

DIOCESAN GUIDELINES ON INFANT BAPTISM Diocese of Oakland

Introduction and Summary

In recent years pastoral concern that the sacraments be celebrations of faith has given rise to a wide variety of practice regarding those infants to be admitted to the sacrament of Baptism and regarding the catechesis of their parents and godparents. While no list of regulations can replace solid pastoral judgment, the following guidelines for the Diocese of Oakland are necessary to assist priests in forming their personal judgment as to who is to be admitted to the sacrament of Baptism and to guarantee that a pre-baptismal catechesis be provided in every parish. Briefly these guidelines indicate that:

1. EVERY CATHOLIC PARENT HAS A RIGHT IN JUSTICE TO HAVE HIS OR HER CHILD BAPTIZED IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH. IF THIS RIGHT IS TO BE REFUSED OR ITS EXERCISE DELAYED, THE BURDEN OF PROOF THAT THIS RIGHT HAS BEEN SURRENDERED RESTS UPON THE PRIEST.
2. IN THOSE EXCEPTIONAL CASES WHERE SOUND PASTORAL JUDGMENT DICTATES THAT BAPTISM SHOULD BE DEFERRED, THE BASIC CRITERION IS NOT THE RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR OR STATUS OF THE PARENTS IN ITSELF. IT IS RATHER THE ABSENCE OF "A REASONABLE HOPE" (SPES FUNDATA) THAT THE CHILD WILL BE RAISED IN THE CATHOLIC FAITH BY PARENTS OR SOME OTHER RESPONSIBLE PARTY.
3. ARRANGEMENTS FOR BAPTISM ARE TO BE MADE THROUGH PERSONAL INTERVIEW WITH THE PARISH PRIEST, AND A PRE-BAPTISMAL CATECHESIS AS NORMAL PROCEDURE FOR PARENTS IS TO BE ESTABLISHED IN EVERY PARISH OF THE DIOCESE.
4. PRIESTS AND DEACONS SHOULD NOT BAPTIZE CHILDREN FROM OUTSIDE THE PARISH WITHOUT EXPRESS PERMISSION FROM THE PROPER PASTOR; WHEN ANOTHER PRIEST HAS DETERMINED THAT BAPTISM MUST BE DEFERRED, THAT JUDGMENT SHOULD BE RESPECTED UNLESS IT IS IN CLEAR AND SUBSTANTIAL VIOLATION OF THESE DIOCESAN GUIDELINES.

Diocesan Guidelines

Admission to Baptism

Although Church legislation has undergone some change with the New Rite of Baptism of Children, basically Canon Law (Canons 750-751) is still in effect. Church law affirms that EVERY CATHOLIC PARENT HAS A RIGHT IN JUSTICE TO HAVE HIS OR HER CHILD BAPTIZED IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH. IF THIS RIGHT IS TO BE REFUSED OR ITS EXERCISE DELAYED, THE BURDEN OF PROOF THAT THIS RIGHT HAS BEEN SURRENDERED RESTS UPON THE PRIEST. IN THOSE EXCEPTIONAL CASES WHERE SOUND PASTORAL JUDGMENT DICTATES THAT BAPTISM SHOULD BE DEFERRED, THE BASIC CRITERION IS NOT THE RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR OR STATUS OF THE PARENTS IN ITSELF. IT IS RATHER THE ABSENCE OF "A REASONABLE HOPE" (SPES FUNDATA) THAT THE CHILD WILL BE RAISED IN THE CATHOLIC FAITH BY PARENTS OR SOME OTHER RESPONSIBLE PARTY. It is only in the light of this criterion that Baptism may be

deferred. It should be noted that what is required is not moral certitude but simply a reasonable hope. When this minimal spes fundata is not present then the priest not only may but should postpone Baptism until such time as there is some evidence of reasonable hope.

This pastoral decision to delay Baptism takes precedence over the "as soon as possible" formerly indicated in the Code. The Rite for Baptism of Children (#8, 4) does not say that Baptism may be refused but simply that it be postponed until the parents are able to discharge their obligation or other assurances have been given. It is presumed that the priest will offer positive assistance in helping parents (and/or godparents) to respond to their obligation.

Making the Decision

In making the difficult and exceptional decision to defer Baptism of an infant the key issue is: When is this "reasonable hope" present and when is it not? Some of the negative criteria presently used do not seem to establish the absence of reasonable hope and therefore would not by themselves be sufficient reason for the delay or the refusal of Baptism. For example: Whether or not a person uses the envelopes or is actively involved in parish life is no criterion by itself as to whether that person will see to it that the child is raised in the Catholic faith. Whether the parents come to Mass every Sunday is again no criterion in and of itself for delaying Baptism. Whether the parents' marriage is valid or not is a pastoral concern that may need to be prudently addressed on the occasion of the arrangement for Baptism, but it likewise does not constitute the key to whether the "reasonable hope" required by Church law is present or absent. Even when the parents and/or godparents do not come to the required pre-catechesis this is not in and of itself sufficient reason to judge that the necessary "reasonable hope" is absent.

