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# The FURROW

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## Families at the Centre

*The experience  
of Baptism Team  
Members*

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# Families at the Centre

## *The experience of Baptism Team Members*

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When a child is welcomed into the Christian community through the sacrament of Baptism, it offers a unique moment of encounter between the church community and young families. Preparation for baptism of their child, the celebration of the sacrament itself and post-baptismal activities offer opportunities to draw young families closer into the heart of the community. This enriches both the lives of the families and the lives of the parish community - ‘the church is good for the family and the family is good for the church.’<sup>1</sup> It is important that the experience of young parents/caregivers of all levels of commitment, (from those who are faithfully committed to those who may be distanced from the traditional practices of church and the parish community itself) is a positive one, where they are valued and supported in the religious upbringing of their children. However, with the notable absence of young families from parish celebrations and activities, and with ample evidence of a disconnect between young people and the church, *how* can parish communities affirm and support families choosing baptism for their children, in a sustainable way?

In June, 2021, a small-scale research project on baptism focusing on the Archdiocese of Dublin was initiated by St Patrick’s Pontifical University, Maynooth and the Mater Dei Centre for Catholic Education, DCU. The project sought to explore how the agency of families who present their children for baptism in the Catholic Church in Ireland might be further encouraged. The project was born out of the recognition that many new parents may not consider themselves closely connected to the Church; for most, their first encounter with parish occurs through the sacrament of Baptism. If they experience a welcoming community which can

1 Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia: The Joy of Love. Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family*, 2016, #87.

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connect with them in a meaningful way and help them to feel more empowered in their role of nurturing the spirituality of their child, perhaps they may want to continue with that connection with church, beyond just the ‘event’ of the celebration of the sacrament of Baptism. Answering the call of *Amoris Laetitia* which exhorts the Church to cooperate with parents through suitable pastoral initiatives, the project’s ultimate goal is to use the principles and methods of *Godly Play* to support parents/caregivers to nurture their child’s spirituality leading up to, and beyond, the celebration of Baptism.<sup>2</sup>

The findings of the Baptism Project in relation to the experience of baptism team members in their ministry, will be presented in this, the *first* in a series of three articles entitled *Families at the Centre*. The *second* article will focus on family spirituality and the *third* article will set out the *Godly Play* principles which will inform a new initiative.

The Baptism Project set out, in the first instance, to hear the voices of *baptism team members* concerning their current practices, their experience of their role and their perceptions of the parents they encounter. This was achieved by means of an anonymous survey which was circulated digitally. Questions on the survey related to the type of preparation provided for parents prior to baptism; a focus on the ceremony itself; and any follow-up with parents. Respondents to the survey were invited to partake further in the project by agreeing to attend focus group interviews where the responses to the survey would be explored further and to check if there were resonances among interviewees with the wider group of survey respondents. Three such focus group interviews took place in June 2021 and consisted predominantly of baptism team members from the Archdiocese of Dublin. The use of open-ended ‘wondering questions’ during the interviews ensured that even at this early stage, *Godly Play* principles were informing the conduct of the Baptism Project.<sup>3</sup> The intention of this phase of the research was not to produce data which could be scientifically validated, but rather to get a flavour of baptism team members’ experiences and perceptions, which would assist the project team in planning for a suitable initiative to support and resource parents. A second survey,

2 Jerome Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995 and Jerome Berryman, *Stories of God at Home: A Godly Play Approach*. New York: Church Publishing, 2018. This approach will be explained in more detail in the third article in this series.

3 A ‘wondering question’ often begins with the words ‘I wonder ...’ and invites people to bring their experience and reflect on their own response to the topic or story being wondered about. As they were shown the findings of the surveys, participants were asked what they liked best about particular responses, what they felt was most important, what they would like to leave out, what surprised them, and whether what they were hearing fit with their own experience.

for parents of recently baptised children, was also circulated at this time, however with the cessation of baptisms due to Covid restrictions, the number of parents responding to this survey was curtailed. Nonetheless, the responses received were representative of parents with varying degrees of affiliation to their parish (from none to committed) and varying degrees of faith commitment. Their responses were used as a springboard for conversations during the focus group interviews with baptism team members.

*Accompanying* parents during the preparation stage for baptism in Catholic parishes in the Archdiocese of Dublin, traditionally involves the requirement of parents to attend some form of preparation for the sacrament (e.g. a preparatory meeting/s) which is usually facilitated by a baptism team. This practice was recounted by all baptism team member respondents and is evidence of the success of the Archdiocese in terms of direction and training courses at which such an approach is advocated (indeed these courses were frequently mentioned by respondents). There may be a Welcoming Mass prior to Baptism, although just a small minority of respondents reported this practice. In addition, there may be a follow-up with the families following the baptism ceremony and where this occurs, it generally involves a Mass to which families of children baptised during that year, are invited. However, once again this was a practice reported by a small minority of respondents.

