

THE CORRECT USE OF CONDITIONAL BAPTISM

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“It ain’t so much men’s ignorance that does the harm as their knowing so many things that ain’t so.”

- G. K. Chesterton¹

“Nothing should be innovated, nothing done but what was handed down.”

- Pope St. Stephen I

I. State of the Question

The great confusion about matters of faith and morals in the world is often an occasion of anxiety for Traditional Catholics. Usually, the best antidote to these anxieties is to have a regular spiritual life, which consists of devotions, great trust to the love and mercy of God, and reception of the Sacraments, especially those of the Holy Eucharist and Penance.

Unfortunately, because this great confusion has been rampant in the Church, too, ever since the apostasy of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), many of the Sacraments of the sect which sprang from the said council, labelled the “Novus Ordo” (new order) church, have been rendered doubtful or invalid, including that of Holy Orders.

Recently among Traditional Catholics there have arisen doubts about the validity of baptisms performed in the Novus Ordo sect. This especially after some well-documented cases of invalid or doubtful baptisms done by Novus Ordo priests have come into light.

One of the Traditionalist clergymen who has questioned the validity of the Novus Ordo baptisms in general, i.e. in all cases, is Bishop Donald Sanborn, Rector of Most Holy Trinity Seminary in Reading, PA, and Superior General of the Roman Catholic Institute (the RCI). In his January 2023 Newsletter he wrote:

Our policy now is this: If you arrive from the Novus Ordo, it is necessary that your baptism be verified either by yourself, or by some witness. Otherwise we baptize again conditionally. For who knows how many other instances

of invalid or doubtful baptisms there have been? We have seen many videos of Novus Ordo priests pour the water onto the hair, and not the forehead, of the recipient. To do so is to render the sacrament doubtful.²

The pastoral directory of the RCI, article 28, says:

Baptisms conferred by Novus Ordo clergy during or after 1990 must be verified as having been done correctly. If positive proof of the correctness of the rite should be lacking, then the baptism must be conferred again *sub conditione* [conditionally].³

At the first outset, this practice (or policy, as it is called) seems perfectly legitimate. Baptism is the Sacrament which puts a soul in the state of sanctifying grace and makes him a member of the Catholic Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, His Kingdom on earth. If the Novus Ordo church and its priests are careless in administering this Sacrament, why not just follow the safer course, and make sure that a person who joins a Traditionalist parish is validly baptized?

But in this most recent controversy, the question which has remained unanswered is this: what are the sacramental and theological principles, drawn from the Canon Law and liturgical books and Church manuals, which justify this policy of the RCI?

At St. Gertrude the Great Roman Catholic Church, whose pastor is Bishop Charles McGuire, and where I am one of the priests, we have come to this conclusion: there is none.

Instead we follow the practice that if someone from a Novus Ordo parish wants to join one of our parishes or missions, we simply ask him if he is a baptized Catholic. And we also ask if he

¹ Chesterton 1988, 169.

² Most Holy Trinity Seminary Newsletter, January 2023, p.3.

³ <http://romancatholicinstitute.org/pastoral-directory-of-the-roman-catholic-institute/>

adheres to our positions regarding the Church and the Faith. (Nowadays we also emphasize the traditional teaching about marriage). And if he does adhere to our positions, we tell him to go to confession to a Traditional priest and then he can start receiving the Sacraments.

Therefore, we now give this study where I'll present the reasons why we differ with and reject the policy of Bishop Sanborn regarding conditional baptisms.

II. History of Conditional Baptism

The question about baptisms done outside the Catholic Church arose for the first time in the 3rd century. At that time one of the eminent Church Fathers, Tertullian, started to teach that heretics do not have the same God, nor the same Christ as Catholics have, and therefore Baptism administered by them is invalid. The Church of Africa adopted this view in a council held by Agrippinus, Bishop of Carthage, around 230-235.⁴

One of the early Fathers who favored rebaptism of heretics was St. Cyprian, the successor of Agrippinus as Bishop of Carthage. He wrote: "Men are not washed among them, but rather made foul, nor are sins purged away, but are even accumulated." In a council held at Carthage in 256, sixty-one bishops signed a letter to the Pope explaining their reasons for rebaptizing, and claiming that it was a question upon which Bishops "were free to differ."⁵

But against this position (policy) of the African Bishops, Pope St. Stephen I said that the practice of rebaptizing heretics was an innovation not approved by the Church. The Church teaching was that those who followed this practice of rebaptism were themselves held as here-

tics. Therefore Pope St. Stephen sent an epistle to Africa, ordering its clergy to stop rebaptisms. This letter of his included the pastoral direction: "Nothing should be innovated, nothing done but what was handed down."⁶ Africa came into line with Rome soon after the martyrdom of St. Cyprian in 258.⁷

Though rebaptism was condemned, another problem arose two centuries afterwards in Italy.

During the early part of the 5th century, the Ostrogoths, who were Arian heretics, attacked the Western Roman Empire, kidnapped Catholic boys and forced them fight in their barbarian armies. During the time of Bishop Neon, who in 450-473 was the Bishop of Ravenna, the capitol of the Western Empire, many prisoners were released and returned to Ravenna, where they now wanted to attend Catholic worship.

But these youth presented a problem to Bishop Neon. They had been so young at their capture that they did not know if someone had baptized them or not in their infancy. With these youth, the very *fact* of their Baptism was doubtful, and there were so many of them, that it greatly disturbed the Bishop. But Neon did what every good Catholic would do, namely he consulted the authorities; and the greatest authority at this time was the Pope, then St.

Leo I. In his answer to Neon, St. Leo wrote:

And so wherever the man himself who is anxious for the new birth **does not recollect his baptism**, and **no one can bear witness** about him being unaware of his consecration to God, there is no possibility for sin to creep in, seeing that, so far as their knowledge goes, neither the bestower or receiver of the consecration is guilty. We know indeed that **an unpardonable offense is committed**, whenever in accordance with the institutions of heretics which the holy Fathers have condemned, **any one is for-**



St. Cyprian of Carthage

⁴ Chapman 1913, 586.

