

Baptism in the Greek Orthodox Church

Welcome to Saint Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church. As you prepare to witness the service, we hope that you use this guide to understand and participate.

Background on Orthodox Christian Baptism

After the Feast of Pentecost, when the Disciples went forth preaching the message of Christ, the majority of those being baptized were adults. The candidates for Baptism, called catechumens, were progressively introduced into the life of the Church by special rites that included exorcisms, prayers, explanations of the Scriptures, etc. This period of preparation, which according to local customs lasted anywhere from one to three years, involved the entire community, which was preparing itself for the reception of new members. It was during this time that each catechumen chose a sponsor who would assist the Apostles and/or Priests in teaching them about Christianity. The sponsor would then guarantee the sincere intentions and Orthodox belief of the person to be baptized.

With the appearance and prevalence of infant baptism between the 2nd and 5th centuries the role of the godparent has changed. Instead of acknowledging the sincere intentions of the person who is seeking to be baptized, the sponsor is given the honor by the Church to assist the parents in the spiritual nurturing and upbringing of the child. It is the godparent then who responds on behalf of the child to the questions posed by the Church, thus renouncing satan and accepting Christ as King and as God. The godparent also recites the Creed paying further witness to the faith and teachings of the Church. It is for this reason that the sponsor must be an active member of the Orthodox Church and becomes from that moment the spiritual brother or sister of the parents.

Choosing Sides in Spiritual Warfare

The service begins in the Narthex with a series of prayers for the spiritual well-being of the catechumen (typically a child) followed by the renunciations of satan by the godparents and their affirmation of faith in Our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ and ends with the giving of the catechumen's new Christian name.

In these opening prayers, the catechumen's (child's) name is written in God's Book of Life and he/she becomes a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven. The catechumen is also designated a "Soldier of Christ" as he/she prepares to battle the power of satan. The Godparents make their renunciations (e.g. "I do renounce Satan) and affirmations of their own faith ("I do unite myself to Christ") and then recite the Creed.

The Nicene Creed

I believe in One God, Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in One Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all Ages. Light of Light, True God of True God, begotten not made, one in essence with the Father through Whom all things were made.

Who for us men and for our salvation came down from Heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and of the Virgin Mary and became Man.

Crucified for our salvation under Pontius Pilate, He suffered and was buried. And arose on the third day according to the Scriptures. And ascended unto Heaven and is sitting at the right hand of the Father; and He will return in glory to judge the living and the dead; whose Kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father, Who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, Who spoke through the Prophets.

I believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. I acknowledge One Baptism for the remission of sins. I await the Resurrection of the dead and the Life of the world to come.

Amen.

The Blessing of the Waters

The Baptism begins with the blessing of the water and a Doxology ("Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and forever and unto the ages of ages"), which announces the Kingdom of God as the theme, the content, and the ultimate goal of Baptism. The Sacrament of Baptism starts the spiritual journey of the soon to be enlightened Christian, and the initial doxology reveals and announces their final destination: the Kingdom of God.

The Blessing of the Olive Oil & Anointing

Following the initial petitions and prayers blessing the water, the pre-baptismal anointing with olive oil takes place. Oil has always been a religious symbol. It is a natural source of light and joy, and in ancient times was primarily used as medicine. In the case of baptism, it is the sickness of sin from which we are being healed. Oil is also known as the symbol of reconciliation and peace. We thank God over the oil and therefore make it again what God has made it: a gift of healing, a gift of peace, a gift of spiritual power and life. As the warriors of ancient times were anointed with oil before battle, so the new Christian who will battle with the enemies of salvation, namely, "against the principalities, against the powers, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12), is anointed as a faithful soldier of Jesus Christ. The priest makes the sign of the cross in the water with the oil three times and anoints the person who is to be baptized on their brow, their breast, their ears, their hands, their feet and their back.

Immersion

The candidate is now immersed three times into the water, saying the words: "The Servant of God [catechumen's name] is baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen." the entire Church "seals" each immersion with an "Amen."

The Sacrament of Chrismation

Immediately following the triple immersion Baptism, the newly baptized receives the Sacrament of Chrismation, the gift of the seal of the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit who descended visibly on the Apostles in tongues of fire now descends invisibly onto the newly baptized to strengthen them as they begin their new Christian life.

This sacrament is the fulfillment of Baptism and signifies the participation of everyone

who is baptized into the Spirit of Pentecost, consecrating the person as the Temple of the Holy Spirit. (The material of the Holy Chrism is made of 49 aromatic substances that symbolize the infinite Gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is prepared every ten years on Holy Thursday in a special service at the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in the presence of representatives of all the Orthodox Patriarchies.)

Tonsuring

The priest now cuts a small lock of hair from the infant's head in the form of a cross. This is done on behalf of the child who offers a gift to God to thank Him for the great blessings that have been received. A white garment, symbolizing purity and righteousness is placed upon the newly baptized along with the Baptismal Cross and the priest blesses them before they are worn.

Scripture Readings

Romans 6:3-11 is read to remind us that at baptism we die to sin and are united to Christ in a new life. Matthew 28:16-20 is read to remind us of Christ's "Great Commission" to baptize all nations "...in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."

Circling

The celebrant leads the newly baptized with their sponsor(s) in a circular procession around the baptismal font, while the congregation chants the verse from Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (3. 27): "All those who have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ forever, Alleluia!"

The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist

Finally, the newly baptized partakes of the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. By partaking of Holy Communion, the child becomes part of the Church.

Conclusion

The priest declares to the new Christian, "You have been baptized, illuminated, anointed, and sanctified in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." All have participated in the baptismal liturgy and witnessed the Sacraments of Baptism, Chrismation and Holy Eucharist in celebration of the 'new life' offered in Christ to the newly baptized. This sacrament is also a reminder that each of us is continually renewed through the partaking of Holy Communion and we, along with the newly baptized, are continually offered 'new life' in Christ!