



# WORSHIP OFFICE

Archdiocese of Newark

## Baptismal Fonts

The scriptures are filled with imagery of water and baptism. Think of the Spirit dwelling over the waters of creation in Genesis. *Gn. 1:2* Think of the waters of the flood over which Noah was saved. *Gn. 7:11* Recall the waters of the Jordan at Jesus' own baptism *Mark 1:9* or the water flowing from the side of Christ when he was pierced on the cross. *Jn. 19:34* Think of the water flowing from the temple in Ezekiel's vision bringing healing to the world. *Ez. 47:1ff* These experiences of water as part of salvation history were not minimal by any means. Consequently, there is a great need for the baptismal fonts in our churches to emulate the deep waters through which the baptized die and rise to new life in the Paschal Mystery of Christ.

The first Christian churches were homes converted into places of worship. The dining rooms were made into places to celebrate the Eucharist and the bath was converted into a place for baptism. These were usually homes of wealthy people and the tubs were of considerable size, making them useful for adult immersion. The earliest known house church, dating to the second century, was excavated in the city of Dura Europas, Iraq (*photo right*).



As buildings were constructed for the growing Church, baptisteries were also created housing large fonts meant for baptizing both children and adults by immersion. The primary reason that the baptistery was separate from the church was that baptism was done in the nude. (*Photo left: 6<sup>th</sup> Century font, Ravenna, Italy*)

An early written record describing how to baptize comes from a second century document called the *Didache* which states, "baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living water." *Living water* means that the water is flowing or moving. There is evidence that even early fonts had flowing water.

During the Middle Ages, the understanding and practice of sacramental celebrations was diminished for a variety of reasons. Most people being baptized were infants, and therefore small, while a growing theology of original sin eclipsed the initiation aspects of the sacrament. Consequently, fonts shrunk in size and very little water was used in baptizing.

In the modern period, the fuller understanding of baptism was restored. Original sin is washed away and the recipient is born again of water and the Spirit into the Church, the Body of Christ. Additionally, the entire faith community now participates in the initiation process which is especially evident in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. The RCIA now stands as the normative model for all forms of Christian initiation. This fuller, restored understanding of initiation requires a fuller celebration of baptism. There is to be no sense of minimalism when celebrating the sacraments; there should be ample amounts of water present and used when baptizing.



In building and renovating churches today, nothing less than an ample font with flowing water should be considered to properly celebrate the rites of the Church. The font also reminds those who are already baptized of the importance of their baptism upon entering the church. Anything less would shortchange the celebration and theology of baptism as we know it today.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' document on church environment, *Built of Living Stones*, states, "One font that will accommodate the baptism of both infants and adults symbolizes the one faith and the one baptism that Christians share...The font should be large enough to supply ample water for the baptism of both adults and infants..." *BLS, 69:1-2*

The rites celebrated and symbols used in a church building speak to the assembly about the importance of what we believe. A large font with flowing water, experienced week after week, speaks more powerfully than words to God's people that they have been reborn in Christ. "We have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." *Romans 6:4*



It is clear from the scriptures, history, theology and current documents of the Church that what is needed for the proper celebration of sacraments and sacramentals in the life of the Church is a font of ample size, containing living water. An ample font will foster good celebrations which in turn will foster faith in liturgical participants.

### Location



Locating the font near the front doors of the church reminds the faithful that it is through their baptism that they enter the church, approaching the altar for the Eucharist. It reminds them of the common bond they share with the other members of

the assembly. It is the birthplace of the members of the church, making us one as brothers and sisters in Christ. Having the font near the doors is ritually helpful for the sprinkling of caskets at funerals. It is also more suitable for people signing themselves with holy water when they enter or leave the church.

Consideration should be given to the space surrounding the baptismal font, defining the area and allowing room for the proper celebration of the rites. Additional lighting in the area should also be considered. The size and scale of the font can vary, but there should be at least enough room for an adult to kneel in the pool for water to be poured over his or her head. There should be an upper section for infant baptism, large enough for immersion. Concerns over the sound of running water can be easily addressed.