⁵ Chapman 1913, 586.

⁶ Vincent of Lerins 1847, 14-16.

⁷ Chapman 1913, 587.

ced twice to enter the font, which is but once available for those who are to be reborn, in opposition to the Apostle's teaching, which speaks to us of One Godhead in Trinity, one confession in Faith, one sacrament in Baptism. But in this nothing similar is to be apprehended, since, **what is not known to have been done at all, cannot come under the charge of repetition.** And so, whenever such a case occurs, first **sift it by careful investigation, and spend a considerable time,** unless his last end is near, in inquiring whether there be absolutely no one who by his testimony can assist the other's ignorance. And when it is established that **the man who requires the sacrament of baptism is prevented by a mere baseless suspicion, let him come boldly to obtain the grace, of which he is conscious of no trace in himself.** Nor need we fear thus to open the door of salvation which has not been shown to have been entered before...

But if it is established that a man has been baptized by heretics, on him the mystery of regeneration must in no way be repeated, but only that conferred which was wanting before, so that he may obtain the power of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of the Bishop's hands.⁸

We see that there were, then, two questions to be solved in the case of a doubtful Baptism. The Bishop was first to inquire if the man was baptized *at all*. If this couldn't be established, he was to be baptized *conditionally*, in which case no offense of rebaptizing was committed. But if it *was* possible to establish that the man had received Baptism administered by Arian heretics, he was *not* to be baptized, either conditionally or absolutely. He was, in that case, to be simply given the Sacrament of Confirmation, and treated as a Catholic.

The next time there was a major baptismal controversy was in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1400s. Some Eastern schismatics, who wished to join the Catholic Church, presented themselves to Albert Tabor, Bishop of Vilna. The diffi-

culty with them was that their Eastern schismatic churches had baptized them with the form: "The servant of God N. is baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Bishop Tabor therefore consulted Pope Alexander VI, if these people should renounce their former Baptism and be baptized again. The Pope made the decision, that the Baptism should *not* be repeated, and that all those baptized in the third person who wished to join the Church, could do so without any condition, obligation, or force to submit to conditional Baptism.⁹

Though the Pope explicitly declared the Eastern schismatic baptisms to be valid, there nevertheless remained a policy, especially among the diocesan clergy, of performing conditional baptism on converts from schism. This was one of the abuses which the Council of Trent, convoked in 1545, sought to correct. *The Roman Catechism*, authorized by the Council, and published by Pope St. Pius V, instructed that the pastors must be particularly careful to avoid the frequent abuse of indiscriminate administration of conditional Baptism on account that this practice (policy) exposes the Sacrament to serious disrespect. *The Roman Catechism* continued:



Alexander VI, Pope in 1492-1503

Some people imagine that if a child is presented for Baptism, no inquiry as to a possible previous Baptism is required, and that one can proceed immediately to administer the sacrament. Even worse is the case where, having ascertained that the child was baptized privately, one does not hesitate to baptize it conditionally, and actually add at the same time the solemn ceremonies of the Church! **Such action is sacrilegious**, and involves the minister in what canonists call an "irregularity."* It was authorita-

⁸ [Letter 166](#). Emphasis added.

⁹ Mončak 1987, 218-219. This form is valid only in the Eastern rites, not in the Latin Church. Cf. Prümmer 1953, 84.

* Previously one who thus solemnly rebaptized, and also the person who knowingly submitted to rebaptism, incurred

irregularity, which prevented the reception of higher orders. This delict does not appear in the list of irregularities given in the Code of Canon Law (1917), and therefore, according to the general principles of the law, it must be considered as abolished. (McHugh 1917, 108)

tively decided by Pope Alexander that the conditional form of Baptism is to be used only when, **after due inquiry, there is still a doubt** as to the validity of the previous Baptism, and that **in no other case can it ever be lawful to administer Baptism a second time, even conditionally.**¹⁰

So, in line with the decisions of Pope St. Leo, the Church defined the principle that if the Baptism of the candidate was doubtful, the priest was *not allowed* just to perform a new rite of Baptism at his free will. He was obliged to do diligent research *in each case*, and only if the doubt still remained, was it lawful to perform conditional Baptism. And the reason why the Church so greatly emphasized the necessity of such research was the danger of the priest committing a sacrilege, namely trying to perform again a sacred rite which by divine commandment can be given only once.

The Roman Catechism further defined that Baptism, for the sake of its nature and character, may never, on any account be repeated, and that the pastors should carefully instruct the faithful on this point. But if there were a *reasonable doubt* about the *fact* of the previous Baptism, a conditional Baptism, as a reasonable precaution, should be administered with the following formula: “If you are already baptized, I do not baptize you again; but if you are not already baptized, I baptize you in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.”¹¹ *The Roman Ritual* of 1614 enshrined that formula within its introduction, “*On Properly Administering the Sacrament of Baptism.*” The form to be used was: “N. if thou art not baptized, I baptize thee, etc.” Conditional baptism was to be done *solemnly*, i.e. with all the ceremonies described in the Ritual, except in the cases of adult converts from heresy, when it

could, with the permission of the Ordinary, be done *privately* without ceremonies.¹²

