

---

# The Sacrament of Baptism in an Ecumenical Context

---



By Rev. William Hammer,  
Ecumenical Officer, Archdiocese of Louisville

In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul is writing to offer encouragement to Roman Christians to hold fast to their faith. Regarding their baptism, he asks rhetorically whether they remember, “we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Through baptism into his death we were buried with him, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life.” (Romans 6:3-4)

All Christians are incorporated into a life in Christ and into his Church through Baptism. Baptism creates a bond of unity between all Christians and Christ and among all Christians in Christ.

The 2003 revised *Ecumenical Handbook for the Roman Catholic Dioceses of Kentucky* offers our bishops’ affirmation and encouragement to Catholics to build upon our shared foundation in the Christian faith: the waters of baptism. To give visible expression to the shared experience of being “baptized into Christ Jesus,” there should be ceremonies and prayer services where Christians come together to renew their baptismal promises.

The 1993 *Directory for the Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, (DAPNE) states that the Catholic Church recognizes as valid all baptisms “conferred with water and with a formula which clearly indicates that baptism is done in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” (DAPNE n.93, see also Canon 849). The last 40 years of dialogue among members of the various Christian churches has produced much progress and theological agreement in understanding the significance, importance, and effects of baptism. One example is the 1982 ground breaking document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, published by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. Vatican representatives also participated in its preparation.

Given our Catholic understanding of the nature of

baptism and the permanence of the relationship created by being baptized into Christ Jesus, the Catholic Church never “re-baptizes” another validly baptized Christian who seeks membership in the Catholic Church. Acceptance of an already baptized candidate for full communion into the Catholic Church requires celebrating the sacrament of Reconciliation “at a time prior to and distinct from the celebration of the rite of reception” (Appendix iii, n. 36, U.S. edition of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*). For admission into the Catholic Church, there follows a profession of faith, and the celebration of the sacraments of Confirmation and First Eucharist.

The Kentucky *Ecumenical Handbook* also offers guidance to parents who are in ecumenical or interchurch marriages and who are preparing for their child’s baptism. While there can be only one minister of Baptism, and that minister should be of the denomination into which the child will be baptized, the *Handbook* notes that “a minister of another Church or ecclesial Community (may) take part in the celebration” (n. 80). Thus ministers from both churches may share in the baptismal celebration of the child’s “new life” in Christ. Another possibility for mutual recognition of the baptism would be for the child and parents to be recognized or welcomed by the faith community of the other Christian parent as an affirmation of the baptism on a subsequent Sunday.

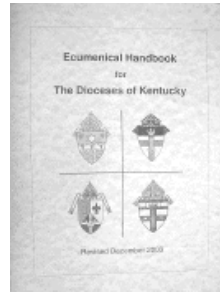
Another question that arises for parents at the time of the baptism of their child concerns the choice of godparents or witness. Drawing from DAPNE, the *Ecumenical Handbook* explains that there is a distinction between a godparent/sponsor and a witness. Godparents should be members of the Christian church into which the child will be baptized. This is so because they commit themselves to supporting parents in their duty of being good Christian parents and they represent the community of faith into which the child is being baptized (n. 81). Thus there must be at least one Catholic godparent at a baptism administered in the Catholic Church and other Christians may participate as

---

witnesses. In recognition of the promise made by the witness to support the parents in the Christian faith development of the newly baptized child, "The names of such witnesses should be entered as such into the baptismal register" (n. 81). Conversely, "Catholics may act as witnesses at baptisms in other Churches or ecclesial communities" (n. 81).

The mutual recognition of baptism by most Christian churches offers a profound witness to the basic bond of unity that all the baptized share. Though our interchurch communion is still imperfect, Catholics are neither isolated from nor an independent organization from all other Christians. Though denominational differences are still significant in some matters and we live out our faith in a particular community, we must acknowledge that baptism by a particular church is simultaneously baptism into the universal Church. All Christians are called to nurture

the faith and life of all our brothers and sisters in Christ and thereby live out an essential component of our ecumenical vocation.



This article is the 4th of a series of six written by members of the Catholic Conference of Kentucky's Ecumenical Committee.

For more information on baptism and other ecumenical matters in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, the *Ecumenical Handbook for the Dioceses of*

*Kentucky* is available from your diocesan ecumenical office or you can download it from the website of the Catholic Conference of Kentucky: ([www.ccky.org](http://www.ccky.org)).

---

## FIRST MESSAGE of BENEDICT XVI

Wednesday, 20 April 2005

Nourished and sustained by the Eucharist, Catholics cannot but feel encouraged to strive for the full unity for which Christ expressed so ardent a hope in the Upper Room. The Successor of Peter knows that he must make himself especially responsible for his Divine Master's supreme aspiration. Indeed, he is entrusted with the task of strengthening his brethren (cf. Lk 22: 32).

With full awareness, therefore, at the beginning of his ministry in the Church of Rome which Peter bathed in his blood, Peter's current Successor takes on as his primary task the duty to work tirelessly to rebuild the full and visible unity of all Christ's followers. This is his ambition, his impelling duty. He is aware that good intentions do not suffice for this. Concrete gestures that enter hearts and stir consciences are essential, inspiring in everyone that inner conversion that is the prerequisite for all ecumenical progress.

Theological dialogue is necessary; the investigation of the historical reasons for the decisions made in the past is also indispensable. But what is most urgently needed is that "purification of memory", so often recalled by John Paul II, which alone can dispose souls to accept the full truth of Christ. Each one of us must come before him, the supreme Judge of every living person, and render an account to him of all we have done or have failed to do to further the great good of the full and visible unity of all his disciples.

The current Successor of Peter is allowing himself to be called in the first person by this requirement and is prepared to do everything in his power to promote the fundamental cause of ecumenism. Following the example of his Predecessors, he is fully determined to encourage every initiative that seems appropriate for promoting contacts and understanding with the representatives of the different Churches and Ecclesial Communities....



1042 Burlington Lane, Frankfort, KY 40601  
(502) 875-4345 For more info, click on [www.ccky.org](http://www.ccky.org)

The Catholic Conference of KY (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops of Kentucky, established in 1983. Catholics throughout Kentucky have joined CCK in advocating for government policies that reflect Gospel values. Add your voice in asking legislators to advance the common good of our Commonwealth. Join the CCK legislative advocacy network by signing up as a faithful Citizen Advocate on the CCK web page at: [www.ccky.org](http://www.ccky.org).

✘ Archbishop Thomas C. Kelly, O.P. ✘ Bishop John J. McRaith ✘ Bishop Roger J. Foys ✘ Bishop Ronald W. Gainer

---