

INFANT BAPTISM POLICY

The following policy regarding the baptism of infants in the Diocese of Las Cruces is intended to give general guidelines and provide uniformity throughout the diocese in the preparation and celebration of this sacrament. This policy is only intended in cases of ordinary means.

The policy has been developed with some flexibility to allow for local parishes to adapt to their own specific needs.

It should be noted that this policy is only intended for infant baptisms and that the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults (OCIA) is established as the norm for the preparation of adults in the Diocese of Las Cruces. It should also be noted that there are provisions in the OCIA for the preparation and celebration of this sacrament with children of catechetical age (the age of reason) and this should also be considered the norm. The age of reason as stated in the Revised Code is seven years.

Theological Background of Infant Baptism

Infant baptism celebrates the saving faith already transforming the lives of parents and of the community, a faith that will be shared by word and example with the newly baptized infants as they grow into responsible young adulthood. This ancient practice of infant baptism continues in the church today. But parents and community must clearly understand the Christian meaning of baptism and must freely choose to celebrate the sacrament as a time of growth in their own relationship with God. The goal of Christian Initiation is the formation of a spirit-filled adult community of deeply committed Christians who, in bearing witness to their faith in Christ, glorify their Father in heaven. So baptism must be understood as a "new birth" into a way of life. It is the first stage in an extended process of growth towards Christian maturity. In choosing baptism for an infant, parents and the community accept the responsibility to continue the initiation of the baptized through Eucharist and confirmation.

For Christians, Christ is the "sacrament," the effective sign of God's love and mercy and power in our lives. Since Christ acts through His Church, the Christian community, the sacraments need to be understood and seen in the context of the saving actions of the community of believers. At baptism, marked with the sign of faith, the baptized enter into the Christian community. Now as members of this Christian community, they gather in His name to pray with and for each other; they encourage one another by word and example, exhorting each other in faith; they bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. The sacramental celebrations within the community joyfully express this reality for the believer, thereby deepening faith and strengthening the bonds of the Christian community.

Baptism is the door to life with God and His Kingdom. It is the beginning of the initiation into a life committed to Christ. Baptism is without fruit if not lived out. The sacrament invites the baptized on a pilgrimage with the whole Church as they seek the fullness of faith -- eternal life in Christ. Baptism calls the person in this life to actively engage in Christ's mission of love and to become like Christ, the revelation of God's love.

Place of Baptism

1. The infant should be baptized in the parish proper to his/her parents and can only be baptized outside of the parish with the expressed written permission of the proper parish pastor. This permission is given when a just cause is present (Canon 857.2).

2. The parents should have established membership within the parish of baptism and if not having previously done so, membership should be established. Change of parish membership should not occur from one local parish to another because of differing parish baptismal policies.
3. Baptismal records must be recorded in the church where the baptism is celebrated (Canon 877). Parents are to be given certificates recording the date, place, and minister of baptism.

Arrangements of Baptism

1. Arrangements for baptism are to be made by at least one of the parents through a personal interview with the parish priest or designated minister thirty (30) to sixty (60) days prior to the baptism. It is strongly recommended that parents begin this process prior to the birth of their child.
2. The interview should discern in the Catholic parent(s) a sincere effort to live the Christian life and to establish a reasonable hope that the child will be raised in the Catholic faith (Canon 868.2).
3. Serious lack of the above elements would constitute legitimate reasons for the delaying of the baptism (Canon 868.2). The purpose of the delay would allow time for parents to come to a fuller understanding of their faith and their relationship to the parish community.
4. Each of the following is not to be used as criteria in and of it self to establish whether there is reasonable hope that the child will be raised in the faith:
 - a. parents' attendance at Sunday mass;
 - b. use of parish envelopes or parents' active involvement in parish life;
 - c. the validity of the parents' marriage. Note: This is a pastoral concern which may need to be addressed at this time. Those parents with invalid marriages should be invited to have their marriages validated. A parish pastoral program should include lay ministries who provide further support for these couples.
 - d. parish registration. Note: Canon law indicates that people have a right to the sacraments in the parish where they reside as long as the other pertinent obligations are met.

The occasion of a parent's coming to inquire about baptism of a child is a splendid opportunity for those in pastoral ministry to show the Church's loving concern for the child and its family; a warm and understanding welcome may encourage the parent(s) to a fuller life of faith and participation in the parish. If the parent resides in the parish and indicates that he/she is not registered, the priest/representative can invite the person to register.

5. Comments on Making the Decision of Delaying Baptism

In making the difficult and exceptional decision to defer baptism of an infant, the key issue is: When is this "reasonable hope" (that the child will be brought up in the Catholic religion) 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 indefinite postponement of baptism. For example:

Whether or not a person is registered, uses 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.

