



**Norms for Conditional Baptism  
Diocese of St. Augustine  
August 29, 2023**

*There is one body and one spirit, just as there is just one hope of your calling.  
There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all,  
who is above all, and through all and in all.*  
[Ephesians 4:4-6]

Roman Catholic doctrine has long held there is only one Baptism. When administered in the name of the Most Holy Trinity and with water, Baptism, even in a religion that is not in communion with the Roman Catholic Church, is held as valid.

The present law on this matter is included in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, no. 480:

The sacrament of baptism cannot be repeated and therefore it is not permitted to confer it again conditionally, unless there is a reasonable doubt about the fact of validity of the baptism already conferred. If serious investigation raises such prudent doubt and it seems necessary to confer baptism again conditionally, the minister should explain beforehand the reasons why this is being done and a non-solemn form of baptism is to be used.

The local Ordinary is to decide in each case what rites are to be included or excluded in conferring conditional baptism.

In line with this, the *National Statutes for the Catechumenate*, no. 37 repeats this as particular law for the Dioceses of the United States of America. It also includes the following: “If conditional baptism then seems necessary, this must be celebrated privately rather than at a public liturgical assembly....”

There are circumstances when, with due respect to the law, conditional Baptism may be necessary. The *National Statutes for the Catechumenate*<sup>1</sup> as well as *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*<sup>2</sup> provide definite norms for when conditional Baptism may be necessary.

<sup>1</sup> Approved by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (now the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) on 11 November 1986.

<sup>2</sup> *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. Approved for use in the Dioceses of the United States, 18 March 1988. See no. 480.

There may be reasonable and prudent doubt concerning the baptism of such Christians which cannot be resolved after serious investigation into the fact and/or validity of baptism, namely, to ascertain whether the person was baptized with water and with the Trinitarian formula, and whether the minister and the recipient of the sacrament had the proper requisite intentions. If conditional baptism then seems necessary, this must be celebrated privately rather than at a public liturgical assembly of the community and with only those limited rites which the diocesan bishop determines....<sup>3</sup>

In order to provide clearer guidance to the clergy and laity of the Diocese of St. Augustine, the following Norms for Conditional Baptism are established.

## **I. When to Administer Conditional Baptism**

Conditional Baptism in the Church is necessary for one of two reasons:

- (1) When the fact of Baptism is unknown OR
- (2) When the fact of Baptism is known, but its validity is questionable.

The Sacrament of Baptism is to only be administered conditionally when it is impossible to verify whether or not an individual has been baptized, OR when there is a serious reason for doubting the validity of a previous attempt to confer Baptism. (Cf. *CIC* 845, 869) The National Statutes for the Catechumenate state: “A serious investigation” must be undertaken by the pastor or parish staff in order to determine if conditional Baptism is necessary. The mere absence of a baptismal record is not a sufficient “serious investigation.” Therefore, the following steps are provided to assist in the investigation:

- A. In order to establish the fact that an individual was baptized, it is sufficient to have either one (1) irreproachable witness OR, if the Baptism was conferred upon an adult, the sworn testimony of the baptized person (*CIC* 876).
- B. Baptism is assumed to have been administered validly in the Catholic Church or in any church or ecclesial community that habitually uses valid form, matter and intention. An individual baptized under such circumstances is not to be re-baptized unless there is a serious reason to believe that form, matter or intention was lacking (*CIC* 869, §2)
- C. In order for Baptism to be valid, the form used must name the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity as “Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” Any other formulas are not valid. If it is known that any other formulas were used, then the person is to be baptized absolutely. If there is serious reason to believe that an invalid form was used, the individual is to be baptized conditionally.

[P.N. – Questions regarding the validity of the celebration of Baptism within a particular ecclesial community may be directed to the Office of Christian Formation which keeps a list of Christian religions in which Baptism is considered valid.]

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<sup>3</sup> National Statutes for the Catechumenate, no. 37.

- D. When a serious doubt exists regarding the valid conferral of Baptism, the individual, if an adult, is to be properly catechized on the nature of the Sacrament of Baptism before a conditional celebration of the sacrament takes place.<sup>4</sup>

## **II. For Individuals who are Candidates for Reception into Full Communion with the Catholic Church**

In the case of individuals preparing to be received into full communion with the Catholic Church, the following norms are to be followed when, after serious and full investigation, the fact or validity of Baptism cannot be established. (RCIA no. 480)

- A. Conditional Baptism is only to be administered outside of Mass, without solemnity and privately, that is, with a minimum number of people present. It is never to be publicly announced.
- B. The ritual to be followed is in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, numbers 340-361.<sup>5</sup> The celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation (or the post-baptismal anointing with Sacred Chrism) is omitted. The clothing with a baptismal garment and presentation with a lighted candle may be omitted.
- C. The form used for a conditional Baptism is as follows:

*If you are not baptized, N., I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

This form is accompanied by the pouring of water as indicated in number 226 of the *RCIA*.

- D. The sponsor is to be the same person who will serve as sponsor for the individual's reception into full communion.
- E. Following the reception of conditional baptism in private, the individual will join the other candidates for reception into full communion with the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil. They will make a Profession of Faith and receive the Sacrament of Confirmation along with reception of the Holy Eucharist.

