Vatican says baptisms using wrong words are not valid

VATICAN CITY – A baptism administered "in the name of the Creator, and of the Redeemer and of the Sanctifier" is not a baptism at all, said the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The congregation's statement was published Feb. 29 as a brief response to questions regarding the validity of baptisms using that formula.

Asked whether a baptism performed with that formula – or a similar one referring to the "Creator, Liberator and Sustainer" – would be valid, the congregation answered "Negative."

Asked whether people who were initiated with a rite using these formulas would now need to be baptized "in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," the congregation answered "Affirmative."

The congregation said Pope Benedict XVI "approved these responses" and ordered their publication.

If either formula – recently initiated in North America to avoid referring to the Trinity with masculine names – was used, the person is not yet formally a Christian and any subsequent sacraments the person received also are invalid, said Cardinal Urbano Navarrete in a commentary commissioned by the doctrinal congregation.

"Persons who were baptized or will be baptized in the future with the formulas in question in reality are not baptized," the cardinal wrote. If they are now adults and want to be baptized, they must receive the instruction prescribed for all preparing for baptism and they should receive baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist during the same Mass, he said.

The most serious practical consequences, he said, are likely to be seen in the area of marriage where no sacrament exists if both spouses had been baptized with an invalid formula.

Even if only one of the spouses had been baptized with an invalid formula, there still is no valid sacrament of matrimony unless before the wedding the couple had obtained the dispensation needed for a marriage between a Catholic and a non-Christian, the cardinal said.

Cardinal Navarrete also said that, obviously, the sacraments of confirmation and of holy orders also are invalid when conferred on people baptized with an invalid formula.

In addition, he said, anyone who attempted to baptize someone using an invalid formula is subject to church penalties, which should be applied since it is "seriously illegitimate and unjust to deceive both the baptized and the community" by presenting the rite as a baptism.

In a separate commentary also commissioned by the doctrinal congregation, Monsignor Antonio Miralles said "expressions that invalidate the conferral of a true baptism cannot be tolerated by the church."

The monsignor, a consultant to the doctrinal congregation and a professor at Rome's Pontifical Holy Cross University, said the church believes it has no authority "to change that which Christ himself instituted" when he told his disciples to go out and baptize "in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

The problem with using "creator" and "redeemer" is not that they do not identify God as male, but that they "subvert faith in the Trinity" because they do not make clear the relationship among the three distinct persons, he said. For example, "God is eternally Father in relation to his only begotten Son, who is not eternally Son except in relation to the Father."

Monsignor Miralles said that the formula "creator, redeemer, sanctifier" is not Trinitarian because it blurs the distinctions among the three persons of the Trinity who all are involved together in the divine actions of creation, redemption and sanctification.

The monsignor also argued that the use of the recent formulas – more common among Protestants than among Catholics – could have a negative impact on

ecumenism, because a common baptism is essential for Christian unity.

A baptism recognized as valid by all dialogue partners is what allows them to call each other Christians, he said.

“All of us Christians are called to remain solidly faithful to the unity well expressed in the Letter to the Ephesians,” which calls for a common profession of “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all,” he said.