PASTORAL QUESTIONS

The following section attempts to answer many of the frequently asked questions concerning the baptism of children. Many of the answers to these questions can be found in the liturgical documents *(Introduction to the Rites of Christian Initiation, Introduction to the Rite of Baptism for Children, Pastoralis Actio* ["An Instruction on Infant Baptism"]), *the revised Code of Canon Law, The Catechism of the Catholic Church;* as well as these Diocesan Guidelines.) Priests, deacons and baptismal teams should have a working knowledge of these important ecclesial documents when dealing with the theoretical and practical aspects of the sacrament.

1. **When should parents contact the parish about baptism for their children?**
   As adequate preparation takes ample time, parishes are encouraged to invite expectant parents to make initial contact as early as possible in the pregnancy (cf. Guideline II). Participating in the preparation program during pregnancy allows appropriate time to discern whether baptism should or should not be celebrated once the child is born (cf. Guideline IV).

2. **Are parents required to attend baptismal preparation sessions before their children are baptized?**
   The "General Introduction to Christian Initiation" (#3 found in the preliminary pages of both the *Rite of Baptism for Children* and the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*), the *Rite of Baptism of Children* (RBC #5.1) and the *Code of Canon Law* (CCL #851.2) are very clear that parents be properly prepared for both living out the commitment they are making (i.e., to raise their child in the faith) and for being able to celebrate the sacrament "with understanding." Thus, pastors may, with pastoral discretion, dispense parents from this requirement if he feels the parents of a child are already adequately prepared to both fulfill their commitment and to celebrate the sacrament "with understanding." However, all sacramental preparation should include not just catechetical components, but spiritual components as well. Thus, even when parents are catechetically prepared, participation in the spiritual components of the preparation should be seen as an integral part of the sacramental celebration. (Before dispensing this requirement, please read the answers to Pastoral Questions 5 and 6.)

3. **Are godparents required to attend baptismal preparation sessions before their godchild is baptized?**
   Before answering this question, please note that the rite, in its introductory paragraphs, does not speak of godparent but sponsor. This is because those who serve as godparents fulfill a ministry of the Church which is not limited to the sacrament of baptism, but which is a part of the larger life of the Catholic community. The ministry of the sponsor is the sharing of the faith with new members as well as introducing new members into the life of the community helping them to become active members. This ecclesial ministry, which is the responsibility of all the baptized, is carried out in relationship with any given person by a designated member of the community. This person is properly called a sponsor. If a child has two people sharing in this ministry, one must be female and the other male (at least one of them must meet the requirements stated in

Canon Law to be a sponsor), and together they are called godparents.

The role of a sponsor is very valuable in the Christian formation of a baptized child. By accepting the honor of being a sponsor, a person also accepts the responsibility that accompanies that honor: to assist the newly baptized in their Christian life as a representative of the whole Christian community. Therefore, godparents must be prepared in order to fulfill their roles in the Rite and in assisting the parents in their duties of raising the child in the practice of the faith. Since a portion of the preparation sessions should address the role of sponsor (not only in their ritual functions but also in the life-long commitment being made in the celebration), it is beneficial for the godparents to be a part of these sessions. Though godparents can be strongly encouraged to attend the preparation process, it can not be required. Further, a parish can make contact with godparents to ensure they meet the canonical requirements but the parish can not require godparents to produce a letter from their pastor confirming their eligibility.

Please note, because the role of sponsor is an ecclesial role (that is, the sponsor represents the Church community and not the family community) Canon Law sets forth certain requirements for taking on the function of sponsor (cf. Guideline V). When parents register for the baptismal preparation program, they should be informed of these requirements so that they may make an appropriate selection of godparents who would be asked to participate in the preparation program.

4. **May the preparation of the parents and godparents follow rather than precede the celebration of the sacrament?**

It should be clear that the intent of the preparation process is to prepare the parents and godparents for the Rite, offering them insights and deepening their dispositions so that the celebration will be a truly meaningful commitment on their part to raise their child in the faith. The Rite suggests, in different ways, that there should be no concern about postponing the sacrament, excluding an emergency, until the preparation is accomplished. Thus, pastors should periodically remind parishioners that the preparation process should be begun as early as possible (cf. Guideline II; e.g., during the fourth or fifth month of pregnancy.) If the sessions are not taken before the birth of the child, parents should be advised that as a matter of normal practice baptism will be postponed until the preparation process is completed.

