



Ask and You Shall Receive....
Sunday, June 9, 2024

Question: Why do we baptize babies? Why not wait until they reach an age of understanding?

Answer: The baptism of children has existed from the birth of Christianity, and was called into question in the modern world after the rise of the "Baptist" movement and related groups, who insisted that Christians should not be baptized until they were rationally and consciously aware of their faith. The Baptist position opposed the Roman Catholic claim that baptizing children was necessary in order to cleanse them of the stain of Original Sin. The Orthodox Church does not teach that we are born with the guilt of original sin, but that we are born with a fallen nature. The Church, thus, has always taught that children should be baptized in order to receive the new life in Christ. St. John Chrysostom, for instance, says that "...we baptize even infants, though they are not defiled by sins, so that there may be given to them holiness, righteousness, adoption...and that they may be members in the body of Christ."

Even in the New Testament, people were baptized as households, and not as individuals, and the households must have included children, as at Acts 16:15, where we hear that Lydia was baptized "with her household" (see also Acts 18:8; 1 Cor 1:16). In the next century, St. Justin Martyr (mid-100's AD) referred to people who were "disciples of Christ from childhood (1st Apology 15.6). A few years later, Hippolytus of Rome said in the 200's, "Baptize first the children, and if they can speak for themselves let them do so. Otherwise, let their parents or other relatives speak for them."

If this is an apostolic teaching, preserved by the Church from the start, what is its purpose? St. Gregory the Theologian says that being baptized from childhood will "allow sin no opportunity..." (Oration on Holy Baptism 40:7 [A.D. 388]). In other words, we do not want our children to be raised apart from the life of the Church and apart from the sanctifying work of the sacraments. Children receive physical birth from their parents, but are "born from above" into divine life in baptism (John 3). Why should this process start late in life? Why should we leave the matter to chance? Our ascent to God is one of constant growth and deeper understanding. Why should we delay union with God until adulthood? We don't do this with other types of formation and education. Why with Christian formation?

But this requires something of parents and godparents. St. Dionysius the Areopagite says that those responsible for a child's religious instruction are bound to teach a child to "bid farewell to all things contrary to the Gospel..." Parents and godparents become "a guide and religious surety, who implant in [the child] a disposition for Divine things, and keep the child inexperienced in things contrary." After we baptize our children, we must create holy habits and wrap them in divine life from the very start, so that they avoid things that oppose the Gospel, and so mature in their faith at the same time that they mature toward adulthood.



Ask and You Shall Receive....

Sunday, February 18, 2024

Question: When should we do our cross in Church, whether during the liturgy or at some other service or a memorial service?

Answer: The answer to this question is simple: you cross yourself whenever you want to cross yourself. Our Church has some fairly strict rules about some things, and especially about some of the things we do during worship. But when it comes to making the sign of the cross, there are no “rules” in the strict sense of that term. To cross ourselves is an expression of our faith in God. We can cross ourselves whenever feel the need to cover ourselves with a divine blessing. There are some times, however, when it is typical for people to cross themselves during divine services. These times are the following:

- Whenever the name of the Holy Trinity is mentioned (The Father, Son and Holy Spirit).
- Whenever we enter a Church, or do something like light a candle.
- Whenever we venerate an icon, the Gospel book or any other sacred item.
- When we receive Holy Communion.
- When receiving a blessing from a clergyman, though some traditions have us merely bow and place our hand on our heart to receive such a blessing.

These, of course, are not the only times to make the sign of the cross. It is neither wrong to make the cross too much, nor is it wrong to make it too little. It is an expression of personal piety. Outside of corporate worship, one could make the sign of the cross before beginning personal prayer, or during some time of thanksgiving or of need. But the bottom line is, we cannot make the sign of the cross too often!

Ask and You Shall Receive....

Sunday, November 5, 2023

Question: What is the rapture and why do Protestants discuss it so much?

