

## 15. What to Expect When You're Expecting (in the Orthodox Church)

The coming into the world of a new human being is something glorious — a miracle of God! We celebrate and give thanks to the Creator for His ongoing work of creation. As Orthodox Christians we affirm the sanctity of human life. We regard it as our sacred duty to protect the most vulnerable human beings, including in particular those not yet born, those newly born, and our children as they are growing, in the hopes that they might all grow to be mature men and women, shining forth the radiant image of God in the world.

We also know that, especially for new parents, there is quite a “learning curve” to navigate. Both practically and spiritually, parents need support to carry out their ministry. Thankfully, the Church in her wisdom has provided a number of means of just such support. Expecting parents are encouraged to make use of all of these. In general, this means staying closely connected with the Church as a family.

First of all, please let the priest know as soon as you find out that you are expecting. Even if you are not yet ready to make it public, the priest can be praying for you and the child. Later, the prayer request can be extended to others. There is a special prayer for expecting mothers, available upon request, that both parents and others can pray. Keep in mind that expecting mothers are not expected to fast strictly. They are, however, encouraged to attend services frequently, and to surround their child with prayer!

If at all possible, the priest can visit and bless the mother approaching the time of delivery. Then, on the day of your child's birth, please contact the priest so that he can come and pray the prayers after childbirth (the “first day” prayers). On the eighth day after birth, there are the “naming” or “eighth day” prayers, which the priest normally does in your home. For the naming, the child's Christian name (Patron Saint's name) is used. Mothers traditionally observe a period of 40 days during which they remain at home, bonding with their newborn child. During this period they are expected not to attend services at church, but to attend to their precious infant. At the 40th day (or on the Sunday immediately following the 40th day) the mother and child come for the “churching” of the child and a special blessing for the mother. The mother is received back to the Eucharistic banquet at this point, and the child — considered a catechumen since the “naming prayer” — is presented to God in anticipation of the coming baptism.

Normally, it is best to plan the baptism some time soon after the 40th day, as the child should be strong enough now, but still just the right size! Waiting many months — especially a year or more — after birth is both unnecessary and often makes for a difficult baptism. When planning a child's baptism, parents should always remember that baptism is not a magical, stand-alone act, but an initiation of the child into the fullness of life in Christ, which must be continued with regular church attendance, reception of Communion, and Christian teaching. Important considerations for Orthodox parents include the following: who the child's godparents will be (please see the information concerning this in the Brief Guide to Baptism), what Saint the child will have as his or her patron, and how to maintain the family's church attendance, prayer rule, and other spiritual disciplines while adjusting for changes that come with the new baby.

For more information concerning baptism, please see the next section.