



THE BIRTH OF A CHILD & INFANT BAPTISM:
SACRAMENTAL GUIDELINES
FOR ST NICHOLAS ORTHODOX CHURCH

Fr Mark Therrien

Although the Church's baptismal rites developed primarily around the model of adult baptism, from the beginning the Church has also known the practice of baptizing infant children who are born into Christian families, as implied already in Scripture (see, e.g., Acts 16), and as attested to in the writings of early theologians (e.g., Origen). Indeed, although the Church continued to know the practice of delaying baptism until early childhood even into later centuries, eventually the baptism of infants became the Church's norm. For this reason, in addition to the service of baptism itself, there also gradually developed a series of rites associated with the birth of the child, the post-parturition recovery of the mother, and the return of the mother and the first entrance of the child to the church assembly.

For the sake of clarity in setting forth what the Church's practices are, and how these should be observed at the proper moments for the sake of salvation and well-being of the child, the mother, and their family, the following guidelines are offered. These are based principally on the regulations found in the official Service Books of the Church, and on the Clergy Guidelines that govern the celebration of the divine services in the Orthodox Church in America.

During Pregnancy

It is pious custom at St Nicholas Church that, after a suitable period of time has passed upon learning of a pregnancy, a family communicates this information to the parish rector so that prayers might be asked for the well-being of the mother and her unborn child. During this time, the names of the expectant parents are put onto the parish prayer list that is included in each week's bulletin.

In the Days Leading Up to When the Child is Due

In the days immediately leading up to the childbirth, the couple should inform the rector so that he can be prepared to pray the initial rites after childbirth as soon as possible.

After Childbirth: The Service on the First Day

Soon after childbirth, the Church offers a series of prayers to be said over the mother and the newly born child for their healing, protection, and salvation. Ideally, these prayers would be said on the same day on which the child is born. If that is not feasible, they may be said on another day.

The family does not have prepare anything special for these prayers to be said.

After Childbirth: The Service on the Eighth Day

Several days after childbirth, the Church offers another prayer for the child, the primary purpose of which is to bestow a name upon him or her. The custom of naming a child on the eighth day goes back to the Old Testament: According to the Law, a male child would be circumcised on the eighth day after he was born (see Leviticus 12:3; cf. Philippians 3:5), and he would also receive his name on this same day—a prescription that the Lord Jesus himself eventually fulfilled for us (see Luke 2:21). The reason for this practice is that, in the Scriptural perspective, bearing a name

is intimately connected with one's true identity in God. For example, at Revelation 2:17, we are told that, in the age to come, each of the saints will receive a new name that is hidden from all men except to the one who receives it.

In light of the importance of the name in Scripture, then, it is the Church's practice that a newly born child is given his or her Christian name in a liturgical rite. The Church's practice thus underscores fact that a child's name is given to him or her as a blessing from God, and that this name points to something essential about who this child is called to become in his or her life. Related to this, it is important to note that the prayer for naming the child is an ancient prayer used to enroll catechumens. In this way, the rite of naming the child points ahead to the child's baptism (and thus, full reception into the Church). For this reason, the name that is bestowed upon the child during this service must be the Christian name with which the child will eventually be baptized. As noted by our bishops, this name should be "the name of a recognized Orthodox saint."

As its title suggests, the prayer for naming the child would ideally be said on the eighth day after birth. At our parish, however, the usual practice is that this prayer is said right before the churching of the mother and child on the fortieth day (see below). In this way, the entire parish community can witness the new child take his or her first step towards entering the Church. Still, if the family requests it, the prayer may be said earlier.

If the service of the eighth day takes place at home, then the family should set out an icon of the Theotokos in advance of the priest's visit. But if the service takes place in church, the family does not have prepare anything special for these prayers to be said.

Forty Days after Childbirth:
The Service of the Churching of the Mother and the Child

After childbirth, a mother is blessed to remain at home and to refrain from participating in the Church's Eucharistic assembly for a period of forty days.