There are many things to consider when installing or renovating a baptistery. The Office of Divine Worship is ready to assist parishes in this process. For more information call 973.497.4345. [www.rcan.org/worship](http://www.rcan.org/worship)

From *Built of Living Stones* (USCCB, November, 2000):

### **The Baptistry**

The rites of baptism, the first of the sacraments of initiation, require a prominent place for celebration.<sup>89</sup> Initiation into the Church is entrance into a eucharistic community united in Jesus Christ. Because the rites of initiation of the Church begin with baptism and are completed by the reception of the Eucharist, the baptismal font and its location reflect the Christian's journey through the waters of baptism to the altar. This integral relationship between the baptismal font and the altar can be demonstrated in a variety of ways, such as placing the font and altar on the same architectural axis, using natural or artificial lighting, using the same floor patterns, and using common or similar materials and elements of design. The location of the baptismal font, its design, and the materials used for its construction are important considerations in the planning and design of the building. It is customary to locate the baptismal font either in a special area within the main body of the church or in a separate baptistry. Through the waters of baptism the faithful enter the life of Christ.<sup>90</sup>

For this reason the font should be visible and accessible to all who enter the church building. While the baptistry is proportioned to the building itself and should be able to hold a good number of people, its actual size will be determined by the needs of the local community. Water is the key symbol of baptism and the focal point of the font. In this water believers die to sin and are reborn to new life in Christ. In designing the font and the iconography in the baptismal area, the parish will want to consider the traditional symbolism that has been the inspiration for the font's design throughout history. The font is a symbol of both tomb and womb; its power is the power of the triumphant cross; and baptism sets the Christian on the path to the life that will never end, the "eighth day" of eternity where Christ's reign of peace and justice is celebrated. The following criteria can be helpful when choosing the design for the font:

1. One font that will accommodate the baptism of both infants and adults symbolizes the one faith and one baptism that Christians share. The size and design of the font can facilitate the dignified celebration for all who are baptized at the one font.
2. The font should be large enough to supply ample water for the baptism of both adults and infants. Since baptism in Catholic churches may take place by immersion in the water, or by infusion (pouring), fonts that permit all forms of baptismal practice are encouraged.<sup>91</sup>
3. Baptism is a sacrament of the whole Church and, in particular, of the local parish community. Therefore the ability of the congregation to participate in baptisms is an important consideration.

4. The location of the baptistry will determine how, and how actively, the entire liturgical assembly can participate in the rite of baptism.
5. Because of the essential relationship of baptism to the celebration of other sacraments and rituals, the parish will want to choose an area for the baptistry or the font that visually symbolizes that relationship. Some churches choose to place the baptistry and font near the entrance to the church. Confirmation and the Eucharist complete the initiation begun at baptism; marriage and ordination are ways of living the life of faith begun in baptism; the funeral of a Christian is the final journey of a life in Christ that began in baptism; and the sacrament of penance calls the faithful to conversion and to a renewal of their baptismal commitment. Placing the baptismal font in an area near the entrance or gathering space where the members pass regularly and setting it on an axis with the altar can symbolize the relationship between the various sacraments as well as the importance of the Eucharist within the life and faith development of the members.
6. With the restoration of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults that culminates in baptism at the Easter Vigil, churches need private spaces where the newly baptized can go immediately after their baptism to be clothed in their white garments and to prepare for the completion of initiation in the Eucharist. In some instances, nearby sacristies can serve this purpose.

(rev. 9/4/2018)

89. Congregation for Divine Worship, Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults [RCIA] (1988), General Introduction, no. 25: "The baptistry or the area where the baptismal font is located should be reserved for the sacrament of baptism and should be worthy to serve as the place where Christians are reborn in water and the Holy Spirit. The baptistry may be situated in a chapel either inside or outside the church or in some other part of the church easily seen by the faithful; it should be large enough to accommodate a good number of people. After the Easter season, the Easter candle should be kept reverently in the baptistry, in such a way that it can be lighted for the celebration of baptism and so that from it the candles for the newly baptized can easily be lighted."

90. Ibid., no. 213: "Therefore in the celebration of baptism the washing with water should take on its full importance as the sign of that mystical sharing in Christ's death and resurrection through which those who believe in his name die to sin and rise to eternal life. Either immersion or the pouring of water should be chosen for the rite, whichever will serve in individual cases and in the various traditions and circumstances to ensure the clear understanding that this washing is not a mere purification rite but the sacrament of being joined to Christ."

91. Ibid.: "Either immersion or the pouring of water should be chosen for the rite, whichever will serve in individual cases and in the various traditions and circumstances to ensure the clear understanding that this washing is not a mere purification rite but the sacrament of being joined to Christ."