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(s) or another responsible party in any realistic sense, then there may well be grounds to indefinitely postpone baptism until the situation changes. For example:

If the parent(s) do not attend Mass, have no personal and family-centered faith-life consistent with their cultural tradition, express no great determination to see that their children go to Mass and attend some form of religious instruction, and are not willing to participate in some basic catechesis on the meaning of baptism and their responsibilities as parent(s), then such a convergence of circumstances might be present.

Particular sensitivity must be exercised toward Catholics whose culture and background have implicitly taught the value of always having their children baptized but who 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 or cultural faith tradition ever seriously required. In such instances, it may be pastorally sound to admit the child to baptism as long as the parent(s) participate in the pre-baptismal program that will deepen their understanding of their obligations and responsibilities.

Parent(s) most always have the primary influences and responsibility of the child's faith. In some cases, when the parent(s) may be weak in their faith, one sponsor may be able to supply the support that an infant or child needs for growth in the faith. Although this situation may be rare, sponsors and parents or other relatives may be able to give the support necessary to see that the child is raised as a Catholic. In this situation, the baptism will have to be delayed for some time so that the circumstances can be properly assessed and instruction given both to the parent(s) and sponsor(s). The entire procedure should take place openly and without any attempt to shelter the parent(s) from the difficulties of the situation. When a child's baptism has been indefinitely postponed, it is important that every effort be expended to keep in contact with the parent(s) by inviting them to parish events, by stopping to see them and their child from time to time, and by encouraging them back to an active and living faith.

Such on-going ministry reflects the full pastoral concern people have a right to expect from their ministerial leaders. It goes without saying that even those whose requests for baptism are indefinitely postponed should always be met with kindness and understanding, not with anger, coldness, judgment or a self-righteous attitude.

6. An appeal of a pastor's decision to delay baptism may be made in writing by the parent(s) to the territorial vicar. If a vicar is the pastor of the appealing party, he should designate a

pastor in his vicariate to hear the case. Appeals of the vicar or his designate's decision may be made to the Vicar General or the Chancellor.

Sponsors (Padrinos)

Requirements for the sponsors are listed in Canons 872, 873, and 874 of the Revised Code of Canon Law. Among these it should be noted:

1. These persons must be prepared and suitable to the role they fulfill.
2. Only one male or female sponsor or one of each sex is permitted.
3. Must be at least 16 years of age and have been confirmed, received the Eucharist, and lead a life in harmony with the faith and the role to be undertaken.
4. They must not be bound by canonical penalty.
5. Ordinarily, if married, they should be in a valid marriage. However, a canonically inefficacious marriage does not automatically disqualify one from being a sponsor.

A "canonically inefficacious marriage" simply means that the marriage does not fulfill the minimum requirements for a canonically valid marriage. However, the marriage may, in fact, be endowed with other elements that would allow the person(s) in such a situation to represent the community and supply the required support that the neo-baptized child and family need.

The clause, "does not automatically disqualify one," implies that a decision is required from the pastoral minister (pastor, parish life coordinator, administrator) whether to allow a couple to function as sponsors or not. This decision would be made on a case-by-case basis and would be considered an exception to the rule and not the norm.

Today, for many different reasons, many people find themselves in non-valid marriages. The minister should exercise pastoral discretion in permitting such persons to serve as sponsors. In exercising pastoral discretion the minister would need to take into consideration, besides the couple's canonical status, the broader aspects of the situation; e.g., their living in an exemplary manner, their relationship as spouses and parents, their degree of commitment to the church and the community, and their commitment to the natural obligations to any other children they might have.

It should also be noted that when making a decision to allow for such an exception all efforts must be made to avoid scandal or confusion among the people of God.

6. Sponsors cannot be the parents of the child to be baptized.
7. A baptized person of a non-Catholic ecclesial community can serve as a witness to the baptism together with a Catholic sponsor.
8. There should be some indication that the sponsor will have fairly frequent contact with the candidate and will be instrumental in the faith development of the individual.

Catechetical Preparation of Parents and Sponsors in Infant Baptism

1. Parents and sponsors should be properly prepared for the sacrament of baptism (Canon 867).
2. A minimum of six clock hours of catechetical preparation shall be attended by parents and sponsors while the optimum should be left to the pastor and his staff depending upon the parent background and faith commitment.

Note: Pastoral discernment should be exercised in the case of parents and sponsors who have been involved in the preparation sessions of several children. These parents and sponsors should be encouraged to attend these sessions to share their faith and wealth of experience with the others present. Sharing one's faith builds up one's own faith.

