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Immersion baptism

Bishop Matthew H. Clark and Father James Schwartz baptize Austin Coppola at St. Louis Church, Pittsford. (Photo courtesy of Duncan Studio.)

Water deepens symbolism

Cheryl Coppola admits she was "a wreck" when she was anticipating her twin boys' baptism in 1996.

It wasn't so much that Bishop Matthew H. Clark would be doing it: It was that the baptism would be by immersion. She was afraid her 2-month-old babies would be dunked entirely under water.

"I was so worried about them being immersed, especially with their being premature," the parishioner of St. Louis, Pittsford, recalled. So when Father James Schwartz, St. Louis' pastor, asked her and her husband Michael to consider immersion to help inaugurate the parish's new font, she recalled, "I said absolutely no way was I going to allow them to go under. ... I drilled him with the questions."

However, at their Aug. 18 baptisms, Austin John and Ty Anthony were immersed — gently cradled and dipped by the bishop.

"We were really happy we did it the way we did," Coppola said. "We experienced it, and it was more meaningful to us, too."

Growing trend

Immersion baptisms for children and adults are picking up — especially since at least a dozen churches now have installed permanent immersion fonts in keeping with current diocesan guidelines.

Parishioners at these parishes are seeing that "immersion" does not necessarily mean submersion — no matter what the dictionary says.

"People have this idea we are going to drown the baby," said Barbara Swiecki, pastoral associate at Church of the Transfiguration, Pittsford. "That is not the way it's done here."

Normally the baby is placed sitting in the shallow water, if the font is two levels, with warm temperature-controlled water. After water is poured over the baby's head in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the baby is lifted and shown to the community as its newest member. Adults being baptized generally kneel in deeper water and have water poured over their heads.

During Easter Vigil this year, St. Mary's Church in Auburn will use its new baptismal pool for adults for the first time. Nine adults and children will be baptized in it.

"I'm still a little unsure about it," acknowledged Father Robert Schrader, pastor. He planned to meet with a Syracuse priest accustomed to baptizing adults by immersion — the St. Mary's baptismal pool is the only one among Auburn's Catholic churches. He wondered, for example, "Once you're all wet, how do you get from

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Story by
Kathleen Schwar