## **III. For Individuals Living as Members of the Catholic Church**

When a serious doubt regarding the validity of Baptism for an individual who already is living as a member of the Catholic Church, conditional Baptism may be celebrated for one of the following reasons:

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<sup>4</sup> P.N. – Canon 865, §1 requires “that an adult have manifested the will to receive baptism, be sufficiently instructed in the truths of faith and in Christian obligations and be tested in the Christian life by means of the catechumenate....”

<sup>5</sup> *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, “Christian Initiation of Adults in Exceptional Circumstances.”

- A. For a child who has yet to reach the age of reason, *The Order of Baptism of Children* is to be following using the formula given above in Chapter II.<sup>6</sup>
- B. For all individuals who have reached the age of reason, the norms established above in section II are to be followed. If the Sacrament of Confirmation was previously received, this Sacrament is to be administered conditionally at the same time.

### **Recording of Conditional Baptisms**

All conditional Baptisms are to be recorded in the parish's Baptism Register. If the original attempt at Baptism was celebrated in a Catholic Church, the conditional Baptism is to be noted in the margin of the entry that recorded the original attempt at Baptism.

If the original attempt at Baptism was in a non-Catholic ecclesial community, a new entry is to be made in the Baptism Register of the parish in which the conditional Baptism is celebrated. A note in the margin is to be made that the Baptism was conditional.

### **Circumstances Requiring Variations from these Norms**

When circumstances may suggest a variation from the norms described in this document, the Bishop's Office should be contacted, preferable in writing, with the request.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Order of Baptism of Children*, 2<sup>nd</sup> typical edition, approved for use in the Dioceses of the United States. Approved for use 14 November 2017. Obligatory use as of 12 April 2020.

## APPENDIX

Following the Second Vatican Council, the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity published the “Ecumenical Directory” in two parts (the first in 1967 and the second in 1970). Then, in 1993, the same Secretariat promulgated an update to this directory which was entitled “Directory for the Application of the Principles and Norms on Ecumenism.” In this document, the Church provides the following guidance concerning the issue of conditional baptism.

- a) “There is no doubt about the validity of baptism as conferred in the various Eastern Churches. It is enough to establish the fact of the baptism. In these Churches the sacrament of confirmation (chrismation) is properly administered by the priest at the same time as baptism. There it often happens that no mention is made of confirmation in the canonical testimony of baptism. This does not give grounds for doubting that this sacrament was also conferred.
- b) “With regard to Christians from other Churches and ecclesial Communities, before considering the validity of baptism of an individual Christian, one should determine whether an agreement on baptism has been made by the Churches and ecclesial Communities of the regions or localities involved and whether baptism has in fact been administered according to this agreement. It should be noted, however, that the absence of a formal agreement about baptism should not automatically lead to doubt about the validity of baptism.
- c) “With regard to these Christians, where an official ecclesiastical attestation has been given, there is no reason for doubting the validity of the baptism conferred in their Churches and ecclesial Communities unless, in a particular case, an examination clearly shows that a serious reason exists for having a doubt about one of the following: the matter and form and words used in the conferral of baptism, the intention of an adult baptized or the minister of the baptism.
- d) “If, even after careful investigation, a serious doubt persists about the proper administration of the baptism and it is judged necessary to baptize conditionally, the Catholic minister should show proper regard for the doctrine that baptism may be conferred only once by explaining to the person involved, both why in this case he is baptizing conditionally and what is the significance of the rite of conditional baptism. Furthermore, the rite of conditional baptism is to be carried out in private and not in public.”<sup>7</sup>

This guidance, according to theologians and commentators, establishes that any practice of indiscriminately baptizing all who desire to be received into full communion with the Catholic Church is to be avoided.

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<sup>7</sup> Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, “Directory for the Application of the Principles and Norms on Ecumenism,” published on 25 March 1993 with the approval and confirmation of Pope John Paul II.

Father Paul Turner, writing in the liturgical journal *Worship* about conditional baptism, offers this practical advice:

“The fact of baptism is becoming easier to establish. Beyond relying on fallible ministers and secretaries to remember to record the information and to do so accurately, photographs, videos and social media posts all lend additional testimony. Even the question of validity can often be resolved when evidence of the actual ceremony surfaces. Ministers still placed in the awkward situation of needing to determine the fact or validity of baptism should perform their due diligence.”<sup>8</sup>

In general, there is widespread agreement that the following three criteria are to be used to determine the validity of any Baptism, Catholic or not:

- A.) The use of water
- B.) The use of the proper Trinitarian formula
- C.) The intention to do what the Church does when she confers this sacrament

Inability to obtain a baptism certificate alone does not constitute a reasonable doubt that a baptism is invalid.

Particularly in the United States, “altar calls” are a phenomenon that are found in many Protestant and evangelical denominations. Because of their nature, baptisms which take place during such events deserve particular attention as to their validity. Since in canon 865 of the *Code of Canon Law* there is a requirement “that an adult have manifested the will to receive baptism,”<sup>9</sup> a question can arise as to whether this was established and expressed in the one being baptized.

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<sup>8</sup> Rev. Paul Turner, “The Amen Corner: On Conditional Baptism,” *Worship* Volume 91 (January 2017).

<sup>9</sup> See footnote number 4 of these norms.