III. The Principles in Administrating Baptism

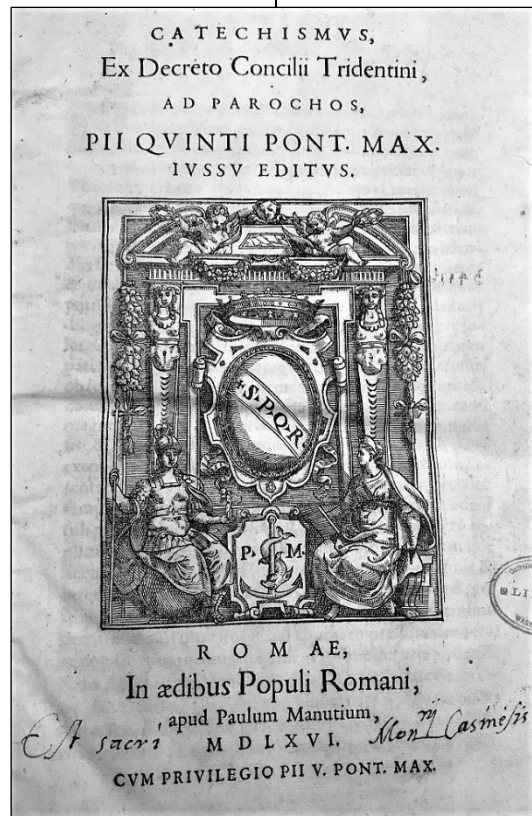
After Trent, the Roman congregations issued several clarifications concerning the investigation that the priest, who sought to baptize a convert conditionally, was to do. If the *validity* of a Baptism administered by non-Catholics was doubtful, the case had to be investigated to decide if Baptism was to be conferred at all, or conditionally. This meant that the rituals of the respective sect were to be searched and their customs examined. The golden middle to be observed was: “Not too lenient and not too strict.”¹³

These principles were laid out in the Code of Canon Law of 1917, canon 732:

- 1) The Sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and orders, which imprint a character, cannot be repeated.
- 2) But if a prudent doubt exists about whether really and validly these [Sacraments] were conferred, they are to be conferred again under condition.

Several theologians and canonists have written numerous manuals commenting on the Code, including instructions and principles about the proper administration of the Sacraments. And it's this Code and these theologians from which any sacramental principles (policies) must be drawn.

Though Bishop Sanborn often (including in the newsletter quoted above) likes to criticize the Modernist teachers of the Vatican II church for saying that “sacraments are not magic words,” that statement is very much true. Sacraments are *not* magic words. For example, when I say the words of absolution over a penitent, these words do not change a bad person into a good



¹⁰ RC 1985, 190-191. Part 2, chapter 1, #57.

¹¹ RC 1985, 189-190. Part 2, chapter 1, #55 & #56.

¹² Fortescue & O'Connell 1962, 363.

¹³ Augustine 1921, 23-24.

person, as if I were a magician changing a rabbit into colorful scarfs by saying *hocus pocus*. To absolve someone validly, mere words are not enough. The person absolving must have valid orders and true mission from the Church, and the person absolved must have true contrition for his sins and have made an integral confession. So whenever a priest is investigating whether a certain Sacrament is valid or not, he has to examine the case carefully according to the sacramental principles of the Church, not according to his own whims.

In the case of the sacrament of Baptism, in order that it be valid, i.e. to work and confer sanctifying grace and membership in the Church, the person baptizing must have the correct intention, apply the correct matter – i.e. water – and pronounce the correct words. In his bull *Exultate Deo* (1439) Pope Eugene IV defined:

All these sacraments are dispensed in three ways, namely, by things as the matter, by words as the form, and by the person of the minister conferring the sacrament with the intention of doing as the Church does; if any of these is lacking the sacrament is not fulfilled.¹⁴

We therefore need to look into these cases separately, first regarding the necessary intention of the minister, and then his application of the correct matter and form.

III.a. Intention

It was through some controversies that theologians in the medieval times began a systematic study of sacramental principles, turning their attention to the question of the minister's mind and intention. Pope Innocent IV (1243-1254) wrote:

Note that for someone to be baptized, it is necessary that the minister intend to baptize and not merely to bathe or to wash the body; but it does not seem necessary, as regards the effect of Baptism, that he should know what Baptism is, or that in it grace is infused, or that it is a sacrament; nor is it needed that he believe this. Indeed, even though he believes the contrary and thinks the whole thing as nonsense and deception, nevertheless Baptism produces its effect. Likewise, it is not necessary that he who bap-

tizes should know what the Church is, or from where the Church or the person baptized is, nor that he mentally intends to do what the Church does. Even if he in his mind should wish to perform the contrary, that is, not to do what the Church does, nevertheless he does it, because if he keeps the form, the person nevertheless is baptized, **as long as the minister intends to baptize**. That's why, if someone in the case of necessity, or even outside of necessity, were to go to a Saracen and say: "Baptize me," and teaches him the form, and the Saracen baptizes him, not believing that through the immersion anything happens except a soaking, and does not intend to baptize him, or even to soak him according to the **intention** of him who asks the Baptism, namely, that Baptism should effect whatever it can effect, and the person baptizing **intends to confer whatever the other ministers who confer Baptism intend**, although he does not believe it can effect anything, then the Baptism is valid. But if he does not intend this, he does not baptize, and it is unnecessary that he knows anything else what the Church understands about these things, or even what he knows or believes to be the Church.¹⁵

The person baptizing, therefore, even if he'd be a non-Catholic, confers a valid Baptism, as long as he *wills to baptize*, even though he doesn't understand or believe what the Church is, or does not know anything about what the Church does. The reason is that the minister does not need to perform the same thing what the Church *intends* but what the Church *does*.¹⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas summarizes: "If the form is kept, and nothing outwardly done which expresses a contrary intention, the Baptism is valid."¹⁷

The Church has ever since, both in theory and in practice, emphasized that doubts about the validity of baptisms based upon the minister's intention are imprudent and scrupulous. The *Instruction* of the Sacred Congregation of the Inquisition (later the Holy Office) of 30 January, 1833, is of particular interest. A convert to the Catholic faith said that he was worried about his Baptism, because a schismatic Bishop, who also had recently converted to the true faith, had declared, that while he was still in schism, he had never had the intention of truly baptizing when he baptized the children of Catholics. This was because he had hated the Catholic religion. The instruction referred to St. Pius V's declaration

¹⁴ DZ 695.

¹⁵ De Baptismo et ejus effectu. Innocent 1570, 459-460.

¹⁶ Cf. DZ 867.

