



The Pastor's Corner



from the pastor

Baptism of Infants and the Marital Status of Parents

Does the marital status of parents determine whether their children can be baptized into the Catholic Church?

This question has come up with alarming frequency during my ministry. Many Catholic parents have told me that even though they were active members of a parish, the pastor refused to baptize their children because he insisted they must first “get their marriage straightened out”.

In many of these cases, the requesting parents were “married outside the Church”, because one or both partners have been previously married and divorced. Until a Catholic Church tribunal issues a judgment of nullity on their previous marriages, they could not licitly be married in the Catholic Church to a new partner.

In other cases, a single parent who has never married became pregnant and chose to keep the baby. The pastor refused to baptize the baby because the parent was not married.

In some cases, there were two parents involved but they are not married and do not plan to marry. Again, the pastor refused to baptize the baby because the parents were not married.

So many of these stories have come my way that I decided I had better check our Code of Canon Law which states general policies for the universal Catholic Church. Here is what I found on the question of parents who are requesting Baptism of their infant child.

Canon 851 The celebration of Baptism must be prepared properly; consequently:
2/ the parents of an infant to be baptized and those who are to undertake the function of sponsor are to be instructed properly on the meaning of this sacrament and the obligations attached to it. The pastor personally or through others is to take care that the parents are properly instructed through both pastoral advice and common prayer, bringing several families together and, where possible, visiting them.

The universal Canon Law says nothing about the marital status of the parents who are requesting the Baptism of their infants.

I wondered if there might be some local regulation for our own diocese about which I didn't know. To find out, I sent an email to Monsignor Kevin Quirk, the Judicial Vicar of our Diocese. He is the person on whom the bishop relies for correct understanding and application of the Canon Law that governs the universal Church. He is known as a careful, precise and conservative interpreter of Canon Law and he is always very clear and helpful. Here are portions of his reply to me:

John:

If there is one thing that really upsets me, as a canonist and pastoral minister, it is precisely this: the only requirement for baptism is that the person be unbaptized ... that is it. There is no requirement, in any sacrament, that would make my reception of a sacrament dependent on my parents' canonical status....the priests who are saying this (denying Baptism because of parents' marital status) are absolutely wrong and should be told to stop it.....I have declared null a number of marriages wherein the couple was forced by the priest to marry...in order to have children baptized. KMQ

Whew! That was a little more forceful than I was expecting!

Fifth Sunday of Easter

If I have heard about many of these cases, I have to assume that there are many more Catholic parents out there with similar stories from whom I have not heard. In too many cases, parents did not know that they could protest to our bishop about the refusal. Some parents felt so alienated that they stopped going to church at all.

I invite anyone who has had a similar experience to come and tell me about it.

On behalf of our Church, I deeply apologize to any parents whose request to baptize their infants was refused for unjust reasons. I will do all in my power to correct the situation.

Please share this message with anyone who may appreciate it!