

# *Rev. Susanna Stefanachi Macomb*

Located in New York City & has performed ceremonies all over the U.S & the world!  
• PHONE: 212-663-1044 • WEBSITE: [www.susannamacomb.com](http://www.susannamacomb.com) • EMAIL: [mail@susannamacomb.com](mailto:mail@susannamacomb.com)

*The Who, What, Where and When of Baby Blessing Ceremonies* edited and adapted from

**BLESS THIS CHILD** by *Rev. Susanna Stefanachi Macomb* (copyrighted 2008)

**WHO will perform your ceremony?** If you wish a spiritual baby blessing ceremony rooted in love and family, one that is inclusive and honors the entire family, you might consider an interfaith minister. Your ceremony may be non-denominational, God-centered or humanist. It may honor your faith and cultural traditions in the most universal way. Interfaith ministers will also co-officiate with other clergy. There are many couples who in addition to a traditional naming or baptism performed in their church, temple or mosque, have asked me to perform a more personalized ceremony in their home. These babies were twice blessed! My advice: Interview celebrants, and follow your heart. You want to be sure that you make the right choice for your family. You want to be sure that you trust your celebrant to serve your needs with the utmost care and love possible.

If you are an interfaith couple, you need a celebrant who is experienced in interfaith baby blessings, one who is knowledgeable of your various traditions and sensitive to possible issues. It has been my joy and privilege to perform hundreds of baby blessing ceremonies for interfaith families. An interfaith ceremony done properly is an enlightening, enriching experience for all!

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**WHO participates in the ceremony?** In the ceremonies I conduct, the child, the parents, grandparents, godparents or spiritual mentors (if appointed), and the child's siblings are all included. Whether they participate in rituals or readings is up to you. There are so many special ways I have personally developed for honoring the baby *and* the most important people in the baby's life. In some ceremonies, at the very end, we have asked ask all the children (cousins and friends) in the congregation to come forward and say prayers/make good wishes for the baby for his or her many years to follow. Sometimes they sprinkle rose petals or blow bubbles representing their good wishes. This makes for a delightful moment. Just imagine it, in your mind's eye. Sometimes there is a special friend who is honored. In one case, a young mother wanted to honor a friend who stood by her side through her difficult infertility period, the pregnancy, the actual birth and in the early days that followed the birth. We presented her with a gift along with a few personal words of thanks and our honorary guest was moved to tears. In another ceremony for an adopted child, we honored the birth mother and grandmother. Ultimately, it is you who must decide who will participate and who will be honored. The passages and rituals presented in my extensive baby blessing menu of ceremonial elements will help you make those decisions.

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**WHAT will our ceremony look like?** A baby blessing can range from the traditional to the alternative---and contain aspects of both. It can be religious, spiritual, humanist, cultural or a combination thereof. Based on your choices of rituals, prayers, blessings and readings from our manual, your ceremony can be traditional, creative or personal--or as most of my ceremonies are---a delightfully rich combination of these various elements. My method allows for a personal customized ceremony that touches the heart-----one that draws the entire family into a warm embrace.

**WHAT do we call our baby's ceremony?** Some couples, especially interfaith couples, ask me, "What do we call our ceremony?" Some of my couples simply refer to their ceremony as a *baby blessing*. Depending on which traditional elements you choose, the ceremony is either a *baby naming*, a *baptism*, a *christening*, a *dedication* or combinations thereof. Still others have named it a *baby welcoming* or a *birth celebration*. A baby naming contains the tradition of formally naming the child. Sometimes the child is given an additional spiritual name as done in many faith traditions and cultures around the world including Judaism where a Hebrew name is given. A baptism involves a ritual of gently pouring water over the baby's head as is done in the Christian tradition. In the Christian Eastern Orthodox tradition the child's body, stripped of clothing, is immersed in the water. The only times the children were bodily immersed in the ceremonies I have conducted were in the summer months in nearby streams, warm oceans or small

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wading pools. Then the children really enjoy it! Baptisms can be done in a *universal sense*.

In a universal baptism the baby is blessed as a child of God and welcomed as a child of humanity---the mystical union of souls on earth. It is in a sense an initiation into this world.

A traditional baptism, a christening, is done in name of *The Father, Son and Holy Spirit*.

A *baby dedication* is a formal dedication of the child to God. I remember one ceremony for two interdenominational Christians who wanted a spiritual but non-religious

ceremony to welcome and bless their child. They were planning to raise the child in the Unitarian Church. One of the grandmothers, a devout Catholic, was very upset. Can you imagine my joy when she thanked me for the most meaningful ceremony she had experienced in her life? She had just never witnessed such a personalized ceremony.

We went to great lengths to honor the grandparents, including her husband who passed away. It all touched home.