3. Sponsor preparation programs from other parishes and/or dioceses are to be accepted as equivalent preparation programs.
4. It is strongly encouraged that lay persons along with the priest or deacon conduct these sessions in the parish. Training of these instructors will be offered by the diocese. Priests and deacons should also attend these training sessions even if they are not directly responsible for the parish baptismal program.
5. These preparation sessions are not only to be lecture-oriented but should also utilize the best techniques of adult education discussion, faith sharing, and drawing conclusions from within the group.
6. Preparation models and resources are available to accommodate the implementation of this policy. It should be noted that the catechetical preparation cannot and should not attempt to present the entirety of the Church's teaching to the parents and sponsors. These catechetical sessions should not constitute a total religious education program for adults; rather they could serve as an introduction to other parish adult religious education programs.
7. The catechetical sessions are to include the following:
 - A. The meaning of salvation in Jesus Christ.
 - B. The meaning of Church and one's responsibility to it.
What does it mean to be Church?
An introduction to the parish and community life.
 - C. Faith development, including the cultural influences.
 - D. Good parenting skills
 1. nurturing
 2. emotional, moral, and faith development.
 - E. Sharing in the sacramental life of the Church.
 - F. The meaning of the sacrament of baptism.
 - G. Explanation of the baptismal ritual and celebration.
 - H. The role of the sponsor.
8. Sensitivity should be given to the participants' literary level.

Liturgical Celebration

The celebration of the sacrament should be administered according to the New Rite of Baptism (1969). It is strongly encouraged that this be a community celebration and, when possible, conducted within the confines of a Sunday Eucharistic Liturgy or the Easter Vigil (Canon 856).

Good liturgy is more than just knowing and performing the ritual. Good liturgy understands the importance of sign and symbol and understands that the primary focus is always on the assembly as people gathered in His name. This is especially true in the Sacraments of Initiation.

The symbols of baptism are rich. They should never be minimalized. Immersion speaks more clearly of the meaning of baptism. Oils used should be plentiful and should be "poured" upon the child just as the love of God is showered upon the one being baptized. The symbols and signs of baptism should be big enough to create an experience for all those who are present.

The actual baptismal liturgy can begin at the time of pregnancy. It would be good for a parish to have a blessing of pregnant mothers. This could be done by bringing mothers, couples, and families up to the sanctuary prior to the final blessing. Before giving the entire community its final blessing, those in the process of giving life could be blessed in these or similar words:

"Loving God, you are the Author of all life. In your goodness, you allow us to share in the process of bringing new life to the world. We ask your blessings upon these, your children, who are about to bring life. Keep them safe and in your care. May they know presence in their lives, and may they know the love that grows within them. We ask these prayers through Christ, our Lord. Amen."

This blessing could take place once every couple of months. It would give great witness to the Church's love of life and would involve the entire community in the experience of giving life.

At the actual time of baptism, everything possible should be done to include community participation. Quality music for that liturgy should be chosen and should invite community participation. Special care should be taken for hospitality, especially for those who might be visiting.

Since baptism is a community celebration, the place of baptism should be the parish church. This gathering at the church gives witness to our commitment to the community of faith (Canon 860). It is important that great care be taken in preparing the families, including brothers and sisters of the one to be baptized, to understand the meaning of the baptismal liturgy.

If the baptism takes place outside of Mass, great care should be taken to emphasize the importance of the Word proclaimed at the celebration. Great care should also be taken for the preparation and for the involvement of the assembled Christian community. No one is served well by a baptism of "convenience" which is over in just a few moments and which has not been a good, prayerful, and liturgically appropriate celebration.

Documentation

This sacrament is to be recorded in the parochial baptismal registry.

Documentation for Adopted Children

In concurrence with the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' decree of promulgation dated October 20, 2000 and in accord with canon 877§3, the following shall be documented concerning the baptism of adopted children:

1. For children baptized after their adoption is finalized, the following information shall be entered in the register:
 - A. The Christian name(s) of the child as designated by the adoptive parent(s)
 - B. The name(s) of the adoptive parents
 - C. The date and place of birth
 - D. The names of the sponsors selected by the adoptive parent(s)
 - E. The place and date of baptism
 - F. The name of the minister performing the baptism; and
 - G. The fact of adoption but not the names of the natural parents.

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.

2. 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:
 - A. Parentheses shall be placed around the names of the natural parents
 - B. The name(s) of the adoptive parent(s) shall then be added
 - C. The child's former surname shall also be parenthesized and the name surname added; and
 - D. A notation shall be made that child was legally adopted.

Baptismal certificates issued by the parish for these individuals shall give only the name(s) of the adoptive parent(s), the children new legal surname, the date and place of baptism and the name of the minister who conferred the sacrament. The name(s) of the sponsor(s) shall not be given and no mention of the fact of adoption shall be made on the baptismal certificate

For future ease in reference, and to afford what may often be the only possibility of reference after the adoption has been finalized, a baptismal entry for the adopted child can be made in the baptismal register of the adoptive parents' parish, citing the date and location of the original baptismal record, and listing only the name of the adoptive parents, and the date and place of birth.

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.