heavens open and God reveals to us that this is his Son. Jesus was baptized for our sakes, not for his. He was baptized so we would know he's beginning a new stage of his life--his public ministry. And he was baptized so the voice would tell us who he is: the Son of God.

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord concludes the Christmas season, because this is the season of Epiphany, when Jesus is manifested to the world. Today the Father manifests Christ as his Son, and through this Epiphany, we come to know the mystery in which we too are baptized.

No matter how old we were or what religion we belonged to, we all were baptized in the same baptism. We share the same mystery and the same calling, to live like Christ and share his life.