However, if for some reason the parents are not able to participate in the sessions prior to the baptism, post-baptismal sessions should be held. These sessions need to be designed to help the parents "unfold the mysteries" they have celebrated in the rites and to help them in their duty as Christian parents. That is, these sessions should be developed using the principles outlined for the Period of Mystagogy in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. They should not be merely attending the Pre-Baptismal Program of the parish.

5. **Do parents and godparents need to attend a preparation program again when another child is to be baptized?**
The answer to this question depends upon the type of program in the parish. If it is one which merely presents information about the Rite of Baptism by a program leader to the participants, it will probably not be necessary for participating again within a three to four year period. However, if the program includes preparation for faith formation of infants and pre-school children as well as about the Rite of Baptism, and the learning method is more inclusive of the participants (which is a better adult formation model), then, each time the program is offered, the learning will be effected by the participation of the participants in each specific program offering. The varied perspectives, different insights and nuanced understandings arising from a different group of participants can help parents, who participated previously with another group, to deepen their awareness and understanding of the mysteries celebrated in this sacrament as well as their abilities to raise their child in the faith.

6. **May some parents, especially those with extensive Catholic education, be excused from the preparation sessions?**
As mentioned in response to Pastoral Question #2, a pastor, whose assessment of a parent(s) readiness (cf. Guideline IV) is that he/she/they are prepared to undertake the commitment expressed in baptism and to celebrate the sacrament with understanding, may dispense the parent(s) from the requirement of participating in a preparation program. However, the pastor should consider the following: if those who will be participating in the preparation sessions only experience other non-active or marginally participating parents, how are they going to be helped to realize the value of truly belonging to and participating in a parish community? This is a witness that "prepared" parents can bring to the sessions; and consequently, their participation can be a ministry to these other parents. This will be especially true if the parish program has been developed using principles for good adult faith formation.

7. **Can a brother or sister be a sponsor (godparent)?**
Brothers or sisters of a child to be baptized may be godparents providing that they meet the requirements laid out in Canon Law #874 (cf. Guideline V), namely
- have completed their 16th year
- have the aptitude and intention of fulfilling this function
- be confirmed and have celebrated their First Communion
- not be bound by any canonical penalty.

8. **How should inter-church marriages (marriage between a Catholic and a Christian of another denomination) be handled during the preparation process?**
Although we recognize a common baptism, the understanding of baptism differs among the various Christian denominations. Therefore, it would be appropriate to encourage non-Catholic Christian parents to participate in the preparation program so that they may have a better understanding of what we are celebrating with their child. However, since at the time of their wedding the non-Catholic Christian parent did not take on the obligation of raising their children within our Church, but rather confirmed that they

understood their Catholic spouse's obligation and would not interfere with that obligation, participation cannot be required.

In the celebration of the sacrament, the non-Catholic Christian spouse should be encouraged to participate fully, inclusive of renewing his/her baptismal promises. A parent unable to make the profession of faith may keep silent. (RBC #854) It may be prudent to explain the line "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church" lest they feel they are professing a faith in the Roman Catholic Church rather than in the Church of Jesus which is universal (catholic), i.e., open to all people.

9. **How should inter-religious marriages (marriages between a Catholic and a non-Christian spouse) be handled during the preparation process?**
What was said in response to question #8 applies here also. The non-Christian spouse does not have the obligation of raising their children in the faith. However, while not being obligated to participate they should be invited and welcomed to the program so that they may appreciate and understand better what is being celebrated with their child.

During the sessions, team members must make every effort to be respectful of the religious beliefs of the non-Christian parent(s). The team should encourage those in an inter-faith marriages to seek out the similarities in their beliefs, particularly those beliefs celebrated in the rite of Baptism.

Whether they attend the program or not, prior to the celebration of the rite, non-Christian parents should be instructed that they remain silent in response to the various questions and, in particular, at the time of the renewal of baptismal promises (RBC #5.4). It is sufficient to have the response of the Catholic spouse.