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas 1947, 237. Distinctio VI, Q. 1, Art. II.

that Calvinist Baptism was valid, because the private belief of the minister against baptismal regeneration does not annul his general prevailing intention of doing what Christ instituted, or what is done in the true Church of Christ.* A generic intention of doing what the Church does, or of doing what Christ instituted, or what Christians do, is sufficient. And the *Instruction* rejected the doubt about the validity of the Baptism in question as being imprudent and without sufficient foundation.¹⁸

In 1872 the following question was presented to the Sacred Congregation of the Inquisition:

“Whether Baptism administered by heretics is doubtful, because of lack of intention of doing what Christ willed, if an express declaration were made by the minister before Baptism, that Baptism produced no effect upon the soul.” The answer was: “In the ne-

gative, because, notwithstanding the error about the effect of Baptism, the intention of doing what the Church does is not excluded.”¹⁹

The same principle was followed, and reference given to previous decrees, in the answer given in 1877 to Augustin-Magloire Blanchet, Bishop of Nesqually, USA. Bishop Blanchet had enquired about the validity of Baptism conferred by certain groups of Methodists, whose doctrine and practice seemed doubtful. The answer said:

Now “what the Church does” signifies not the purpose in view but the action done. Moreover, the same

is clear from the practice of the Church. For neither did the ancient Church rebaptize children baptized by Pelagians, nor do we rebaptize those baptized by Zwinglians and Calvinists; and yet we know that all these baptize without the intention of fulfilling the purpose of Baptism, which is to take away original sin.²⁰

Whatever doubts one might have concerning the validity of Novus Ordo baptisms, they can't, therefore, be based on defective intention or the mental state of the minister. The sufficient intention is so easy to have that really the only way *not* to have it, would be if the person performing

Baptism would especially resolve: “I do not intend what the Church does.”²¹

III.b. Matter and Form

Since there can be no question of an intention invalidating a Baptism, we'll look to the other two qualifications mentioned by Pope



Jeanne Lombard: Clandestine Baptism by the Huguenots, 1925

Eugene IV, namely matter and form. *The Baltimore Catechism* tells how one would give Baptism: “I would give Baptism by pouring ordinary water on the forehead of the person to be baptized, saying while pouring it: *I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.*”²²

As said above, Canon Law states that “if a prudent doubt exists about whether really and validly these [Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders] were conferred, they are to be conferred again under condition.”

The question naturally arises, then, what does

* In France, during the religious wars between Catholics and Calvinist Huguenots in the 1500s, the question arose whether to rebaptize those baptized by the Calvinists who wished to convert to Catholicism. The question was taken to Pope St. Pius V, who answered that they shouldn't. The council of Embrun, in 1576, therefore decided, that since the Pope had defined that Baptism done by the Calvinists was valid, because they used correct matter and form, and

had the general intention of doing what Christ instituted, those who were baptized by the Calvinists are not to be baptized again conditionally. (Mangenot 1910, 340)

¹⁸ Leeming 1956, 472.

¹⁹ Leeming 1956, 472-473.

²⁰ Leeming 1956, 473.

²¹ DZ 1318.

²² Connell 1958, 187.

it mean to have a “doubt,” and when can it be categorized as “prudent,” as opposed to “imprudent”?

“Doubt” comes from the Latin word *dubium*. It can be defined by “a state in which the mind is suspended between two contradictory propositions and unable to assent to either of them.”²³ Thus for example, I may have a doubt if this person is baptized or not.

Doubt is opposed to *certitude*, i.e. “the adhesion of the mind to a proposition without misgiving as to its truth.”²⁴ For example, I am certain that this person is baptized because I baptized him myself.

Doubt is either *positive* or *negative*. In a *positive* doubt the evidence for and against is so equally balanced as to render decision impossible, e.g. I know that a person went through a baptism ceremony, but I don’t know who baptized him. A *negative* doubt arises from the absence of sufficient evidence on either side, e.g. I have no evidence that this person has received Baptism. It is thus possible that a doubt may be positive on the one side and negative on the other, i.e. I am certain that the person went through a ceremony of Baptism, but I don’t know if the person who baptized him was qualified to do it.²⁵

Prudent doubts are distinguished from *imprudent*, according to the reasonableness or unreasonableness of the considerations on which the doubt is based.²⁶

As Canon Law states, there might be doubts whether a person is either “really” or “validly” baptized. In sacramental theology, when the question is about the existence or non-existence of some *fact* connected with obligation, and when the fact at issue is one about which no presumption is afforded, such as if the person was baptized or not, the principle to solve the negative doubt is: “A fact should not be taken for granted, but must be proved.”²⁷

Unlike in the times of Bishop Neon of Ravenna, we live in a time when there is very rarely any doubt whether a person has gone through the ceremony of Baptism or not. Either a personal testimony, a photograph, or a baptismal cer-

tificate from the person’s parish is sufficient to verify the fact.

To settle a negative doubt about the *quality*, or validity, of an act performed (such as Baptism), it may be settled from general presumptions or principles. When the act was according to law, and the doubt concerns its validity or sufficiency, one may take it that all was rightly done, for it usually happens that he who complies with the substance, also complies with what is accessory. Moreover, the welfare of the public and of individuals requires that an act done outwardly according to law should be deemed as rightly performed unless the contrary can be proved. Hence the rule: “In doubt decide for the validity of what was done.”²⁸

This is the basic sacramental principle what we follow at St. Gertrude the Great. When a person from a Novus Ordo parish comes to us, agrees with our positions, and wishes to join us, we simply asked if he is a baptized Catholic. We know from the rituals and testimonies that the Novus Ordo sect uses the correct matter and form. We therefore judge according to “what was done,” not what might have been done and not done. To doubt the quality, or validity, of a person’s Baptism would be imprudent, because there is no room either for a positive doubt, for we can identify the sect and minister, or for a negative doubt, because we can have the proper physical evidence of the ceremony.

