

Vatican ruling on Mormon baptism clarifies Catholic practice

By Jerry Filteau

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WASHINGTON - U.S. church officials said the Vatican ruling on the invalidity of baptism in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is intended to clarify Catholic practice, not make a judgment on Latter-day Saints, more widely known as Mormons.

A canon law expert called the ruling a significant one for church courts dealing with marriage cases.

Monsignor J. Terrence Fitzgerald, vicar general of the Salt Lake City Diocese, said in a telephone interview that, before the ruling, priests in Utah had been giving conditional baptism to Latter-day Saints who become Catholic.

Now they will "baptize absolutely," he said, not preceding it with the conditional formula, "If you are not baptized."

Latter-day Saints have their world headquarters in Salt Lake City.

In a statement sent to all parishes, missions and offices of the diocese, Salt Lake City Bishop George H. Niederauer emphasized that the Vatican ruling "should not be understood as either judging or measuring a spiritual relationship between Jesus Christ and the LDS Church."

The bishop said, "As we know, the LDS Church baptizes all its new members who were previously baptized in any other church. That practice indicated that the LDS Church regards its own baptism as accomplishing something which is substantially different from that of all other baptismal rites."

The Vatican ruling, he said “indicates that the Catholic Church also recognizes that LDS baptism is substantially different from Roman Catholic baptism.”

“We cooperate with the LDS in many areas of charitable works,” Monsignor Fitzgerald said. “We share many similar views on community issues and moral issues. ... So this is not a judgment about the relationship of the individual Mormon to Christ, it’s a statement about how we’re going to practice baptism.”

Bishop Niederauer’s statement noted that the Vatican’s own commentary on the ruling called for continued Catholic-Mormon cooperation, dialogue and growth in understanding.

The doctrinal congregation’s ruling was dated June 5 and published July 16.

In its commentary, the Vatican said that even though the Mormon baptismal rite refers to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the church’s beliefs about the identity of the three persons are so different from Catholic and mainline Christian belief that the rite cannot be regarded as a Christian baptism.

Latter-day Saints regard Jesus and the Holy Spirit as children of the Father and the Heavenly Mother. They believe that baptism was instituted by the Father, not Christ, and that it goes back to Adam and Eve.

The congregation said it reached its determination with the assistance of the U.S. bishops’ Committee on Doctrine.

Bishop Donald W. Trautman of Erie, Pa., chairman of that committee, told Catholic News Service, “The church in the United States was closely identified with this judgment. It has supplied much of the information and documentation to Rome and concurred in the judgment.”

Summarizing the effect on pastoral practice, he said: “We would no longer say (baptizing a former LDS member) is a conditional baptism; it is a baptism. As far as marriages go, we would say each one has to be considered independently. The effect of this on marriages has to be judged on a case-by-case basis.”

In church law marriages are considered sacramental only if both parties are

baptized.

If the non-Catholic party is not baptized, the marriage is not sacramental. It is not a valid marriage unless certain conditions have been fulfilled and the bishop has given a dispensation for it.

Church law adds, "If at the time the marriage was contracted one party was commonly held to have been baptized or the baptism was doubtful, the validity of the marriage must be presumed ... until it is proven with certainty that one party was baptized but the other was not."

Franciscan Father Arthur J. Espelage, executive coordinator of the Canon Law Society of America, said for many years now the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments had held that Mormon baptisms were not valid and called for baptism of converts from that church.

But he said that for questions of validity of a marriage between a baptized Christian and a member of the Latter-day Saints, the doctrinal congregation regarded it as a sacramental marriage; it "would not grant the Petrine privilege" by which the pope can dissolve a nonsacramental marriage in favor of the faith of the baptized party.

"The Holy Father could never dissolve a sacramental marriage," he said, but now cases involving a Mormon partner may be resolved by dissolution of the previous marriage, avoiding the more difficult and not always successful alternative of seeking an annulment.

Monsignor Fitzgerald said when dealing with marriage cases involving Mormons, "previously we assumed that they were baptized validly; now we will assume that the LDS person is not baptized."

Bishop Trautman noted that such issues can get complicated. He said one would have to explore, for example, whether the Mormon had first been validly baptized in a Christian church and later converted to the Latter-day Saints.

He said his committee did not investigate how other Christian churches deal with the question of the validity of Mormon baptisms.

In a published commentary on the issue the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America concluded that Mormon teaching is so “substantially different” from Christian belief that “Christian baptism has not taken place” in a Mormon baptism.

Paulist Father Ronald Roberson, associate director of the U.S. bishops’ Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and an expert on Orthodox churches, said none of the Orthodox churches regard Mormon baptism as valid.

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