

There are no easy answers to the question of what interchurch families should do about baptism, while the churches and ecclesial communities continue to be divided. We are considering here particularly the situation when Roman Catholics are married to Christians of another communion, especially Anglicans and Protestants.

The background

Baptism signifies incorporation into Christ and into his Body the Church. Before the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) the Roman Catholic Church equated itself with the Church of Christ. All other Christians were officially regarded as schismatics or heretics in error and there was a widespread view among Roman Catholics that they therefore had no rights. Marriages between Roman Catholics and other Christians were allowed only if both partners promised that all the children of the marriage would be baptised and brought up as Roman Catholics. (The Eastern Orthodox churches still have a similar position.) Anglican and Protestant churches strongly disapproved of this legislation. They encouraged their members not to make a promise, but did not make laws about it.

The Second Vatican Council viewed other churches and ecclesial communities much more positively than before, recognising the baptism that they celebrate and the work of the Holy Spirit in them. The Council also recognised the conscientious rights of other Christians to practise their faith in the way they believed to conform with the will of Christ. These developments had enormous implications for the question of baptism when Roman Catholics married other Christians.

So what is the position today?

The Roman Catholic Church expects its members who marry other Christians to make every effort to bring up their children as Catholics, and wants both partners to think seriously about the question before they commit themselves to marriage. So it still requires a pre-nuptial promise. But from 1970 it has been the Catholic partner alone who makes a promise (the other partner is to be informed of it) and it is not an absolute promise. The form used in England and Wales is: 'I sincerely undertake that I will do all that I can within the unity of our partnership to have all the children of our marriage baptised and brought up in the Catholic Church.' ([*Mixed Marriages: the Revised Directory promulgated by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 30th April 1990, p.19*](#))

The Ecumenical Directory issued from Rome in 1993 recognises that the other partner 'may feel a like obligation because of his/her own Christian commitment', and points to the importance of 'the maintenance of the communion of the family'. It continues: 'If, notwithstanding the Catholic's best efforts, the children are not baptised and brought up in the Catholic Church, the Catholic parent does not fall subject to the censure of Canon Law.' ([*Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, 150-51: the 'Ecumenical Directory'*](#))

Both parents are responsible for their child's religious upbringing; they need to make a joint parental decision about it. Some parents will freely decide together to bring up their children in one church or the other, and that is what is envisaged by the current legislation. The phrase 'notwithstanding the Catholic's best efforts' does however introduce an element of competition.

Mutual recognition of baptism

It might be thought that a decision is not so difficult, since the major churches that celebrate the baptism of infants mutually recognise one another's baptisms. They will not re-baptise someone who wants to leave one church and join another. In Britain and Ireland a common *Certificate of Christian Baptism* is available, which the Roman Catholic Church, the churches of the Anglican Communion, the Church of Scotland and the Free Churches have agreed is evidence of Christian baptism. Baptism constitutes a sacramental bond of unity, and brings all the baptised into a real (though not fully realised) communion (*Ecumenical Directory*, 92, 129). But the problem is the relation of baptism to church membership. The 1993 Ecumenical Directory from Rome states: 'While by baptism a person is incorporated into Christ and his Church, this is only done in practice in a given Church or ecclesial Community. Baptism, therefore, may not be conferred jointly by two ministers belonging to different Churches or ecclesial Communities.' (97)