IV. Lay Baptism

Though there is, of course, no Church decision about the quality or validity of the Novus Ordo baptisms, the Church has clear principles about the repetitions of lay baptisms. And the principle is that it is gravely unlawful to rebaptize, even conditionally, when there is mere suspicion or tenuous doubt, that is, *less* than a prudent doubt, regarding the validity of the first Baptism.²⁹

It is obvious, then, that the practice of giving conditional Baptism, as a matter of course, to all who have already received the Sacrament from a layman, cannot be justified. The 1927 Maynooth Synod of Ireland, which carried out the work of

²³ Sharpe 1913, 141.

²⁴ Sharpe 1913, 141.

²⁵ Sharpe 1913, 141.

²⁶ Sharpe 1913, 141.

²⁷ McHugh & Callan 1960, 238.

²⁸ McHugh & Callan 1960, 239.

²⁹ McCarthy 1960, 54.

bringing Irish ecclesiastical discipline into harmony with the Code of Canon Law, had this principle in mind, when it decreed that “infants baptized by lay people are not to be rebaptized *sub conditione*, unless there remains, *after diligent investigation*, a prudent doubt concerning the validity of the former Baptism.” Diligent investigation is prescribed in every case. This precludes the application of any universal principle of always rebaptizing conditionally. It is unlawful, and *per se* gravely unlawful, to repeat a Sacrament if there is no reasonable or prudent basis for the doubt regarding its validity.³⁰

V. How to Solve a Doubt about Validity?

It should be noted that doubt is a purely subjective condition, i.e. it belongs only to the mind which has to judge the facts, and has no application to facts themselves.³¹ The person whose baptismal status is meant to be solved either has been regenerated in baptismal waters,

or he has not. Whatever doubts I may have about either the *fact* or the *quality* of his Baptism, doesn't change his status in one way or another.

Therefore, when solving the doubt, the solution cannot be any policy about what a particular minister is *assumed* to do or not to do, but what he *actually has done*, and whether this particular person here and now (*hic et nunc*) has received Baptism or not.

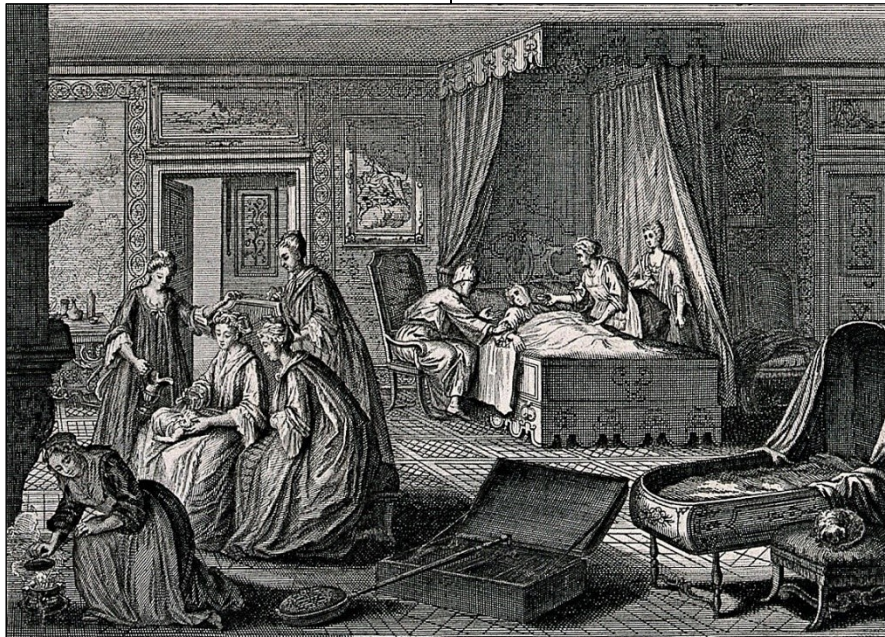
I can give two examples from St. Gertrude's, the cases of *Mr. X* and *Baby Y*. Mr. X, who wanted to convert to Catholicism, had been baptized in a Protestant sect; Baby Y had been baptized by her mother because of a very speedy delivery; and because the baby was having breathing diffi-

culties, the mother baptized her just in case. In neither case was there a doubt about the *fact* of Baptism, but merely about the *quality* of it, namely was it valid, i.e. did it work.

In Mr. X's case, I originally was going to baptize him conditionally, since he came from Protestantism. But when I asked about the qualities of his Baptism, he said his parents had told him that this particular sect, though it baptized by immersion into water, did not use the trinitarian formula, which is essential for the validity. Therefore I baptized him unconditionally, with all the ceremonies prescribed in the *Roman Ritual* for adult converts to the faith. In Mr. X's case, the study about the qualities of his Baptism

showed that it had not worked. There was no need for conditional Baptism for I had done the research and not acted by a mere assumption or policy.

In Baby Y's case, she was born to parents who were members of St. Gertrude the Great and married by Bishop Dolan. After hearing



A new-born baby being baptized by a midwife in the mother's bedroom

about Baby Y's birth, and the extraordinary circumstances of it, he called the mother over the phone to ask about the qualities of the Baptism. Bishop Dolan asked the mother if she had poured the water over the baby's head while saying the words: "I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." The mother told him she had. She was nervous, though, and asked if it should be done again just to be on the safe side. But Bishop Dolan said it sounded like she had done it correctly, that it was a one-time thing, and all the other baptismal ceremonies would be provided by Father Cekada. So in Baby Y's case, the study about the qualities of her Baptism showed that it had worked.

³⁰ McCarthy 1960, 54.

³¹ Sharpe 1913, 141.