10. **What should be done if the baptismal team does not believe that there is "founded hope that the infant will be brought up in the Catholic religion?"**
As a part of the preparation program, there should be an initial interview with the parent(s) (cf. Guidelines III). This is especially important with parent(s) who are unknown to the leaders of the parish. Part of this interview should attend to discernment of readiness to celebrate the sacrament (cf. Guideline IV). If at that time, or if later in the process of preparation, it is discerned that there is no "founded hope" that the child will be raised in the faith, the pastor must be informed so as to be included in the decision making. The parent(s) or other family members who may be pushing for the baptism of the child should be informed that by official directives we are obligated not to baptize their child at this time, and they should be given the reasons for postponing the baptism (cf. RBC #8.4; CCL #868). In addition, the parent(s) should be presented with various opportunities through which to become actively involved in the growth in their Christian faith in the Catholic Church, noting that, if they do become active in their faith, baptism could be celebrated at a later date.

11. **May a priest or deacon celebrate a "Christian baptism" for a couple in an inter-church marriage (marriages between a Catholic and a non-Catholic Christian) when both decide to raise the child as a "Christian" and leave the choice of denomination to the child later in life?**
Although we share a common baptism with other Christian communities who baptize with water and a Trinitarian formula (in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit), it is our Catholic perspective that baptism is never non-denominational. It is always into Christ within the denomination celebrating the baptism. Thus, a priest or deacon may NOT baptize a child when the parents intention is to raise the child as a "Christian" and not as a Catholic Christian.

12. **When should baptisms be celebrated?**
The preferred time for celebrating Baptism is on a Sunday (the day when the community commemorates the Lord's resurrection) in the parish church with the full and active participation of the community of the faithful (cf. Guideline VII). This means that the preferred time of baptism is during a Sunday Mass (RBC #9) so that the community may be present and the paschal relationship between baptism and Eucharist may be clearly seen.

13. **Is the celebration of baptism during Sunday Mass required?**
Celebrating baptism at a Sunday Mass is the Church's preferred time for the celebration, but is not the required time. For pastoral reasons, a parish may need to limit the number of infants to be baptized during a particular Mass, as well as how frequently baptisms are are celebrated with the regular Sunday assemblies.

When celebrated outside of a Sunday Mass, the preferred day for celebration is still Sunday. It is expected that the celebration of baptism will follow the principles for good liturgical celebrations (no one minister taking all the parts, but the presence of various ministers; the presence of members of the faith community; the inclusion of music, movement, and full use of the symbols.)

14. **Can a child be baptized privately?**
Sacraments are by their very nature public and communal. They are never private actions. Thus, when one is baptized (be they child or an adult), the whole Church celebrates and rejoices. Therefore, the communal nature of the sacrament should be reflected in the manner it is celebrated: "[Baptism] should be conferred in a communal celebration for all the recently born children, and in the presence of the faithful…" (RBC #32)

When family circumstances preclude the child being baptized during the parish's normally scheduled times (either at Mass or outside of Mass), baptism may be celebrated at another time. However, every effort should be made to be sure that the celebration reflects its communal nature "in the presence…at least of relatives, friends and neighbors, who are all to take an active part in the rite." (RBC #32)

15. **Can a child be baptized in a family home?**
The Rite of Baptism states clearly that baptism should not be celebrated in private homes, except in danger of death. (RBC#12) The reason for this restriction is so that baptism (the sacrament of the Church's faith and of admittance into the people of God) will normally be celebrated, as is most appropriate, in the parish church, which must have a baptismal font. (RBC #10)

16. **When is an emergency baptism appropriate?**
An emergency baptism is appropriate whenever the infant is in danger of death. This does not mean that death is imminent and inevitable, but that the child is seriously ill or in need of surgery or other medical procedure that could put the life of the child at risk.

If baptism is celebrated in an emergency, outside of a parish church, it must be recorded in the Register of Baptisms either at the parish within whose boundaries the place of baptism is located or at the parish of the infant's parent(s).

17. **If an emergency baptism is required, how should the parents be prepared?**

If parishes stress the importance of parents contacting the parish office about baptism preparation as early as possible in the pregnancy (or before the adoption of a child), the need for preparation in emergency situations will be reduced from its already low rate to almost non-existent. But, when the situation does arise, prudence should lead the minister to determine how much of an emergency exists and how much opportunity there is for at least a minimal explanation of the meaning of baptism. If the situation is acute, baptism should be celebrated immediately with a discussion of its implications following later. In either case, the baptism and the catechesis should be approached as an opportunity for pastoral comforting of the parent(s) in this stressful time.

