



**Apostolic Exhortation Regarding
the Holy Mystery (Sacrament) of Baptism
in the Italo-Greek Byzantine Orthodox Catholic Church**

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By God's mercy Archbishop of Syracuse and Ortigia
and of All Sicily, Southern Italy, and Magna Graecia
Metropolitan of the Americas and Canada of the Italo-Greeks
Bishop of Utica
Primate of the Italo-Greek Byzantine Orthodox Catholic Church

To the beloved priests, deacons, monastics, and laity and the entire plentitude of the Most Holy Apostolic and Archiepiscopal Throne of Syracuse, and to all Christians of good will: grace and peace from God our Father, the love of Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all!

Recently, the media throughout the world reported of the baptism of two infants, the children of a gay couple, which was performed in Athens, Greece by a hierarch of the Orthodox Church. This hierarch, not the ruling bishop of the Metropolis in which the baptism took place, undertook the baptism of these innocent children without informing the ruling Metropolitan of all the facts of the case which, if made known to the Metropolitan, would have resulted in either the postponement of the baptism pending review of the request by the Holy Synod of Bishops of the

Church of Greece or its outright cancellation. It is not the intent of this, my letter, to weigh in on the matter of the baptism in question. Rather, I seek to put before you all, the policy of the Italo-Greek Byzantine Orthodox Catholic Church regarding our understanding of the Holy Mystery (Sacrament) of Baptism and the prerequisites that are required by our Particular Local Orthodox Church for the administration and celebration of the Holy Mystery of Baptism

Let us begin with the understanding of the Holy Mystery of Baptism in the Orthodox Catholic Church.

Simply put, Baptism is our death, burial, and resurrection in union with our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ. It replaces circumcision as the new rite of passage into the Covenant between God and His people. It is through Baptism that we enter into the Kingdom of God and into eternal life. The Apostle Paul described the promise of God beautifully in his letter to the Romans: "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). Thus, we can see the essential quality of baptism in attaining salvation.

To baptize (Gr. baptizo) literally means to immerse or to put into. Therefore, Orthodox Catholics have always baptized by triple immersion, "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). In the Old Testament, we see a type of Christian Baptism in the passage across the Red Sea (1 Corinthians 10:1-2). John the Baptist, the last prophet of the Old Covenant, baptized with water unto repentance (Mark 1:4; Acts 19:4), and Our Lord Jesus Christ received this baptism and transformed it.

There are three main things that occur on and are set in motion upon our being baptized. All three are spiritual in nature and reflect the "walk in newness of life" we are about to experience.

#1. A First and Second Dying

During Holy Baptism, we die with Christ on the Cross and descend into Hades with Him (the immersion). Then we ascend out of Hades with Christ, renewed and born again. As Saint Cyril of Alexandria (4th century) wrote to new converts, "You were led by the hand to the holy pool of divine baptism and each of you was asked if he believed in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. And you made that saving confession, you descended into the water and came up again three times. In the very same moment, you died and were born."

The second dying we experience is our continual death to sin. Every day we must die to sin; when we do not and allow ourselves to sin, we have quite literally forsaken/rejected our baptism. Saint Paul writes to the Colossians: "Therefore put to death your members which are upon the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:5).

#2. The Resurrection of Righteousness

Baptism ushers in our new life in Christ, our new birth and the entrance into God's Kingdom (John 3:5) where we walk in newness of life. This Mystery joins us to Christ in His glorified humanity and indwelt by God Himself (John 14:23). Because of Christ's death, we can now have a true relationship with God. A real, dynamic relationship, a true life in Christ. This first resurrection also serves as the prelude to the resurrection of our bodies at the Second Coming.

#3. Intimate, Continual Communion with God

The final spiritual change that Baptism accomplishes within us is purpose. We rise up out of Baptism to a new life, to the beginning of eternal life itself. This is why Saint Peter tells us that Baptism saves us (1 Peter 3:21) - it removes filth from our souls and bodies and gives us a "good conscience toward God". Because Christ took on our human nature and deified it by placing it at the Right Hand of the Father, we now have a pathway toward complete communion with God. We can participate in the Life of His Church and partake of Him in the Eucharist. We can experience His love, His grace, His energies, in a very real way. And we can continue to progress toward eternal life with God right there beside us.