VI. The Church Teaching about Doubting Baptism

In dealing with casuist cases about the doubts concerning Baptism, the moral theologians have repeatedly warned against repeating the Sacrament based on mere doubt or suspicion:

Before there can be any question involving a repetition of this necessary Sacrament there must be a more reasonable foundation for the doubt than a mere *think so*. Theologians are agreed that a mere *negative doubt* is not sufficient to warrant an iteration of a Sacrament. It is not lawful to repeat a Sacrament even *conditionally* under the circumstances, for such a doubt is held to be *omnino imprudens atque inane** and hence the reconference of a Sacrament would make the minister guilty of a mortal sin. - -

A Baptism is to be considered as probably invalid when there is real reason for doubting whether some essential requisite of the sacrament was wanting, e.g., when doubtful matter or form has been used. If anxiety arises that is not supported by any good reason, as happens with scrupulous persons whose vain fears make them uncertain about their actions and intentions, it should be dismissed from the mind as unworthy of attention. Only doubts that are objective and well founded ought to be considered. To repeat Baptism, Confirmation or Holy Orders, even conditionally, because of doubts that are plainly insufficient, would be a sacrilege for the same reason that an absolute iteration is a profanation of sacred things.³²

Having an attitude (policy) where the priest automatically presumes, when the correct matter and form were applied, “what if this person was not properly baptized,” is purely an unreasonable, imprudent, and negative doubt.

VII. Solemn and Private Baptism

But if one would follow the RCI policy of administering conditional Baptism on adult converts from the Novus Ordo, there is, besides the theological and sacramental problems, also the question of what manner of reception into the Church should be used in their case.

In sacramental theology, when divided accor-

ding to the form, there are two kinds of Baptisms, **solemn** and **private**. Which one to be used is determined by the circumstances of the situation and the qualities of the recipient.

Solemn Baptism is the one which is administered by a priest or Bishop following all the described ceremonies in the *Roman Ritual*. The *Ritual* has a much longer form for the solemn Baptism of adults. But the Ordinary can, for a reasonable cause, allow the form for infants to be used in the Baptism of adults.³³

Since Novus Ordo baptisms are held by the RCI as being merely “doubtful,” and Solemn Baptism is administered only unconditionally, a priest couldn’t use it in the case of administering Baptism conditionally on adults.

In *private Baptism*, usually given in a danger of death, it is sufficient that the minister, a priest or a layman, administer the essential matter and form, and have the intention of doing what the Church does. All the ceremonies that precede the actual Baptism are omitted. Private Baptism may be given only in the case of real necessity, i.e., if the child (or adult) is in danger of dying before the full rite is completed. The reason is, of course, that if it were possible to go through the whole rite, the case would not be one of necessity at all, and so there would be no excuse for private Baptism.³⁴

There is only one exception, when the *Roman Ritual* concedes the right to use private Baptism outside the danger of death, and that is “in the case of adult *heretics* who are to be baptized conditionally.”³⁵ Therefore we look next at how the Church has dealt with doubtful baptisms in different sects.

VIII. The Reception of Converts

As the Church legislates, each single case must be investigated and indiscriminate rebaptizing of non-Catholics is not founded on any law. As an example of sects whose Baptism is assumed to be valid, the Church has mentioned Calvinists, Presbyterians, and Anglicans.³⁶

But whenever there was a question of a convert from some obscure Protestant sect, since there was not one authorized mode of baptizing

* utterly imprudent and void.

³² McHugh 1917, 100, 108.

³³ Fortescue & O’Connell 1962, 361-362.

³⁴ Fortescue & O’Connell 1962, 362.

³⁵ Weller 1950, 27. Emphasis added.

³⁶ Augustine 1921, 23-24.

among the sects, and the necessity and true significance of the Sacrament was not uniformly taught and put into practice among them, there evidently were many instances where the validity of their Baptism remained questionable. This was especially true in the United States, where Bishops adopted the practice that practically all converts from Protestantism were invariably baptized, either absolutely or conditionally. This was not because Baptism administered by heretics was held to be invalid, but because it was generally impossible to discover whether they had been properly baptized. Even in cases where a ceremony had certainly been performed, i.e. the *fact* of the event was certain, a reasonable doubt of validity generally remained.³⁷

Though some countries were given more leeway in applying the Church principles, the Code of Canon Law, the *Roman Ritual*, and the decisions of the Holy Office state that the reception of a convert is always referred to the diocesan Bishop, i.e. a Bishop with

an ordinary jurisdiction. It was in his power only to decide what procedure to use, whether there was a need of an abjuration of errors, and also if there was a necessity to absolve the convert from the censure of excommunication, if perchance he had incurred it. When the priest assigned to receive the convert had made a careful inquiry about the *fact* and the *validity* of the convert's Baptism, there were three procedures which could be taken.

- 1) **Convert not already baptized.** In this case there was no need for an abjuration, since an unbaptized person is not a here-

tic, nor an absolution from an excommunication, nor confession. There is no formal profession of faith needed, because that included in the baptismal rite suffices. Then the convert was baptized according to all the ceremonies of the Ritual.

- 2) **Convert already baptized.** When it was morally certain that the Baptism formerly received was valid, the same rite of reception was followed as in the case when conditional baptism was conferred, except that the rite of Baptism is omitted and absolution is given unconditionally.

- 3) **Convert doubtfully baptized.** This rite requires the abjuration of errors (in the case of those over the age of puberty) made in the presence of the Ordinary or his delegate, and at least two witnesses. Then follows the absolution from the censure of excommunication (for those over the age of puberty). The Baptism is done with the conditional form ("*Si non es baptizatus,*" etc.), after



Lucini Antonio: Baptism of St. Augustine by St. Ambrose

which the convert makes his general confession, and the priest will absolve him conditionally, since the validity of the Baptism was in doubt. The Code of Canon Law (753 §2) also directs the convert to attend Mass and make his first Communion.³⁸

Private Baptism can, as stated above, be made in the case of *adult heretics*, but it still has to be adjoined with the abjuration of errors and general confession.

If a mere negative "what if" doubt, which as we recall, was called "utterly imprudent and

³⁷ Fanning 1913, 264.

³⁸ Fortescue 1943, 388-391.

void,” would be sufficient to determine the priest’s sacramental policy, one could, in that case, start to doubt *all* Baptisms done outside one’s own group. This actually took place a few decades ago in Europe. A Traditional group, after losing their priest, called in a Traditional Bishop to take over their mission. And the Bishop* demanded, that *everyone* in the group, children and adults alike, must receive conditional Baptism and Confirmation from him before he agreed to become their pastor.