However, if there is a convergence of circumstances, all of which tend to indicate that this child will not be raised in the Catholic faith by parent or other responsible party in any realistic sense, then there may well be grounds to delay baptism until the situation changes. For example, if the parents do not attend Mass, express no great determination to see that their children go to Mass or attend some form of religious instruction and are unwilling to participate in some basic catechesis on the meaning of Baptism and their responsibilities as parents, such a convergence of circumstances would be present.

Particular sensitivity must be exercised toward Catholics whose culture and background have implicitly taught that "good Catholics" always have their children baptized but do not necessarily attend Mass with any regularity. In some cases these Catholics objectively give little evidence of Catholicity but subjectively are doing all that the "Church" of their youth ever seriously required. In such instances it may be pastorally sound to admit the child to Baptism as long as the parents participate in a pre-baptismal program that will deepen their understanding of their obligations and responsibilities.

ARRANGEMENTS FOR BAPTISMS ARE TO BE MADE THROUGH PERSONAL INTERVIEW WITH THE PARISH PRIEST. It is only in this way that a prudent pastoral judgment can be made to the existence or non-existence of a reasonable hope that the child will be raised in the Catholic faith. It is this initial meeting which will make it possible to raise to the parents and perhaps godparents the question of how serious a matter Baptism is and what their own responsibilities are in this regard. This would be the place to bring up initial questions about Mass attendance, validity of marriage, concern about the older children's education in the

faith, etc. All this should be done in a manner filled with pastoral solicitude. It might be well for the priest to visit the family in their own home at a subsequent time, asking them in the meantime to think about the matters he has discussed with them. In difficult cases it is only after these discussions that the priest should decide whether and when to proceed with the baptism. The practice of having people arrange for Baptism by telephone with the housekeeper or secretary, or in some instances of having them show up for Baptism on Sunday afternoon unannounced, is not pastorally advisable or sound unless the family is already well known to the priest.

When a child's baptism has been delayed it is important that every effort be expended to keep in contact with the parents, to invite them to parish events, to stop to see them and their child from time to time, to seek to win them back to an active and living faith. To do nothing about ministering to these people afterwards is not the full pastoral concern people have a right to expect from their priests. It goes without saying that even those whose requests for baptism are deferred should always be met with kindness and understanding, not with anger, coldness or self-righteous criticism.

Pre-Baptismal Catechesis

A PRE-BAPTISMAL CATECHESIS AS NORMAL PROCEDURE FOR PARENTS IS TO BE ESTABLISHED IN EVERY PARISH OF THE DIOCESE. The New Rite of Baptism for Children puts emphasis on the role of the parents in the baptism and on the preparation that should ordinarily be a part of the celebration of Baptism.

It is the duty of the priest to prepare families for the baptism of their children and to help them in the task of Christian formation which they have undertaken. It is the duty of the bishop to coordinate such pastoral efforts in the diocese with the help also of deacons and lay people. (#7, 1)

The decree points out that the importance of the sacrament makes some preparation or pre-catechesis a necessary element for all parents. Such pre-baptismal programs already exist in many parishes of our diocese. The diocesan office of Adult Education is able to provide models, resources and contact persons to assist in the preparation of these programs.

According to the documents of the Second Vatican Council, as well as the New Rite of Baptism for Children, wherever rites make provision for communal celebration, it is this way of celebration that is to be preferred to an administration of the sacrament that is individual and quasi-private. In keeping with this norm and the recommendations of the New Rite, Baptism in the context of the Eucharist is highly recommended.

Inter-parochial Relationships

The right to baptize belongs to the pastor of the parish in which the parents of the child to be baptized reside. In those instances where permission has been obtained to have the child baptized in another parish the responsibility for the paperwork, pre-catechesis of the parents and judgment as to whether this baptism should proceed falls upon the priest who has agreed to do the baptism unless other arrangements have been explicitly made with the proper pastor or his associate. PRIESTS AND DEACONS SHOULD NOT BAPTIZE CHILDREN FROM OUTSIDE THE PARISH WITHOUT EXPRESS PERMISSION FROM THE PROPER PASTOR. WHEN ANOTHER PRIEST HAS DETERMINED THAT BAPTISM MUST BE DEFERRED, THAT JUDGMENT SHOULD BE RESPECTED UNLESS IT IS IN CLEAR AND SUBSTANTIAL VIOLATION OF THESE DIOCESAN GUIDELINES.