The approach to supporting parents in the lead up to the celebration of baptism was similar amongst survey respondents. Most parishes had just one meeting during the week leading up to the baptism with such meetings lasting an hour. During that time parents are introduced to one another and to the baptism team; an overview of the sacrament of baptism including its symbols and ritual is provided; and finally any organisational matters pertaining to the ceremony (e.g. seating arrangements, readers etc.) are outlined. With Covid-related restrictions to gathering people together, face to face preparation meetings couldn't take place during the narrow window of opportunity for baptism ceremonies during the summer of 2021. Some parishes went ahead with baptisms without any preparation meeting, much to the chagrin of some of the baptism team member respondents. However, in other parishes, the meetings were moved online to platforms such as Zoom and this experience was greeted very favourably by respondents and interviewees who used them. In some instances they even indicated that they may continue to pursue some Zoom meetings 'when things return to normal,' thereby drawing on the advantages of connecting with young families in their own homes which appears to be more convenient for families and allows other members of the family (such as siblings) to say hello too.

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The perception of baptism team members concerning their role in the process of preparation for baptism, yielded a range of responses from those who took the survey. These included *perfunctory* roles (such as providing information to parents, checking paperwork, assisting the priest and other secretarial duties), *facilitative* roles (such as running the preparation meeting, answering questions and assisting families on the day of baptism) and *mentoring* roles (the perception that they were welcoming parents to the parish, representing the parish community and accompanying parents on a spiritual journey of reflection as they prepared for the sacrament on behalf of their children).

These survey responses were unpacked during the focus group interviews and there was broad agreement with the identified roles. The lack of adequate opportunity to engage further with parents in terms of accompaniment was lamented within current practices. Some interviewees reacted negatively to the perception of the role as assistant to the priest. Amongst respondents, it was common practice for the celebrant to have *limited* involvement with the work of the baptism team and many were only involved in the baptismal ceremony itself, and not the preparation phase:

*I think the baptism team really has the most important role. I know the celebrant is administering the sacrament, but the baptism team are the ones who are really engaging with the family -with the parents, and it's how you come across to them which is how they feel welcomed and how they feel understood.*

Deacons came in for special mention, with members affirming deacons' role in the celebration of baptism. Having 'one foot in family life and one foot in the presbytery' was viewed as an advantage.

When asked if they felt privileged to be part of the baptism team, the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt privileged to be in their role. However almost one third of respondents stated that they had mixed feelings in response to this question. This was borne out in the focus group interviews where some interviewees were very passionate about their involvement (*we put our heart and soul into it, we absolutely love it!*) and others appeared somewhat jaded having been doing the role for many years. The two responses below capture the latter sentiment:

*Truly I shouldn't be still at it. It's very hard to get new members. I'm only hanging in because nobody else is coming*

More than 60% of respondents had been members of their baptism

team for greater than five years and 38% of those had been on their team for more than ten years. The age profile of baptism team members was a cause for concern, with many respondents alluding to the fact that there was nobody under the age of 50 in their teams, and that those members in their fifties were considered young. The comments of a young parent (Noelle) quoted in the report of the Sacramental Implementation Group of the Archdiocese of Dublin highlights the kind of impact this might have on young families' future involvement post-baptism:

*I know our church and I don't really go down that often ... when I do go down, everyone is lovely. But I just never meet anyone that's my age or that has young kids like me ... there is a huge church community, but it feels like it's their own community, that I'm not in it. I have my faith, I love going down and everyone's lovely when I go down, but I'm not in their community ... you feel like I'm part of this community but I'm not really in it. I'd really like to be more included, even though I said I feel like I'm part of it, I'm not in it.<sup>4</sup>*

#### OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Respondents repeatedly recognised the great *opportunity* which baptism presents for connecting with parents. The fact that parents approach the parish for celebration of the sacrament was viewed as very positive. Unlike the other family sacraments, with their affiliation to school contexts and possible peer pressure where almost all children in the classes are celebrating First Communion, Reconciliation or Confirmation, the request to have children baptised is done on an individual family basis. Whilst some interviewees questioned the motivation behind parents' request to have their children baptised, the majority felt that most parents were coming authentically because they wanted to be there and they wanted their child to be initiated into the Christian community. Despite the divergence in opinion regarding the bona fides of parents, every person in the focus groups felt that this opportunity for connecting with parents was not sufficiently harnessed. The limitation of their engagement with young families was a source of frustration for them. In the words of one baptism team member, *'I want more!'*. Speaking passionately about their ministry, focus group participants expressed a widespread craving for more opportunities to introduce the parents into a deeper understanding of their faith and sadness concerning the fact that most young

4 Archdiocese of Dublin, *Sacraments Implementation Group: Final Report*. 2021, unpublished, p. 57.

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families do not come to Mass or engage with parish subsequent to the baptism (*They're very engaged at the meeting and also on the day of the baptism, and then they're gone!*). In one focus group, this sadness was identified as grief.