Answer: First of all, this question assumes that all Protestants discuss the Rapture with, but, in

actual fact, not all Protestants do. To make the matter even more clear, the Orthodox Church,

Roman Catholics and most mainline Protestants, (which means Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians and United Methodists) do not discuss the "Rapture." The concern with a "Rapture" only became a concern for some Protestants in the the 19th century, as part of their

larger interest in what will happen when Christ returns at the end of time. It is an entirely modern theological phenomenon, and has nothing to do with traditional Christian belief or concerns. What, then, is the Rapture? In 1 Thessalonians 4:17, St. Paul says that all Christians

will be "caught up in the clouds" at the return of Christ. The Latin term for "caught up" is rapiemur, hence the English term "Rapture." This passage from 1 Thessalonians is the cause of

lengthy speculation about precisely when Christians will be "caught up," and this lengthy speculation involves a great deal of imaginative and irresponsible readings of the Scriptures. The idea is that Christians will be suddenly snatched up into heaven out of nowhere. This is the

premise for the Left Behind books which were written some years ago, and which were eventually turned into obsession with the Rapture. Orthodox theologians, and others connected to more traditional Christian belief, view the passage in 1 Thessalonians as entirely

unrelated to any of the speculation that people have about the Rapture. Rather, St. Paul is simply reassuring his readers that anyone who dies before the return of Christ will still be with

Christ in the end. He is consoling his followers. Finally, the reason we insist so strongly on adhering to the Holy Tradition of the Church is to avoid the fever dreams and speculations of people who see their own fantasies in the Scriptures, just like this concern with the Rapture. Christ tells us that we will know neither the day nor the hour of his return (Matthew 25:13), and

our focus should be on living lives worthy of his return - whenever that may be.

Ask and You Shall Receive....

Sunday, October 15, 2023

Question: What is the Church's view on organ donation?

Answer: The best answer to this question is provided by the late Fr. Stanley Harakas, who was for many years a professor of Theology and Ethics at Holy Cross School of Theology. He stresses

that such donations are encouraged as expressions of love, but must never be coerced or done

against the will of a donor. His full response is as follows: Although nothing in the Orthodox tradition requires the faithful to donate

their organs to others, nevertheless, this practice may be considered an act of love, and as such

is encouraged. The decision to donate a duplicate organ, such as a kidney, while the donor is living, requires much consideration and should be made in consultation with medical professionals and one's Spiritual Father. The donation of an organ from a deceased person is also an act of love that offers the recipient a longer, fuller life. Such donations are acceptable if the deceased donor had willed such action, or if surviving relatives permit it providing that it was in harmony with the desires of the deceased. Such actions can be approved as an expression of love and the self-determination of the donor. In all cases, respect for the body of the donor should be maintained. Organ transplants should never be commercialized nor coerced nor take place without proper consent, nor place in jeopardy the identity of the donor or recipient, through, for example, the use of animal organs. The death of the donor should never be hastened in order to harvest organs for transplantation to another person (from The Orthodox Church: 455 Questions and Answers)

Ask and You Shall Receive....

Sunday, September 17, 2023

Question: When did fasting on Wednesday and Friday become a practice of the Church?

Answer: I will answer this question directly, and then provide some further information for additional understanding. As for the most basic issue, we know that Christians fasted on Wednesday and Friday already in the first century AD. This rule appears in the earliest Christian

text that was written after the New Testament books. The text is called the "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles." Because the Greek word for "teaching" is "Didache," this text is referred to simply as the "Didache" (pronounced Dee Da Hee). The Didache was only discovered in the 20th century, but it was written before the year 100 AD. It tells us the following: But let not your fasts be with the hypocrites, for they fast on the second and fifth day of the week.

Rather,

fast on the fourth day (Wednesday) and the Day of Preparation (Friday)... (Didache, 8). The Didache does not yet tell us the reason for fasting on Wednesday and Friday. It simply assumes

that its readers know why they fast on these days, which leads us to assume that this was already a well-established thing to do. We hear the explanation for this practice in a text that was written about 150 years later, the "Didascalia Apostolorum" (the Teaching of the Apostles).

This text tells us that Christians fast on Wednesday and Friday because Christ was betrayed by

Judas on Wednesday, and he was crucified on Friday. Fasting was connected to these somber days because longstanding precedent associated fasting with solemn penance. For example, the Old Testament Law required that all Israel should fast on the Day of Atonement, which was

the day when all Israel repented for its sins (Leviticus 16:29). Ancient Jews also fasted for personal reasons, and we know from the New Testament that Jews fasted two days per week

as a matter of course (Luke 18:12). This practice is almost certainly what the Didache has in mind in the passage cited above when it refers to the "hypocrites" who fast on Tuesday and

Thursday. One might wonder why these people are called hypocrites. The word hypocrite is used in the Didache to refer to anyone who follows false religious practices that deny or distort

Christ. By way of summary, therefore, the Didache and the Didaskalia make it clear that (1) Christians should fast on Wednesday and Friday, and (2) that they should do so in solemn remembrance of Christ's betrayal and crucifixion. This practice, therefore, extends all the way

back to the 1st century AD.