This prescription follows a tradition that goes back already to the Old Testament: In the Old Law, the reason for this prescription had to do with considerations of ritual purity and impurity (see, e.g., Leviticus 12:1–8). Within the Christian Tradition, some argue that the Church's practice reflects the concern with purity as found in the Old Law. According to others, the forty days are kept out of pious imitation of the Mother of God, since she too refrained from entering the temple after giving birth to our Lord, even though she was spotless (she returned to the temple only after the days of her purification were complete—an event that we celebrate as part of the feast of the Lord's Encounter with Symeon on February 2). Of course, there is a clearly a practical dimension to this practice as well: Giving birth is usually physically intense, and so the period of forty days gives the mother time to rest, recuperate, and to bond with her newly born child.

Although all of these traditions have probably influenced the Church's practice, the main reason that the Church has preserved this practice has to do with her understanding of the essential interconnection of asceticism and liturgy: Immediately after childbirth, the mother is not bound to keep the ascetic discipline of the Church, for she has already labored much in bringing her child into the world. And so, since the Church's Eucharistic practice is intimately bound up with her ascetic discipline (namely, the practice of rigorous fasting), the mother is blessed not to participate in the Eucharist during this time.

Once a sufficient period of time has passed, however, such that the mother can start to keep some form of ascetic discipline

again (even though it is oftentimes still relaxed to some degree), the Church blesses the mother to return to the Eucharistic assembly, bringing with her also her newly born child. To mark this occasion, the Service of the Churching is celebrated.

Concerning the churching of the mother, the current practice in the Orthodox Church is universal: The mother is churched immediately upon returning to the Eucharistic assembly for the first time. Concerning the churching of the child, however, current practice is mixed. In terms of its historical development, it should be noted that the churching of the child came into being as a *pre-baptismal* rite—a practice that has been maintained by many Churches consistently throughout the centuries. At some point in the Russian Orthodox liturgical tradition, however, the rite of churching the child gradually became separated from the rite of churching the mother (with the churching of the infant being done *after* his or her baptism). With the blessing of our diocesan archbishop, St Nicholas Church observes the practice of churching mothers and infants at the same time. Thus, in normal cases, the churching of the infant is not delayed until after baptism.

At St Nicholas Church, the service of churching the mother and child is normally done before the Sunday Divine Liturgy.

The family does not have prepare anything special for these prayers to be said.

The Service of Baptism

After the churching has been done, baptism should soon follow; it should not be delayed unnecessarily. In preparation, the parents should be ready to meet with the priest to go over to the service, and to receive the needed catechesis (as appropriate). The number of pre-baptismal meetings required might vary depending on any number of factors specific to the specific situation.

Guidelines for the Sacramental Sponsors

Prior to the baptism of the child (and, ideally, prior to his or her birth), at least one sponsor must be chosen for the child. Detailed prescriptions for who is allowed to act in this capacity are found in the Clergy Guidelines of the Orthodox Church in America. According to these:

- “The first sponsor should be of the same sex as the candidate. In the case of infants, a second sponsor may be selected of the opposite sex.”
- Since “[t]he sponsor (godparent) of a candidate for Holy Baptism is a guarantor to the Church that the person will be reared and/or educated in the Orthodox faith,” then “he/she must be a committed Orthodox Christian.” That means that he or she “is already leading a full sacramental life, confessing sins through the Mystery of Penance and receiving Holy Communion.”
- Christians who are not of Orthodox faith are excluded from serving as sponsors. But if requested by the parents, “a non-Orthodox person [may] witness the mystery. That person may be present and considered an honorary witness if there is no negative or scandalous deterrent. This person, however, is not the sponsor of the candidate or the godparent.”
- “The sponsor, as well as the parents, should be prepared to receive the Eucharist at the same time together with the newly baptized Christian.” To that end, the sponsors must make a confession before the baptismal service. They must also abstain from food and drink before the service, “for the holiness and majesty of the Mystery demands this.”

In light of the seriousness with which the Church’s Tradition treats the role of the baptismal sponsor, and for the sake of alleviating the potential for misunderstanding, parents should

take note of the following especially as they consider possible sponsors:

- The selection of sponsor(s) may not be finalized without the blessing of the parish rector.
- In the case of sponsors chosen from outside of the parish, letter(s) will be required from their parish priest(s) attesting to their good standing in the Church.
- In accord with the guidelines of our bishops, those who do not belong to the Church, those who are not in good standing in the Church, and those who, although formally belonging to the Church, do not frequent the sacraments or participate in the normal activities of Orthodox Christian life in other ways, will not be blessed to serve as sponsors (even if they have a close relationship to the family of the child otherwise).

