

Vatican statement on baptisms not meant to cause panic

WASHINGTON – A week after the Vatican announced that baptisms are invalid if they were not administered with the words “in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” the pastor at Christ the King Parish in Haddonfield, N.J., said he had not been inundated with questions from his parishioners.

“Not too many people know about it,” Father Joe Wallace told Catholic News Service March 7.

But he was sure that as word spread about the Feb. 29 statement from the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, not only would Catholics have questions, but so would people from other faiths.

Father Wallace, who is also director of ecumenical and interreligious affairs for the Diocese of Camden, N.J., said the Vatican statement is hardly promoting a new idea and he also said it was not meant to cause panic among those who wonder if their baptisms were performed with the right words.

Instead, he said the Vatican statement was meant to clarify what the church has always believed and ensure that future baptisms use language that is clear and “unambiguously Trinitarian” revealing the three persons of the Trinity.

A statement explaining invalid baptisms was published by the Vatican’s doctrinal congregation as a brief response to questions about formulas using the words “in the name of the Creator and of the Redeemer and of the Sanctifier” or “Creator, Liberator and Sustainer.” These words, used to avoid referring to the Trinity with masculine names, not only make the baptism invalid, but invalidate subsequent sacraments as well.

Father Wallace said he didn’t think this clarification would bring about a flood of requests for the sacraments to be re-administered.

He said church teaching points to the validity of baptisms performed in other

Christian churches. He said these baptisms will still be considered valid for those entering the church through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, unless the baptized person has doubts about the wording of his or her baptism, in which case a conditional baptism will take place in a private ceremony.

For Catholics who were baptized as infants, he said that unless someone videotaped the ceremony and can point to the use of another formula in the baptismal rite or an observer recalls feeling uncomfortable with the wording used, there is no need to question the validity of one's baptism.

"If someone knows for a fact they were baptized with another formula," they should say something, said Susan Wood, a theology professor at Marquette University in Milwaukee. But if they don't know the wording used, they shouldn't be anxious, she told CNS.

Wood, who is currently writing a book on the ecumenical and systematic theology of baptism, said she was pleased with the Vatican announcement, noting that there has been a change in baptismal practice in recent years, primarily in Protestant churches but also in some Catholic churches that use gender-neutral terms to refer to the Trinity.

"Hopefully this will bring attention to it and bring a return to the more traditional formula," she said, adding that the pastoral response should be "to be aware of what's correct and why and move forward, honoring the tradition of the church."

Wood pointed out that an attempt to "avoid male language for God ends up creating more serious problems for Trinitarian theology," because the wording takes away the relationship that each member of the Trinity has with the other and ends up reducing members of the Trinity to their functional roles.

"The personal relationship gets lost" in the attempts to "be politically correct," she said.

Quoting another church tradition, Wood said, "We believe according to how we pray," meaning that prayer formulas influence what one believes.

In the case of gender-neutral language for the Trinity, she said, it takes away the

unique relationship among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and provides an incomplete understanding that could “seriously affect the faith life of the church.”

Ann Riggs, former director of the National Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission, noted that some Protestant churches refer to the Trinity with the gender-neutral terms in baptism while others use the traditional “Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

She also said there has been considerable discussion about baptism among Christian churches worldwide, grappling with the words used, the appropriate ages for baptism and whether water is necessary.

Riggs said the recent Vatican statement on unacceptable wording for Catholic baptisms has caused disappointment among some Christian church leaders, because it “frustrates some hopes people had toward coming to greater unity.”

But she also noted they were grateful that the Catholic Church presented its position carefully and in an “ecumenically sensitive way.”

Riggs, a member of the Christian and Interfaith Relations Committee of Friends General Conference, knows how passionately people feel about baptism.

She said the discussion among Quakers about whether to use water in baptism to bring their practice closer to that of other Christians has been going on for more than 100 years.