A baby blessing for an interfaith family usually contains elements honoring the traditions of both parents. At one ceremony where I co-officiated with a Moyle, the parents jokingly referred to their son's ceremony as a "briss-ening"! Interfaith ceremonies must be done with great respect and sensitivity. Respect is the foundation of an interfaith service. Love is bridge.

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**WHAT will we need for the ceremony?** This will depend on what rituals you choose. I usually ask for a ceremonial table which serves as an altar to hold candles, water, oil, Kiddush cup or wine goblet, rose petals, my book, readings etc. A table covered with a white cloth will do. Often families make these areas quite beautiful sprinkling them with rose petals, draping fabric or decorating them with candles and bouquets of flowers. After all, the ceremonial table or altar is not only is a focal point during the ceremony, it helps create a sacred space. At one service, one family decided to place the family tree (a picture lineage) upon the table. At another, the child's parents put their own framed baby photos taken some 30 years earlier. There are times when nature provides a special altar, a large jutting rock by the ocean's shore or a beautiful slate boulder in the middle of the woods. Chairs may be provided for the parents (and godparents if appointed) to sit facing the congregation. I have done ceremonies where all have remained standing and where all have remained formerly seated (as in a wedding ceremony). Sometimes only immediate family attends, and sometimes there are 100 or more guests. Do give thought to the length of the ceremony and to the comfort of the elderly. The oldest citizens among us often need to be seated. In any case, they *deserve* to be seated. My feeling is that everyone should be comfortable....especially your baby! I tell my parents, "Bring all that your baby loves...pacifiers, bottles, toys, teething ring, bouncy chair etc. We want the child to be happy!" If the ceremony is taking place in the midst of the summer, consider having

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water bottles, fans and parasols on hand-----or rent a tent to provide shade.

*Do consider music.* Consider processing into the ceremony holding your child with music playing in the background. (All you need is a boom box of sorts!) Sometimes I lead the procession followed by the parents holding the baby. Sometimes older siblings process before the baby of honor ringing hand bells announcing the arrival of their new brother or sister. Then enter the godparents or spiritual mentors (if appointed) and grandparents (though often the grandparents or godparents remain seated). Often I do not process, but wait for the family at the altar or designated ceremonial table.

Music lifts the spirit and sets the tone for the event. You may appoint a person to play your favorite cassette disc on a nearby portable stereo. If you have a friend who plays a musical instrument, that would be lovely. If you are in a church or a synagogue you can usually arrange something with the organist. Sometimes a family member is musical and will grace us with their song during the service---a musical interlude. I have heard the voices of angels through solo performances dedicated to our babies of honor---and often the babies are transfixed! *To summarize:* Consider music to open and music to end the ceremony. Choose music that will lift the soul or has meaning for you. Solo, group performance or quiet music may also punctuate and enhance the service at various times, i.e. during a candle lighting. This makes for a reflective moment.

*Baby Blessing Certificates:* If you need/desire a baptismal certificate or a baby naming certificate, there are several websites where you may purchase or download one.

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Visually, they vary from the official and simple to the beautiful and creative. Carefully read the wording on the various certificates offered and decide what is right for you.

There are certificates available for interfaith families as well. You may sign this just after the ceremony. Some of my couples have opted to sign naming certificates as part of the service.

**WHERE do baby ceremonies take place?** I have done baby blessings in various chapels, churches, synagogues, in people's homes, in back yards, on decks, porches, rooftops and balconies, in various rented banquet halls, and in nature's magnificence.....in open fields, forests, on mountain tops and by streams and oceans. In short, baby blessings can be done anywhere that feels right for you, your family and celebrant. After all, it is the sacred intention of the congregants that makes for a hallowed service. It is love that brings in the spirit of God. If you are unaffiliated to any religious organization, however you wish to have your ceremony in a church, chapel or temple or other religiously oriented site, you might consider renting a place of worship for the ceremony. I have done baby blessings in chapels of various denominations. You can inquire into the chapels, churches and temples nearest you. A fee or donation is paid for the use of their premises for an allocated amount of time. University Chapels are often non-denominational and available to the public. Unitarian Churches are also welcoming of people of all faiths. One more note: If you are seeking a spiritual or

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religious community for your family, I counsel research. Attend services, meet the spiritual directors, obtain literature, speak to the congregants, and attend the children's religious education classes. When will you know you have found the spiritual or religious community for your family? *You will feel it. It will feel like home.*

**WHEN is it appropriate to have the ceremony?** I have done baby blessings for children as young as a few days old to children as old as three. Most blessings take place within the first year of a child's life, and usually within the first half year. Parents are often so overwhelmed by the vigorous demands of a new born and they simply need a few months to adjust! Sometimes couples wait so long; they decide to wait further until a child's birthday to mark the occasion. Other parents plan their ceremonies with me long before the child is born. We then set the ceremony's date for when the child will be 1, 2, 3 or 4 months old. My feeling is that you can plan to have the ceremony as soon as you feel you can get it together, AND it is never too late to be blessed!