

# Baptismal Preparation Ministry and Beyond: The Richest Ministerial Soil for Evangelizing Young Families

Tom Quinlan



There is no greater opportunity to reach young Catholics than at the time of baptism of their children. Both research and pastoral common sense affirm this. And yet, baptismal ministry is somehow taken for granted, more or less an afterthought in many parishes.

There was a time, perhaps, when the church could simply assume that parents would raise their children in the faith. In that environment, baptism was simply a sacrament to be conferred. That time has passed. In fact, it has well passed. And now it is time that we as Catholic leaders take seriously the great, incomparable *opportunity* that baptism affords parishes to engage in serious, intentional evangelizing ministry.

It is a simple analogy but one that I use in exhorting parish leaders to rethink the place of baptismal ministry in the matrix of parish ministries; *the cement is wet at baptism.*

While we try (or should try) to move heaven and earth to reshape family religious practice at the time of later sacraments, we often, as a church, miss the opportunity to create meaningful experiences in baptismal preparation and follow-up family ministry, experiences that are highly relational and designed to foster conversion and commitment in young parents.

## RECOGNIZE THE OPPORTUNITY

In this era of new evangelization, the most logical place to proclaim Christ and propose Catholic life is with the vast numbers of Catholics, many of whom are marginal or inactive, who still present their child for baptism. In each of these families, a parish is given a chance to evangelize or re-evangelize. The future religious identity of a young family is often at stake. Parishes must come to recognize this opportunity for what it is, and radically re-imagine how it can take full advantage of the opportunity that the sacramental moment provides.

Some parishes are already trying to be intentionally evangelizing in their baptismal preparation ministry. And, granted, in today's culture, even the most dynamic and attractive ministry

won't bring every young Catholic family back to active faith practice. But if there is any parish in our nation resistant to the challenge of raising the bar for this ministry...if there is any parish satisfied with the outcomes of their baptismal preparation ministry...I would want to ask the Dr. Phil line: "*How's that working for you?*"

Last fall, almost 150 parish leaders came together for a formation day that explored this vitally important theme. We spent the morning looking at baptismal preparation and how it can become a truly evangelizing ministry. The afternoon was dedicated to considering how parishes can strengthen the connection established in baptism throughout the first years of a child's life...*before* the school years. It was a day filled with energy, ideas, and hope. The commitment I asked of each one present was to bring the conversation back to the parish and take action, both immediate and long-term, to make this ministry what it ultimately needs to be: *evangelizing.*

I invite all dioceses and parishes to explore how to strengthen baptismal preparation, the baptism itself, and post-baptism ministry to young families. There is room for improvement and new ways to conduct this ministry. It is not rocket science, but simply a recognition of both the opportunity and the needs of young adults today. Sadly, the cement of religious practice (or lack thereof) has hardened for many families by first Eucharist or confirmation. Let's rejoice that it is still wet and malleable for many of our Catholic young adults at the time of their child's baptism. And let's go to work building ministry that will awaken faith and draw them into a life-giving relationship with Christ and the parish.

The following are six recommendations that I offer from my years overseeing the development of baptismal ministry as a parish director of religious education:

## SIX KEYS TO EFFECTIVE BAPTISMAL MINISTRY

1. **Understand baptismal ministry (before, during, and after baptism) as an opportunity to evangelize and foster conversion.** Design the ministry upon this primary principle.



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2. **Focus on team building and team formation.** There are many gifts present in the people of your parish and numerous roles on baptismal ministry teams. (For example, having a single mother on the team will help the ministry be sensitive to the needs of new single moms. Gifts of hospitality and being able to relate to young adults are invaluable on any such team.)
3. **Build different tracks.** There should be one track for first-time parents and at least one different track for others. For example, one track might focus more on core elements of our faith and the baptismal rite, one more on things like Catholic parenting and what the parish has to offer. However, any track should be heavily Eucharistic in its focus. (By the way, a parish should consider providing more than one session to parents presenting a child for baptism. Two or three is not unreasonable given the importance of baptism. Just make sure they are good!)
4. **Don't call them classes or meetings.** Create more of a *day of formation/retreat* experience and frame it as such. Mix in strong relational interactions with some time for reflective quiet. And don't skimp on the hospitality and humor.
5. **Give families an absolutely tremendous experience of baptism itself.** Let the sacrament and the community evangelize!
6. **Develop follow-up ministry for families between baptism and the school years.** There are countless ways to accomplish this, such as having regular and outreaching communication, assigning a mentoring family, and growing a ministry for mothers. These are the key years that will help to determine what kind of relationship the family will have with your parish and with the church for years to come! |

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#### WHAT IS YOUR BEST PRACTICE?

The NCCL Evangelization Committee is gathering best practice information from parishes across the nation. If you believe your parish or one in your diocese has a strong ministry relating to baptism and early years of formation, please send your name, contact information, role, and parish name to [ccornue@syrdio.org](mailto:ccornue@syrdio.org). Please give a very brief description of the ministry. |