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BAPTISM OF INFANTS

A. INTRODUCTION

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20).

"Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the spirit and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons and daughters of God, we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission. 'Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word'" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1213).

B. PERIOD OF PREGNANCY

Before the child is born, the parents are encouraged to make contact with those responsible for baptismal preparations in the local parish concerning the intended baptism, so that proper arrangements may be made for the celebration. In this way, the parents are able to fulfill their responsibility as stated by Canon Law of baptizing their child within the first few weeks of birth. Pregnancy is the natural period of preparation for welcoming the infant into the family and the faith community alike (Canon 867, §1).

C. FOLLOWING THE BIRTH OF A CHILD

Pastoral practice regarding infant baptism must be governed by two principles:

1. Baptism is a gift from God and is the sign and the means of His prevenient love. In this Sacrament we are freed from original sin and it communicates to us a share in His divine life. Considered in itself, the gift of these blessings to infants must not be delayed.
2. Assurances must be given that the gift thus granted can grow by an authentic education in the faith and Christian life in order to fulfill the true meaning of the sacrament. As a rule, these assurances are to be given by the parents (at least by one parent or by a legal guardian, cf. Canon 868: §1 .2). If these assurances are not taken seriously, there can be grounds for delaying the sacrament.

D. DELAYING CONFERRAL OF BAPTISM

It sometimes happens that pastors are approached by parents who apparently have little faith and practice their religion only occasionally. In this case the pastor will endeavor, to arouse the parents' interest in the sacrament they are requesting and make them aware of the responsibility that they are assuming. In fact, the Church can only accede to the desire of these parents if they give an assurance that, once the child is baptized, it will be given the benefit of the Christian upbringing required by the sacrament. The church must have a **founded hope** that the baptism will bear fruit. If the assurances given, for example, the choice of godparents who will take sincere care of the child, or the support of the extended family are sufficient, the

priest cannot refuse to celebrate the sacrament without delay, as in the case of Christian families. If on the other hand they are insufficient, it will be prudent to delay baptism; however, the pastors should keep in contact with the parents so as to secure, if possible, the conditions required on their part for the celebration of the sacrament. If even this solution fails, it can be suggested as a last resource, that the child be enrolled in the catechumenate when the child reaches school age.

It must be clear that the delay or refusal of baptism is not a means of exercising pressure on the parents. Rather it is a time of educational delay according to individual cases, aimed at helping the family to grow in faith or to become more aware of their responsibilities. With regard to the assurances, any pledge giving a **founded hope** for the Christian upbringing of the child deserves to be considered as sufficient.

Applications of these Guidelines in the Diocese of Santa Rosa

1. In making the difficult and exceptional decision to defer baptism of an infant, the key issue may be stated: When is "founded hope" present and when is it not? Some of the negative criteria used at times by individual ministers of the sacrament do not seem to establish the absence of "founded hope" and therefore should not be used by themselves as sufficient reason for the delay or the refusal of the sacrament. Likewise, whether the parents' marriage is valid or not is a pastoral concern that needs to be prudently addressed on the occasion of the arrangements for baptism, but it likewise does not constitute the key as to whether the "founded hope" required by Church law is present or absent. Even when the parents and/or godparents do not come to the pre-baptism catechesis which the parish provides, this is not, in and of itself, sufficient reason to judge that the necessary "founded hope" is absent.
2. In the case of the first couple of children of a family, the person with baptismal responsibility has "founded hope" merely from their own way of living as Catholics or from their sincere intention or promise. 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 parents or other responsible parties in any realistic sense, then there may well be grounds to delay baptism until the situation changes. If 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 and a "founded hope" can hardly be seen to be present. If a couple have older children who have not been raised as Catholics, the "founded hope" is clearly lacking.
3. Delay of baptism should only be used as a last resort. When baptism is deferred, the door should always be left open so that the parents may return at a later date to the Church.
4. Particular sensitivity must be exercised towards those who consider themselves as Catholics, who realize the importance of baptism for their children, but do not necessarily attend Mass with any regularity. In some cases these Catholics objectively may give little evidence of Catholicity, but subjectively may be leading lives of faith in the Lord. In such instances it is 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 faith in relation to the Christian community. This can be a time of great grace in their lives to draw a little closer to Christ in the mystery of the Church, which is a life-long process for all of us.