Baptism team members seem to be aware of the family circumstances and cultural context within which they operate, but seem stuck as to know what to do next. The dichotomy between their faith experiences and those of young parents is a factor. The following quotation captures this dissonance well:

*The greatest challenge for me is to try to understand what form faith may take in parents who are not only of a very different generation to me, and whose faith formation seems to bear little relation to my own. Like a majority of people involved in church activities in Ireland, I am in the older age group and had a childhood foundation in faith that was in the air we breathed. ... Often the language we automatically use is not familiar, and the challenge is to find ways to express the good news about baptism in more familiar language. Also, to be able to hear the reality behind the language used by the parents to recognise the faith that brought them to baptise their child.*

Nonetheless, as faith filled people, baptism team members trust that the Spirit is present in their work.

One of the questions, in the survey for parents of newly baptised children, asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with a set of statements concerning their willingness and perceived capacity to engage in the spiritual nurture of their children. The findings from this particular question (illustrated in the table below) were presented to baptism team members during the focus group interviews.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Mixed Feelings	Agree	Strongly Agree
It's important to me that I continue to help support my children's spiritual life	0%	6%	8%	43%	43%
I look forward to wondering about God with my child as they grow up	3%	8%	23%	40%	26%

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<i>Continued</i>	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Mixed Feelings	Agree	Strongly Agree
I look forward to sharing my own religious memories with my child	3%	3%	17%	51%	26%
I look forward to praying with my child	0%	14%	17%	40%	29%
I feel confident answering questions which my child may have about God	3%	20%	23%	23%	31%
I feel confident answering questions which my child might have about Jesus	3%	13%	26%	29%	29%
I feel confident answering questions which my child might have about death, suffering or other hard facts of life	0%	17%	34%	20%	29%

Most baptism team members expressed surprise at the levels of *positivity* captured in the parents’ responses above. When this was explored further in the focus groups, it became clear that some interviewees underestimated the capacity and agency of parents, and/or viewed parents as possessing a negative attitude towards religion. This appears to have emerged from an assumption that the non-involvement of parents in parishes subsequent to their child’s baptism was evidence of their opposition or non-interest. Others testified to the interest and good intentions of most parents and recognised the genuine spirituality of parents, albeit existing in a different guise to their own.

*There is a deep spirituality in people even though they’re not expressing it the way we’d like them to, in a sense of us church people ... We have a huge learning to do from a church point of view... they’ll see God differently maybe from my image of God, but let them find their image of God*



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However, the process of engaging meaningfully with parents in a dialogical manner appears to pose a challenge.

*If you've got these parents who've been away from God for so long, how do you reintroduce them? And what language do you use? Do you talk at them for a while, teach them to do this or that, or do you listen? And how do you get them to talk?*

## CONCLUSION

The surveys and focus group interviews with baptism team members provided testimony that the current model of engaging with parents around the time of baptism of their children is sufficient for preparation for the ceremony itself, but falls short of building sustainable relationships with parents beyond that moment. This deficiency is a source of frustration for members of baptism teams who are passionate about their ministry. The observation of the Dublin Diocese Task Force, that the model of Church as we have known it, is not the model that will best serve us in the future,<sup>5</sup> pertains to the celebration of family sacraments no less than any other dimension of Church. The Sacraments Implementation Group of the Archdiocese of Dublin has identified the way forward as recognising, affirming and supporting parents in their 'central role as the primary agents in their children's faith life.'<sup>6</sup> It calls for a renewed emphasis on the importance of the *family* as a locus for celebrating and passing on the Christian faith. This requires a shift in positionality *from* the parish as purveyor of information to families in need of conversion, *to* a recognition of love in the home as the most important foundation for faith.<sup>7</sup> This shift requires parishes to take seriously the role of the home and the agency of parents in the spiritual lives of their children.

If this shift in focus for parishes and baptism teams is to be implemented, some key questions need to be addressed. These include: What resources might be useful in this endeavour? What process could be effective? What supports will be needed to assist baptism teams? It is in the context of these questions that the Baptism Project sought to discern if *Godly Play* principles and/or practices can offer something to the conversation. Before addressing this in the third article of this series on Families at the Centre, the next article will explore the spirituality of family.

5 Archdiocese of Dublin, *Task Force Report*, 2021 p.1.

6 Archdiocese of Dublin, *Sacraments Implementation Group: Final Report*. 2021, unpublished, p. 3.

7 Irish Episcopal Conference, *Nurturing Our Children's Faith*, 2006.