More complicated is the directive concerning a "founded hope that the infant will be brought up in the Catholic religion." (CCL #868) Mindful of the crisis situation, the minister needs to determine that there is a minimal faith practice by the parent(s). If there is not, the minister should try to determine if their request for baptism is based on faith or "magic." If the latter seems to be their motive, sensitive pastoral ministry will be required to be faithful to the Church's directives and compassionate to the needy parent(s). Keep in mind that "pastoral decisions based upon poor theology are poor pastoral decisions."

18. **What rites should be performed following an emergency baptism?**
If a child who has been baptized in danger of death recovers his or her health, then the Rite of Bringing a Baptized Child to the Church (RBC Chapter VI) should be celebrated. With the exception of the reception of the child, this celebration includes all the post-baptismal rites: the anointing with Chrism, clothing with the white garment, the presentation of a lighted candle, and the blessing of the parents and community. There is not re-baptism, nor conditional baptism!

19. **If the parents are not validly married in the Church, can the child be baptized?**
There is nothing that prevents a child born to parents who are not validly married in the Church from being baptized. Every effort should be made by the pastor or parish baptism preparation team to assist the parents to participate as fully as possible in the Catholic Church.

The team should see this as an evangelizing moment for the parents (and the family.)

To address issues of validating the marriage, reference should be made to the Diocesan Marriage Preparation Guidelines.

20. **If the parents are not married, can the child be baptized?**
There is nothing that prevents a child born to parents who are not married from being baptized provided that the parent(s) of that child is/are properly disposed, has/have been appropriately prepared, understand(s) the responsibilities that come with having the child baptized and is/are willing to fulfill the commitment undertaken.

The preparation process for a single parent is important because of the greater difficulties that are faced by single parents. The importance of support from other members of the Catholic community should be emphasized.

If the parents of the child are living together (cohabiting), pastoral sensitivity is required so as to take advantage of this opportunity to explore the possibility of marriage in the Church. The couple should be referred to a priest /deacon to discern this possibility. (See Diocesan Marriage Preparation Guidelines)

21. **May a child with a mental/physical disability be baptized?**
"Disability, of itself, is never a reason for deferring Baptism." (GCSPWB #9)

22. **At what age is a child's baptism no longer governed by the Rite of Baptism for Children but by the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (adapted for children)?**
Part II of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) provides "Rites for Particular Circumstances." Chapter 1 of this part addresses "Christian Initiation of Children who have reached Catechetical Age." This form of the rite is intended for those children who, for whatever reasons, were not baptized as infants, but who have attained the use of reason and are of catechetical age. (RCIA #252) The Church's directions are that these children are to be initiated through a series of periods and steps as outlined in "Part I: Christian Initiation of Adults" while adapted to their specific age group, and not through the *Rite of Baptism for Children.*

"Catechetical age" as been determined by the Bishops of the United States to be seven years old. Therefore, in our diocese the age of seven is to be used to determine whether or not an unbaptized child will be initiated into the Church through the *Rite of Baptism for Children* or the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.*

23. **Why is the presentation of a birth certificate important for issuing a Baptismal Certificate?**
A baptismal certificate is recognized by the government as a legal document wherein parentage and citizenship can be determined. Therefore, the parish ought to verify the child's birth information by means of an official birth certificate before issuing the baptismal certificate. (cf. Guideline IX)

24. **Can godparents be changed?**
In cases of adoption, the adopting parents should always be given an opportunity to change godparents. In all other cases, it is left to the prudential judgment of the pastor of the parish where the baptism is recorded as to whether godparents be changed. It is suggested that only in more serious situations would permission be given (ex. godparent convicted of a serious crime, abandons the Christian faith, etc.).

25. **Can godparents or other relatives bring the child for baptism?**
Someone other than the parent can bring the child for baptism if there is a written statement from the parent that they approve of the baptism of their child. A person who has been named by the court as the "managing conservator" has the legal right to make decisions on the religious upbringing of the child and can bring the child for baptism.

26. **Are baptisms prohibited during the season of Lent?**
There is no prohibition to baptisms taking place during Lent. The Code of Canon Law instructs parents that they have the responsibility to bring their children to baptism as soon after birth as possible (CCL #867). Parishes should not unnecessarily delay baptism by making parents wait until the Easter season.