



THE SACRAMENTS AND THE EPIDEMIC: THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

Some tips from the Latin Mass Society,
in light of the Extraordinary Form
and the Traditional Practice and Discipline of the Church,

On the 23rd March Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister, announced that, in the context of the Coronavirus epidemic, ‘we’ll stop all social events, including weddings, baptisms and other ceremonies, but excluding funerals.’ This raises the question of how Catholics are to fulfil the Code of Canon Law: ‘Parents are obliged to take care that infants are baptized in the first few weeks’, or, when there is danger of death, ‘without delay’.¹

The current severe level of ‘lockdown’, to which these Government restrictions apply, is set to last for three weeks, but it is impossible at the time of writing to know whether this will be renewed at the end of this period, or how it might be modified.

If a priest is unavailable and there is danger of death, an infant, or an unbaptized adult who has expressed a desire for baptism, can and should be baptized by someone else.

If the problem is not death, but indefinite delay, it is a matter of judgement on the parents’ part, preferably in light of discussion with their parish priest or confessor, how long a delay is likely, and how long is reasonable. At a certain point it will become both reasonable and necessary for the infant to be baptized by someone else.²

Anyone with the use of reason can baptize, even a non-believer, if the correct formula is used and if be it done with the correct intention. A baptism by a non-cleric (or an emergency baptism without the full ceremonies by a priest), is called a ‘private’ baptism, as opposed to a ‘solemn’ one. When this is done, parents must ensure that it is followed by the registration of the baptism in the territorial parish in which it took place, and a ceremony performed by a priest which ‘supplies’ the ceremonies of a solemn baptism, and that the baptism is recorded in the parish register.

The importance of the Sacrament of Baptism cannot be exaggerated. It is not a mere ‘naming ceremony’ marking the arrival of a new member of the community, but makes an indelible change to the candidate, washing away Original Sin and incorporating him into the Mystical Body of Christ. Its importance implies not only that it should not be unnecessarily delayed, but also that it must *not* be repeated: to attempt to do so deliberately would be sacrilegious, and all care must be taken that this not be attempted out of ignorance. It must be done *correctly* on the first attempt, and it must if at all possible be *witnessed*, so that it can later be proved to have happened. The usual guidelines on private baptism assume that the reason it is being done is the imminent probable death of an infant (or adult). Where the cause is not this,

¹ ‘Parentes obligatione tenentur curandi ut infantes intra priores hebdomadas baptizentur’: Canon 867 §1.

² Though formulated for a time of higher infant mortality, the canonist Dr Edward Peters notes that commentaries on the 1917 Code of Canon Law suggested that parents should certainly not wait more than a month. See [his blog](#).

but the indefinite unavailability of a priest, we have the leisure to ensure that we get it right, and get it witnessed.

In cases of doubt about the validity of a baptism, baptism can be given conditionally. This is something which we should avoid making necessary.

Who should baptize?

The *Roman Ritual* pertinent to celebrations of the Extraordinary Form states the following:

If possible two witnesses or at least one should be present so that the baptism can be proved. A priest if available should be preferred to a deacon, a deacon to a subdeacon, a cleric to a laic, a man to a woman, unless for the sake of modesty it is more fitting that the woman baptize rather than the man, or because the woman might know the form and method better than the man. Father or mother are not permitted to baptize their child, except when in danger of death no one else can be had who could baptize.³

How is baptism given?

The Roman Ritual, again:

The form for baptism is as follows: **Ego te baptizo in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti (I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit)**, and it is absolutely essential. In no circumstances can it be altered, and these words must be pronounced simultaneously with the pouring of the water.⁴

It should be noted that the formula may be said in Latin or in any other language. The English may use ‘Ghost’ for ‘Spirit’ or ‘you’ for ‘thee’, but no alternative way of identifying the Persons of the Trinity (such as ‘Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier’) is valid. There is no ‘Amen’ at the end. The baptiser can include the name(s) of the candidate before the formula: thus, ‘John, I baptize thee...’

There is more than one way of validly applying the water, but the usual one in the Latin rite is as follows:

The water is to be poured on the head with a triple ablution ... each time in the form of a cross, saying the words simultaneously. The same person must both pour the water and pronounce the words.

The water must be ordinary, natural water: something which is mostly water, but which we would not refer to as water (tea, orange juice, etc.) is not valid. Water blessed in a very solemn way at the Easter Vigil, with chrism added to it, is used for solemn baptisms, but holy water is not necessary for a private baptism.

If it is possible to have godparents present, these must be practising Catholics. According to Canon 873 there should be one or two. If there are two, they should be a godmother and a

³ De Ministro Baptismo, 17

⁴ De Forma Baptismi, 8

godfather. If they cannot be physically present, they can be represented by proxies, who should hold or touch the candidate during the baptism.

The 'Correct Intention'

For the validity of the baptism, the person baptizing must have the 'correct intention'. A ceremony performed as part of a stage play without the intention to baptize would not baptize, even if all the other conditions were fulfilled. The intention is very simple, and does not require any theological knowledge on the part of the person baptizing. It is simply to *do what the Church intends to do in baptism*.

This is, in fact, simply the *intention to baptize*, since that is the Church's intention, but this way of expressing it avoids bringing in any possible difference between what the *baptizer* thinks baptism is, and what the *Church* says baptism is. It doesn't matter if the baptizer has erroneous views about the theology of baptism, or even doesn't believe in it at all, as long as he *intends to do what the Church intends*.

Registering the Baptism

A private baptism must be recorded as soon as possible in an official baptismal register: the territorial parish where the Baptism actually took place (not necessarily the parents' regular place of worship), or the Personal Parish or Personal Ordinariate of the parents, if they are members of one.⁵ During the current emergency it would be quite proper for the parents to put the information in the post or send it by email.

The parents should include the following details and a signed affirmation that the baptism was carried out using water and the proper formula. They could write simply:

The above Baptism was carried out by pouring water on the child while saying 'I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'

DETAILS OF BAPTISM

Christian names of child:

Surname of child:

Date of birth of child:

Name of Father:

Name of Mother (and Mother's maiden name):

Date of the Baptism:

Name of the Minister (the person who carried out the baptism):

⁵ Those served by an official Chaplaincy need to register the baptism with the territorial parish, except in the case of the Polish Chaplaincy, which has its own register, though registration with the parish *as well* will be advisable.

Location of the Baptism (your home address, for example):

(Name(s) of Godparents if present:)

It is a good idea to make a note of where the baptism is registered, if it is not your usual place of worship, or if you are likely to move. The candidate will need to get back in touch with that parish in the context of the reception of further sacraments.

‘Supplying the Ceremonies’

The Roman Ritual has a section giving the *Ordo Supplendi Omissa Super Infantem Baptizatum* (The Rite of Supplying the Ceremonies Omitted in Baptism of an Infant), and another for adults who have been privately baptized. Bringing the infant to this Rite is obligatory.

This Rite gives the infant all the ceremonies and prayers which had been omitted in the private baptism: the exorcisms, the statement of faith, the renunciation of Satan by the Godparents, the anointing with chrism, the giving of exorcised salt, and so on. In the Extraordinary Form it remains an impressive ceremony and a powerful series of blessing for the candidate. It should by no means be neglected, and can of course also be the occasion, once restrictions on ‘social gatherings’ are lifted, of such a social gathering, which has real social value, even if this value is subordinate to supernatural considerations, and indeed to public health.