Concerning when the Baptismal Service may be celebrated

In the case of regular parishioners who are well-known to the priest: Baptism will usually take place on Sunday morning immediately before the Divine Liturgy. Although baptism may be scheduled on another day, Sunday is preferred so that the entire parish can take part in the service—something that is important since the child will be raised in the parish, and since the parishioners therefore share in the responsibility for providing the child with the kind of environment wherein the newly-baptized child can grow in the faith.

In the case of parishioners who, for legitimate reason, do not frequent the services regularly, or in the case of former parishioners who have moved away from the immediate area but who still wish to baptize their child at St Nicholas, and in some other cases: At the discretion of the parish rector, baptism may take place on another occasion, such as Saturday morning. The main reason for this is that, if the child will not be raised within the community, there is a practical difficulty with asking the

community to witness the baptism since it cannot exercise the kind of responsibility for the child's upbringing that such witness entails. Nevertheless, unless the Divine Liturgy is celebrated on the same occasion as the baptism, the family must still plan to attend Divine Liturgy on Sunday morning in order that the newly illumined child might receive the holy Eucharist in order to complete his or her reception into the Church.

Note that, in the case of a child of whose family has a historical connection to St Nicholas parish but now attend another parish, a blessing from the family's current rector must be given for the baptism to take place at St Nicholas. Without this blessing, the baptism cannot take place.

In case of parishioners who do not frequent services regularly, or in the case of non-parishioners who have no long-standing relationship to St Nicholas parish: Baptism will take place on another occasion solely at the discretion of the rector. In these cases, the rector may also use his discretion in delaying the reception of the child until after a period of extended catechesis with the parents.

Items to procure before the baptismal service

The following items must be procured by the parents (or sponsor) prior to the baptismal service:

- A new large white towel (this will be used to receive the child from the font)
- A small white towel (this will be used by the priest)
- A baptismal gown (or a set of white clothes in the case of an older child)
- A baptismal neck-cross on a chain
- A candle (the St Nicholas parish bookstore keeps these on hand)

It is also traditional for the sponsor to give to the newly baptized child an icon of his or her patronal saint, although this is not strictly necessary.

Information to send to the priest before the baptism

At least one week before the baptism, the family must send the following information to the parish rector (via email):

- Full name of person to be baptized:
- Baptismal name (if different):
- Date and Place of birth:
- Name of Father:
- Name of Mother (with maiden name):
- Address:
- Phone number:
- Name of male sponsor:
- Name of female sponsor:

* * *

EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

Ideally, the process for bringing the newly born child into the Church proceeds along the lines outlined above. But, as it sometimes happens, circumstances that are impossible to control might prevent the normal order of rites from being observed. Parents should be aware of the following:

In cases of emergency births
(or in cases where loss of life is possible)

In the case of an emergency birth (e.g., a premature birth), or in the case where it is doubtful whether the newly born infant will live for long, the parents should contact the parish rector as soon as possible so that the baptism can be done immediately.

In a serious case in which a child is born but is not expected to live for any substantial length of time, and when a priest is not able to come to perform the baptism in a timely manner, an emergency baptism may be done by any Orthodox Christian. If this must be done, the person who will do the baptism must procure a vessel containing water. He or she then takes the water and pours it three times over the head of the child, using the following formula: “The servant of God (*name*) is baptized: in the name of the Father [*first pour*], and of the Son [*second pour*], and of the Holy Spirit [*third pour*]. Amen.” In the event that the newly baptized child lives, he or she will receive the remaining rites of baptism whenever this is feasible.

Emergency baptisms should be reported to the priest as soon as possible so that proper pastoral care may be given to the family.

In cases of miscarriage

In the case of a miscarriage, the church has several prayers to be offered over the mother. Recognizing the need for pastoral discretion in light of the difficulties involved in losing a child, these prayers may be offered for the family either at home or at church at a time apart from a public service.

If there is a body, parents should offer their child a burial. The form of the service will take place in accord with the blessing of the diocesan bishop.

The Church has numerous canons and akathists to pray for the sake of consolation and comfort in times of affliction. The priest will help to make these available to the family as they grieve.

