

## A CASE TO THINK ABOUT BEFORE BAPTISM

*Author Unknown*

Kevin and Joan's eyes flamed with anger when they heard my words: "No, I don't think I will baptize your baby this month." Experience had prepared me for their anger and resentment, but I knew this storm had to be confronted.

"But you've got to ... that's unfair!" objected Joan.

"What's unfair?" I questioned.

"You're a priest . . . you can't refuse to baptize a baby. That's unethical.

You're cheating our little girl."

A sharp answer would have destroyed everything. Now would I be able to salvage the wreckage of hurt feelings?

"Give me a chance and I'll try to explain," I cautioned.

"But I never heard of this before – a baby being refused Baptism!" said Kevin painfully.

"Let me try to explain," I calmly began. "I do not want to baptize your baby now because I do not think that you as parents really want to have your baby baptized."

This couple, whom I had never met before, had telephoned in the early afternoon to make arrangements about having their baby, a bright-eyed, seven-pound girl, baptized. Usually I cannot tend to the matter immediately, but since today was a very light day in the parish, I made the appointment for the early afternoon. Kevin and Joan were both in their early twenties. He worked for one of the engineering firms as a draftsman. Joan worked as a legal secretary for one of the law firm's downtown. They were very friendly and polite. Offering me a cup of tea, they spent a few moments discussing their planned holidays in the mountains. Joan then raised the reason for the appointment. Their situation presented three difficulties. First, Joan and Kevin no longer prayed or really considered it an important part of their married life. They both had stopped joining in Sunday Mass two years prior to their marriage. Nor did they feel the Church had all that much to offer their lives as adults. But this seemed the proper thing to do as new parents: to have your children baptized. This couple could not at first understand my reason for delay. They had been brought up with a clear understanding that all Catholic parents have a duty to present their children for Baptism. Without Baptism a child would certainly be lost for all eternity! Now here was a Catholic priest doing exactly the opposite of what they had been taught!

**IS YOUR FAITH REAL?** A very small child cannot speak for itself. But the parents, on the strength and convictions of their own faith, ask the Church to baptize their child. At this moment they promise to raise their child as a Catholic. Kevin and Joan did not seem to be aware of the commitment that Baptism demands. Baptismal promises are only the beginning of life as a Catholic. These promises are made to God, to the Catholic community, and to the child itself. It is a long-range commitment of eighteen to twenty years wherein the parents help the child become a faithful follower of Christ. If the parents do not nourish their child spiritually, the child can come back and rightfully ask why these promises made to him or her were broken. The promises are also made to the community of the Church. As individual parents, we promise our fellow believers to raise our family according to the values and outlook of the Church. At the same time, by accepting these promises, all our fellow Catholics accept the obligation to help these parents in the difficult task of raising a Catholic family today. The members of the Church should also demand that the Baptismal promises be faithfully kept. Almost always in the past, what the parents promised at their child's Baptism was actually carried out as they raised the

family. They did bring their children up to be faithful Catholics. Of course, there were a few parents who did not remain faithful to their promises, but not enough to lead anyone to seriously question the matter. Infant Baptism was a good practice, for the children, the parents, and the local parish community. Kevin and Joan's situation, and hundreds like it, force us to re-think the practice of the Church. Many parish priests have concluded that indiscriminate Baptism does more harm than good. The Sacrament of Baptism is actually being abused!

**A new rule? Kevin framed his question with a deep frown. "But why have things changed so quickly? Why this about face?"**

"We have to come to realize in the past decade (so it is not sudden) that what parents say at the time of Baptism is not what they actually intend," I replied. "In the past we could rely – to a great extent – on what the parents asked for in Baptism as being what they planned to do in the future. Today, we have so many young parents who have literally dropped out of the Church. Any type of faith that they might have can only be classified as minimal. How can they promise to bring up their children as Catholics when they do not believe in it themselves?" Joan objected quickly. "What do you mean – 'don't believe?' We believe in God. We haven't rejected that." "The majority of people claim to believe in God today, but not too many are really serious about it. Somehow, faith in God does not take root in their lives," I returned.

Even though Kevin and Joan have been brought up Catholic, they have not made a definite decision to follow the faith of their parents. When I hold their description of their own religious faith against the Gospels, I know it would be wrong to meet their request by baptizing their baby. We must have assurance that the life of God that has been planted in Baptism promises not be allowed to die in the germination stage. It's like planting a garden, but never bothering to water it. When all these implications are understood, Baptism cannot be received lightly.

**CONFRONTING THE IMPLICATIONS:** As parents, how can you convey to your child a sense of God when prayer does not find a place in your daily life? How can you want to have your child become a member of the Catholic Church when as parents you have dropped out of the Church? How can you strengthen the faith commitment of your children when you never join a praying community at Sunday Mass? How can you bring your children to be sensitive to the needs of others (as Jesus was) when you avoid hearing God's Word proclaimed today?

"So you see, Joan and Kevin, the issue is not that the Church no longer believes and practices infant Baptism. We still firmly believe in this tradition. But we now see that if we continue to baptize whenever a request is made without some assurance that the parents will try to nourish their child's spiritual life, then we are being unfaithful to the commands of Baptism, which is the child's initiation into the Christian way of life.

"Parents can only give what they possess themselves. They cannot lead their children to a true following of the Christian faith if they ignore it themselves or do not consider it useful for their own lives. That is why I said at the beginning that I do not think you really want your child to be baptized!"

The discussion had come to a subdued end. The faces of Joan and Kevin were covered with questions, which they would now have to seriously look at together.