This is, of course, an extreme example, but a logical conclusion if one starts to follow one’s “baseless suspicions” and scruples instead the Canon Law of the Church. It would also be a practice, condemned by St. Leo I, where someone “is forced twice to enter the font.”

Incidentally, the *Ritual* gives the reason for the demand of doing research about whether the convert was ever baptized, “so as to preclude that someone who has been baptized before should want to be baptized again – be it out of ignorance, error, selfish advantage, or any other reason, by imposture or perfidy.”³⁹

IX. Is there Any Room for Conditional Baptism of Catholics?

This tendency of some faithful, mentioned by the *Ritual*, where a scrupulous or ignorant conscience wants rebaptism, is in no way a novelty. Even St. Cyprian was asked by a certain Magnus if Baptism was valid for those who had been baptized in sickness by mere sprinkling, not washing. St. Cyprian answered that “the divine

benefits can in no respect be mutilated and weakened; nor can anything less occur in that case, where, with full and entire faith both of the giver and receiver, is accepted what is drawn from the divine gifts.” Sprinkling with water prevailed equally with washing, and Baptism thus received was perfectly valid.⁴⁰

But of course, just as we cannot act upon the principle that there is *always* a prudent doubt in regard to every Baptism done by someone other than a priest, neither can we assume that there can *never* be a prudent doubt. There might well be such a doubt when the Sacrament is given by one who is poorly instructed or mentally under

average, or in certain circumstances of difficult childbirth or in other hard conditions, e.g. in darkness, in very great haste, etc. But that’s why diligent investigation into the circumstances of each case that arises must be done. This investigation will often help the inquirer to form a morally cer-

tain judgment in favor of – or even against – the validity of the lay Baptism, and then there should be no hesitation in acting in accordance with this judgment. But sometimes, as a result of this diligent investigation, it will be really doubtful if the lay Baptism was valid, in which case, if the doubt cannot be solved, the Sacrament should be repeated conditionally.⁴¹

A typical example of questioning the validity of a Baptism is one mentioned by Bishop Sanborn: one sees a photograph or a video of an adult Baptism, where the water is poured on the person’s hair instead of forehead. Father Nicholas Halligan, professor of Fundamental Theology,



Though not poured on the forehead, the amount of water is almost always sufficient for a moral certainty of having touched the skin.

* He was no one associated with St. Gertrude the Great or Most Holy Trinity Seminary.

³⁹ Weller 1950, 61.

⁴⁰ [Epistle 75](#).

⁴¹ McCarthy 1960, 54-55.

and author of the classic American sacramental manual *The Administration of the Sacraments*, writes: "Unless the skin is washed the baptism is invalid or at least doubtful and thus must be conferred again conditionally. Baptism is at least doubtful if the water touches only the hair."⁴²

Here, just like in the cases dealt with above, one must, if a Baptism like this ever came up, solve the doubt, not according to "what ifs," i.e. *maybe* the water didn't touch the skin, but what was actually done. And the essential thing in the application of the matter (water) is that the ablution is verified and signified. This may be done with a greater or lesser quantity of water. One drop could hardly be said to express ablution,⁴³ but usually the amount used is sufficient to have moral certainty that the water did touch the skin and Baptism was valid.

These kinds of cases are not that common anyway, since the vast majority of Baptisms in the Novus Ordo or mainstream Protestant sects are performed on babies, or, in the case of Baptist sects, usually done

by immersion, i.e. performed by completely submerging a person in water.

Though a priest can never confer Sacraments conditionally based on an imprudent doubt, it is sometimes allowed to do so based on such a doubt from the part of the faithful. *The Casuist* presents such a case, incidentally about a mother who hurriedly baptized her daughter who appeared to be at the point of death. They often spoke about the Baptism and gradually became convinced it was administered invalidly. Their pastor admonished them to put the matter from their thoughts, for he was convinced the Baptism was valid. But they continued their repeated

requests to repeat the Baptism, and as the pastor saw that the matter was seriously vexing their minds, he finally consented to baptize the daughter conditionally.⁴⁴

This kind of a case, like the doubt about whether the water actually touched the hair or not, is a doubt which, while real, is still very slight. Such a doubt does not impose itself on the judgment of a prudent man, and does not therefore constitute a prudent doubt. Still he might not be able to reject it, especially in a matter of such great importance as the validity of Baptism. Therefore some grave authorities hold that a troublesome scruple of which a conscience cannot rid itself, provided it be not altogether unrea-

sonable, is a sufficient reason for repeating conditionally a necessary Sacrament such as Baptism.⁴⁵

The amount of guilt the priest incurs on himself depends on his motive. In the case cited, if the pastor acted merely to gratify a whim indulged by mother and daughter, and felt no doubt about the first Baptism, his act of baptizing

was not justified. The desire to please or even to relieve distress would not justify him in carrying out a farcical simulation of the Sacrament or in attempting to baptize one who, to his knowledge, was already baptized. But if he, on second thought, decided that the reasons of the mother and daughter, although slight, were not clearly absurd, he could, with a clear conscience, repeat the Baptism, though, of course, he is not obliged to do so. So whether the priest is guilty of sacrilege depends on the motives with which he acted.⁴⁶

A curious case was decided by the Sacred Congregation of the Inquisition in 1681. A group



**"Behold I stand nigh the spring of water, and the daughters of the inhabitants of this city will come out to draw water."
(Genesis 24:13)**

⁴² Halligan 1964, 33-34.

⁴³ Augustine 1921, 34-35.

⁴⁴ McHugh 1917, 107.

⁴⁵ McHugh 1917, 108.

⁴⁶ McHugh 1917, 108-109.

of Scottish Protestants approached a priest with the request either to be rebaptized or at least to have the ceremonies repeated, because they were harassed by demons and felt relieved by conditional Baptism or the use of the customary baptismal ceremonies. The Inquisition granted the request and allowed the practice further, especially for non-Catholics, provided that conditional Baptism was not administered for futile reasons.⁴⁷

So, though it does seem that giving conditional Baptism may sometimes be justified, the Church has tolerated this merely to ease the mind of the faithful, who otherwise might be tormented by their scruples about the validity of their Baptism. A priest, on the other hand, cannot base his sacramental actions on mere imprudent doubts, out of fear of committing a sacrilege.

