

# Sacraments

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diocesan guidelines designate the director of the Office of Liturgy, currently Father Thomas Mull, as the next recourse.

As Father Smith pointed out in a written statement, the Church's aim in deferring a sacrament is not to sit in judgment, but to ensure that parents understand the meaning of the sacrament.

"I try to make no judgment about anyone's relationship with God," he wrote. "But as a pastor in the Catholic Church, I am obligated to make a judgment about the external actions of a person as to how that affects them spiritually and how it affects the Church community spiritually."

Father Smith said that the fact that Chapman and Whitcomb are not married is not the reason for his decision. "I would baptize a child of unwed parents if there was some reason to see faith there," he said.

How the guidelines are applied, in other words, depends on the individuals and how external circumstances are seen to reflect internal attitudes. Inasmuch as humans do the determining, they may disagree on what factors are or ought to be decisive.

To identify and address the challenges posed in interpreting diocesan sacramental

guidelines, Bishop Clark called last spring for gatherings of parish staff members around the diocese.

Consequently, the Office of Liturgy and the Office of Religious Education have organized a series of forums, which began September 9 in Elmira. To date, three others have been held — one in Ithaca and two in Rochester. Each has revealed different concerns, according to Sister Mary Ann Binsack, diocesan director of religious education.

Sister Mary Ann stressed that the forums are not leading to another revision of the guidelines. "Our purpose is to find out where everybody is in regard to the guidelines and in what areas they are having difficulty," she said. "Then we need take these areas and work on how to implement them."

Participants at one forum last Thursday pointed to the major challenge created by increasing numbers of unchurched parents seeking sacraments for their children.

"As we become a more welcoming Church, we reach out to people who otherwise wouldn't be there," Sister Mary Ann explained. "People today are also more mobile, and they change parishes more often, so they are more aware of variations between parishes."

In the context of total Christian formation, sacraments should be highlights in a continuous process of education and growth

for both children and parents. Sacramental preparation programs are not designated to take the place of religious education.

But with children who have not been catechized, religious educators face tough choices. Should such youngsters be incorporated into sacramental preparation classes designed for those who have participated in religious education? To which group should preparation classes be geared? Should religious education classes be required for a certain period before a child becomes a candidate for a sacrament?

Those who attempt to delay the process or who require parents to become more involved than the parents would like may find that the family goes parish shopping as a simpler means of reaching their objective.

That's not necessarily bad, as long as the policies of parishes are consistent. In James Sce's case, changing parishes allowed him to escape the glare of conflict and publicity. After the couple demonstrated a willingness to meet the same requirements they faced at Mother of Sorrows, their son was baptized.

Chapman has also spoken with pastors of other parishes. All said they would baptize her child if she was a parishioner or if she had a letter from her own pastor or the bishop.

Few if any diocesan or parish administrators see the publicity Chapman and

See sought as being helpful in resolving the deferral of a sacrament.

"It is very difficult for me to see the advantages of handling situations this way," said Father Kevin McKenna, diocesan vice chancellor. "These conversations are extremely delicate and sensitive. I don't think they should be put into the public arena. . . I'd rather see people in conversation with the pastor or involved in the procedures established by diocesan guidelines to resolve such conflicts."

"Whatever the problem, communication is needed to develop the idea of the sacramental role parents play as the first of teachers," Father McKenna added. "What could be initially seen as an obstacle can become an opportunity for maturation in the Church."

Pastors, campus ministers, and religious education directors, coordinators and administrators are invited to four remaining discussions on sacramental practice. They are: Tuesday, Sept. 30, 10 a.m.-noon at the Finger Lakes Office of Religious Education, Geneva; Wednesday, Oct. 1, 10 a.m.-noon at Sacred Heart Cathedral Rectory; Tuesday, Oct. 7, 10 a.m.-noon at St. Mary's, Dansville; and Wednesday, Oct. 8, 1:30-3:30 p.m. at St. Mary's, Auburn.

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