E. PRE-BAPTISMAL CATECHESIS

1. Catechesis is a ministry of the word which flows from the common worship and leads the faithful to witness through service. The goal of catechesis is to "make a person's faith 'become living, conscious, and active'" (N.C.D. #32). Programs of pre-baptismal catechesis should move parents to a deeper faith life, and facilitate their incorporation into the worshipping community and its ministry of service. If they are prepared through a process that supports these goals of catechesis, they will enter into the ritual celebration with a deeper and more personal awareness of its meaning, its symbolism and its responsibilities.
2. Pastors are encouraged to involve lay couples in the ministry of baptismal catechesis, as they are able to share their own personal experiences, struggles and joys, of living out their faith in a Christian family. In smaller parishes, this catechesis can be given on a personal basis. In larger parishes, this catechesis may be given with a large number of parents but opportunity should be given for faith sharing. One formal session of catechesis is the minimum required. Godparents should be encouraged to attend but should not be absolutely required.
3. Parents who have been recently catechized in preparation for the baptism of a previous child are not required to participate in the one formal session of baptismal catechesis; however, the parish priest should encourage the parents to attend as an opportunity to deepen their own faith in preparation for the baptism of this new baby.
4. Each child must have at least one **godparent** (sponsor) or a child may have one of each sex (Canon 873). To be a godparent one must have completed the sixteenth year (an exception can be made by the priest or deacon for a just cause); be a confirmed practicing Catholic; not be bound by any canonical penalty; not be the father or mother. A baptized non-Catholic cannot act as a godparent but can be a *Christian witness* along with a Catholic sponsor. A non-baptized person cannot act as a godparent or witness. When a particular culture leads parents to seek more than two godparents it is the responsibility of the child's parents to determine the one or two principal godparents for the Church records.

A godparents' responsibility is the nurturing of the faith life of the infants and support of the parents. The ministry of godparent is not viewed by the Church as merely an honorary position, nor does this presume the physical or financial support of the infant. It is preferable that the godparent(s) live in close enough proximity to the child and his/her family to take an active part in the faith lives of the parents and child, but this cannot be a condition for being a godparent (See Canons 872, 873, 874).

5. Although most Catholics are familiar with the conferral of the Sacrament of Baptism through infusion (pouring of water over the head of the person to be baptized), the Church has in recent times reinstated the *Rite of Immersion*. During the pre-baptismal catechesis the possibility of immersion should be explained, what is entailed in the rite and why it is more symbolic to baptize by immersion.
6. According to the documents of the Second Vatican Council, (cf. *Liturgy*, Chapter 1. #27), as well as the *Rite of Baptism for Children*, a communal celebration of the sacrament is to be preferred to that which is individual and 'quasi-private'. In keeping with this norm, baptism in the context of the Eucharist is highly recommended. "If possible, baptism should take place on Sunday, the day on which the Church celebrates the paschal mystery. It should be conferred in a communal celebration for all the recently born children, and in the presence of the faithful, or at least of relatives, friends, and neighbors, who are all to take an active part in the rite." (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, #32, also see Canon 856).

F. CONCLUSION

The Lord himself affirms that baptism is necessary for salvation (John 3:5). He also commands his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to all nations and to baptize them. Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament. The Church does not know of any means other than baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude; this is why she takes care not to neglect the mission she has received from the Lord to see that all who can be baptized are "reborn of the water and the Spirit." **God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments** (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1257).

G. APPENDIX

1. It is the pastor's responsibility to ensure that the proper information relative to the newly baptized child's parents' names, including the mother's maiden name, the date & place of birth of the child and the name(s) of godparent(s), etc., is entered in the parish baptismal registry.
2. **Concerning adopted children.** The NCCB, in accord with the prescriptions of Canon 877 §3, hereby decrees that:
 - a. For **children baptized after their adoption is finalized**, the following information shall be entered in the register:
 1. The Christian name(s) of the child as designated by the adoptive parent(s)
 2. The name of the adoptive parent(s)
 3. The date and place of birth
 4. The names of the sponsors selected by the adoptive parent(s)
 5. The place and date of the baptism
 6. The name of the minister performing the baptism
 7. The fact of adoption, but not the names of the natural parents.
 - b. For **children baptized before their adoption is finalized**, the following notations shall be added to the baptismal register, but only after the adoption has been finalized and with due regard for the civil law of the jurisdiction:
 1. Parentheses shall be placed around the names of the natural parents
 2. The names(s) of the adoptive parents(s) shall be added
 3. The child's former surname shall also be parenthesized and the new name surname added
 4. A notation shall be made that the child was legally adopted
 - c. **Baptismal certificates** issued by the parish for adopted children will be no different from other baptismal certificates. No mention of the fact of adoption shall be made on the baptismal certificate. Parish personnel having access to parish registers have an obligation not to disclose to any person any information which would identify or reveal, directly or indirectly, the fact that a person was adopted.

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