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Pope Francis baptizes a baby as he celebrates Mass marking the feast of the Baptism of the L

Pope Francis baptizes a baby as he celebrates Mass marking the feast of the Baptism of the Lord in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican Jan. 9, 2022. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Before baptizing 16 babies in the Sistine Chapel, Pope Francis reminded parents and godparents of their responsibility to care for and preserve the Christian identity the infants were about to receive.

"This is your task throughout your lives: to guard the Christian identity of your children," the pope said. "It is a daily commitment: help them grow with the light they receive today."

The pope baptized the seven boys and nine girls — the children of Vatican employees — in the Sistine Chapel during the celebration of Mass Jan. 9, the feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

The annual tradition of baptizing infants on the feast day, which began in 1981 by St. John Paul II, was canceled last year due to the pandemic.

Although the baptisms resumed this year, the number of infants was significantly reduced. In January 2020, the pope had baptized 32 infants in the Sistine Chapel.

Delivering a brief, off-the-cuff homily, Pope Francis recalled a hymn for the feast day that said the people of Israel went to the Jordan River to be baptized "with bare feet and bare souls."

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"These children today also come here with 'bare souls' to receive God's justification, Jesus' strength, the strength to move forward in life," he said. "Your children will receive their Christian identity today. And you, parents and godparents, must guard this identity."

With the sounds of fussy children filling the frescoed chapel, the pope repeated his usual advice to mothers of infants, encouraging them to make their children comfortable, and to not worry if they start to cry in the chapel.

"This ceremony is a bit long, the children then feel uncomfortable here in an environment they do not know. Please, they are the protagonists: make sure that they are not too hot, that they feel comfortable," Pope Francis said.

"If they are hungry, breast feed them here, in front of the Lord, no problem," he added. "And if they cry out, let them cry out, because they have a community spirit, let's say a 'band spirit,' a spirit of ensemble, and all it takes is for one to start — because everyone is musical — and immediately the orchestra comes! Let them cry, let them feel free."