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Why do priests differ on baptism?

Q. Our pastor gave a beautiful homily recently on baptism, saying children have a right to baptism as soon as possible after birth. However, this seems to vary from pastor to pastor.

Certain pastors refuse baptism to an innocent child if they judge parents are not "Catholic" enough. Others welcome infants with open arms, even if their parents are out in left field of their faith. How do you explain this? (Illinois)

A. I think we need first to clarify the church's policy on the matter. When Catholic parents (or a Catholic partner in an interfaith marriage) are seriously deficient in their Catholic practice, the pastor is obliged to delay baptism until he can help the parents rethink their faith.

True, children should be baptized "within the first weeks" after birth (Canon 867). The law assumes, however, that parents are practicing their faith, prepared to raise their children as faithful Catholics.

Thus, the same law requires that immediately after birth or before, the parents go to their parish priest to request the sacrament of baptism and to be properly prepared for it. A priest may not, in fact, lawfully baptize a child unless he has a solidly founded hope that the baby will be raised properly as a member of the Catholic religion.

If evidence for this hope is lacking, he should delay the baptism and explain the reason to the parents (Canon 868).

The ritual for baptism emphasizes the point. At least twice during the ceremony, Catholic parents profess adherence to the faith in which the child is being baptized and promise to give the example needed for the child to be raised in their faith.



Father John Dietzen

Question Corner

Normally, this promise cannot be made unless the Catholic parents themselves are faithful in their Catholic practice and are not simply bringing the child for baptism because of family tradition or a vague feeling that "it's the right thing to do."

But — and this is a crucial point — the story does not end there. The parish priest is obliged to help parents who are not yet ready genuinely to profess their faith, to assist them in assuming responsibility for the religious education of their children and then to decide the right time for baptism.

As someone put it well, a church which never says "no" to parents who are seriously deficient in their belief and practice of their faith never will allow them to become deeply believing parents.

It remains vital that Catholic parents desire in their own hearts that the baptism of their child will be what it was meant to be, an earnest recommitment of all their family to the faith they hope to share with their child.

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