

What Must be Done for a Valid Baptism?

Issue: What does the Catholic Church require for a valid baptism?

Response: For valid baptism to occur, the Catholic Church requires proper matter, form and intention. The proper matter is “true and natural water.” The proper form requires the minister to pour, completely immerse in, or sprinkle water upon the candidate, while saying the words, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The minister of baptism must intend to baptize as the Church intends.¹

Discussion: Scripture affirms the necessity of using water and the Trinitarian Formula for baptism (cf. Ez. 36:25; Mt. 28:19; Jn. 3:5). The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) and the Rite of Baptism for Children (RCIC) provide the norms for lawful baptism in the Catholic Church. These rites allow for two options in the method: immersion or the pouring of water. If a candidate is baptized by immersion, “The celebrant, immersing the candidate’s whole body or head three times, baptizes the candidate in the name of the Trinity.”² If a child is baptized by pouring, “[T]he celebrant, taking baptismal water and pouring it three times on the candidate’s bowed head, baptizes the candidate in the name of the Trinity.”³ If water is not

poured or sprinkled on the head, the baptism would be valid, but illicit; i.e., it would be an authentic baptism but done in a way that deviates from the form prescribed by the Church.

Provided the necessary matter, form and intention are present, the Catholic Church recognizes as valid all baptisms that occur outside her authority or in extraordinary circumstances.

The use of anything other than true water renders the baptism invalid. The substitution of different names in place of “Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” in part or in whole, renders the baptism invalid.⁴ For example, it is invalid to replace these three with other names, such as “the Creator, Redeemer and the Sanctifier,” a formula which does not necessarily affirm the Three Persons of the Trinity. This requirement is rooted in the specific instruction of Jesus Himself in commission His apostles to make disciples of all the nations (Mt. 28:19).

Some Christian denominations sprinkle water rather than immerse or pour. Though unlawful in ordinary circumstances in the Catholic Church, sprinkling does bring about a valid baptism. Regarding intention of the minister, despite what religious affiliation the minister may adhere to, the baptism is valid as long as the minister intends what the Church intends. For example, a child is dy-

ing in a hospital. The nurse, who is Hindu, knows that the Catholic parents would want the child baptized. In their absence, she takes water, sprinkles it upon the infant and says the words, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Her intent is to baptize as the parents believe. The baptism is valid.



Last edited 4/25/03

¹ The Council of Florence, as translated in: *The Church Teaches, Documents of the Church in English Translation*, Rockford, Ill. Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1973, 269-270.

The Council of Trent repeated this teaching, as does the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1239-40.

² *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, no. 226.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ By invalid, the Catholic Church means the person would not be cleansed of original sin nor receive sanctifying grace; cf. *Catechism*, nos. 1213-16; 2 Pet. 1:4; Rom. 8:14-17.

RECOMMENDED READING

Holy Bible (Catholic edition)
Catechism of the Catholic Church
(paperback and hardback available)
Vatican II documents

To order, call Benedictus Books toll-free:

(888) 316-2640.

CUF members receive 10% discount.

Hahn and Suprenant, eds., *Catholic for a Reason: Scripture and the Mystery of the Family of God*
Leon Suprenant, ed., *Servants of the Gospel*

Frederick Marks, *A Catholic Handbook for Engaged and Newly Married Couples*

Bishop Thomas J. Tobin, *Without a Doubt*

To order these and other Emmaus Road Publishing titles, call toll-free: (800) 398-5470.

CUF members receive a 10% discount.

FAITH FACTS—Free Member Service:

(800) MY-FAITH (693-2484)

- Signs of the Christ: Sacraments of the Catholic Church • Norms for Infant Baptism
- Let the Children Come to Me: Why the Church Baptizes Babies • Baptism: Is there a “Rite” Time?
- Baptismal Fonts • What Is CUF?

1-800-MY FAITH



Answering *your* questions
on the Catholic faith

Catholics United for the Faith

Catholics United for the Faith

827 N. Fourth St.

Steubenville, OH 43952

(800) 693-2484

www.cuf.org