X. Summary

From everything said above, we can summarize some main points:

- In the Church's practice conditional Baptism was always mainly reserved in the cases where the *fact* of the candidate's Baptism was in doubt. Baptism received in a heretical or schismatical sect always enjoyed the assumption of validity.
- The Church reprovved, and, in the past, even shunned priests, who were in the habit of conferring conditional baptisms freely and without examination. She always demanded that the priests do a thorough investigation before baptizing conditionally, out of fear of committing the sacrilege of rebaptizing.
- The investigation which the priest was obliged to do involved doing actual research about the rituals, procedures, and history of the sect where the candidate belonged. The principle to be acted upon was to search *what was actually done*, not what the priest assumed *might* have been or not have been done.
- The RCI sacramental policy of giving conditional Baptism to the Novus Ordo converts is based on a mere negative doubt, i.e. on the doubt that the person

wishing to receive the Sacraments from them *might* not be validly baptized. (As Bishop Sanborn put it: "Who knows how many other instances of invalid or doubtful baptisms there have been?") That's why it cannot be held to be a prudent doubt required by Canon Law.

- The RCI policy is, furthermore, not based on any Church Law. On the contrary, both divine law and Church law, as the Council of Trent teaches us, forbid a priest to rebaptize a person who was baptized after midnight of January 1, 1990, and who cannot present proofs of the qualities of his Baptism.
- To demand some proofs from a person in a case where there is no prudent doubt, would be to act merely on "baseless suspicion," in the words of Pope St. Leo I.
- Any policy regarding the Sacraments must be based on sacramental theology, not on anecdotal evidence from YouTube videos.
- At St. Gertrude the Great, we follow the basic principles expressed by Fathers McHugh and Callan, namely that in the cases of converts we find out first the *fact* of their Baptism, which, as these theologians say "must be proved." And when the fact has been proved, and because we know that the Baptism's "act was according to law," since correct matter and form are used by the Novus Ordo, we "take it that all was rightly done."
- The only justification for why the Catholic Church *sometimes* allowed conditional Baptism of Catholics, or even non-Catholics, was to ease their scruples about the validity of their own Baptism.
- This kind of rebaptism is never an obligation for any priest. He must baptize conditionally only if he has a prudent doubt. And this for the reason of the ratio of sacrilege, of which the priest could be guilty, if he gives conditional Baptism based on anything other than a prudent doubt demanded by Canon Law.

XI. Conclusions

Based on the above, we priests who work at St.

⁴⁷ Augustine 1921, 73.

Gertrude the Great Roman Catholic Church do not follow the policy of giving conditional Baptism on members of the Novus Ordo sect, which Bishop Sanborn has mandated on the members of the Roman Catholic Institute. The reason is that this policy is not based on any prudent doubt, demanded by Canon Law, but on mere “think sos” and “what ifs.” These kinds of doubts are not prudent, in other words, “utterly imprudent and void.”

Some faithful might ask, why make yet another big fuss about a theological controversy? The priests of SGG and the RCI already have had a public disagreement about the Thesis of Cassiciacum, which has been very divisive in the already very divided Traditional Catholic movement. Wouldn't it be more prudent for the priests involved just agree to disagree, and, in the words of the third century African bishops, treat this as an issue where the clergy are “free to differ?” Or, in the words of Rodney King: “Can't we all just get along?”

Unfortunately, this policy of the RCI does not just stay in isolation among the chapels and missions of their own priests and bishops. It affects traditional Catholics from other chapels and groups, too, including St. Gertrude the Great and her missions. We have already had several cases of our own parishioners moving to an RCI chapel or approaching them for Sacraments after having spent years attending Mass and receiving Sacraments from us. Diligent research about the validity of their Baptism, required by Church law, has already been made, only for them to find themselves having to submit to being conditionally baptized and conditionally confirmed in order to receive the sacraments from an RCI affiliated priest. This includes people confirmed by Bishop Dolan having been conditionally baptized and confirmed.

Thus this policy of Bishop Sanborn, which follows a mere imprudent doubt, is by extension forced upon clergy outside the RCI apostolate, and also on lay people, who have never questioned their own Baptism and worthy reception of the Sacraments.

This is why we, the priests of St. Gertrude the Great, were compelled to publish a public response. The RCI policy on conditional baptisms contradicts divine law, Canon Law, and the sacramental theology what we were all taught while

we were seminarians, and the practice we have used for years as priests. We, as traditional Catholic priests, are all meant to have respect for the decisions of other competent clergy. If a parishioner who was baptized Protestant were determined to have been validly baptized by Bishop Sanborn, I am not meant to re-investigate. I would permit him to the Sacraments. The same respect must be shown in the reverse. I and the other priests who serve St. Gertrude the Great and her missions follow sacramental theology, based on the principles of Canon Law, which we were taught and instructed by Father Cekada to follow.

On the other hand, a sacramental policy such as that of the RCI, which insists on rebaptism of anyone coming from the Novus Ordo and born after the arbitrary year of 1990, is harmful to souls. It is harmful, not only because it goes against the principles of sacramental theology, but it additionally undermines the decisions of other priests and thus causes people to unnecessarily question the priests' capability. Because of this, the policy of the RCI places a burden on us, the traditional priests outside the RCI group. I and the other priests of St. Gertrude the Great were, therefore, not left a choice where we were “free to differ.” Since Bishop Sanborn has in his Seminary Newsletter and Pastoral Directory publicly declared his policy, I have been obliged publicly to show why, according to the principles of sacramental theology, this policy, in the words of Daniel, has been “weighed in the balance and found wanting.” (Dan. 5:27)

Fr. Vili Lehtoranta

West Chester, Ohio
August 9, 2023
St. John Vianney, C.

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