Holy Baptism initiates a very real transformation in the mind, heart, soul, and body. We die with Christ on the Cross and resurrect with Him to a new life in which we die to sin. And because of this rebirth, we can now attain full communion with God, a real relationship with Him, as we work toward our salvation. Therefore, we should thank God for giving us this incredibly beautiful, heartrending gift, unworthy as we are.

Requirements for Baptism in the Orthodox Catholic Church

Let us move now to the basic requirements that must be met by parents who wish to have their child baptized in the Orthodox Catholic Church in the jurisdiction of the Italo-Greek Byzantine Orthodox Catholic Church.

1. The sponsor (godfather or godmother) must be a devout and practicing Orthodox Christian. If the sponsor is married, his or her marriage must have been blessed in the Orthodox Church.
2. The role of the sponsor is directly related to infant baptism. Since the infant is unable to make the necessary confession of faith, the sponsor stands in the child's place and speaks on his/her behalf.
3. The sponsor should be ready to recite the Nicene Creed from memory.
4. For three consecutive Sundays after the baptism, the sponsor should carry the neophyte to the Holy Altar to receive Holy Communion.

5. According to the Tradition of the Orthodox Catholic Church, it is absolutely imperative that one name of Orthodox Christian origin should be given to the child at the time of baptism. (Both Archdioceses of the Italo-Greek Byzantine Orthodox Catholic Church maintain a list of acceptable names which can be chosen by the parents for their children).
6. The day, time, and other arrangements of the baptism must be made with the priest well ahead of time. Parents are advised to call the church office of their parish to discuss these arrangements at least one month before the baptism. It is also advisable for the parents and godparents to meet with the priest once to discuss details of the sacrament as well as to be instructed in the theological importance of the sacrament in specific and the living of the Christian life following baptism in general.
7. The sponsors should be aware that he or she must provide the following items:
 - a. A complete change of clothes for the child (i.e. white baptismal gown, with inner shirt or onesie)
 - b. gold cross
 - c. Three white candles (baptismal candle should be larger or at least more ornate)
 - d. One bottle of olive oil
 - e. One bar of soap
 - f. One small white hand towel
 - g. One large white bath towel
 - h. One small white crib sheet
8. In the event that an unbaptized infant is near death, an Orthodox priest may be called to perform a clinical baptism. In the absence of an Orthodox clergyman, a layman or any other Christian may baptize the infant by sprinkling water on the child while repeating the following three times: "The servant of God (name), is baptized in the Name of the Father, of the Son, and the Holy Spirit."
9. Those adults wishing to become Orthodox Christians must receive catechism from an Orthodox priest, either one-on-one or through a class offered in the parish. After receiving instruction in the Faith, the candidate is accepted into the Church by one of three ways prescribed by the Sixth Ecumenical Council (Canon 95) as appropriate:
 - a. Baptism in the Name of the Father, of the Son, and Holy Spirit by triple immersion (if one has never before been baptized in any church)
 - b. Chrismation (if one has been baptized a Christian in another church but never confirmed in the Orthodox Christian Faith)
 - c. Confession of Faith (in rare occasions, as with non-Chalcedonian Orthodox and members of the Catholic Church (Latin and Eastern Churches)

Proof of baptism must be established by an authentic document. The priest must undertake to instruct the applicant in matters of the Faith and practice that govern the inner life and outward behavior of the Orthodox Christian.

Elucidation of the Necessary Requirements

It is important that parents and Godparents understand the serious nature of Baptism and the obligations that requesting the Holy Mystery impose on them. It is for this reason that Holy Mother Church is scrupulous in her attention to the details of administering the Holy Sacrament. To some, the Church's insistence on a proper administration of the Sacrament may seem legalistic, but this is certainly not the case. When we deal with Baptism, in fact with any of the Holy Mysteries, we are dealing with the spiritual well-being and salvation of the soul of the individual upon which the Sacrament is to be conferred. So, it behooves all concerned that they take great pains to ensure that all is done in proper and good order so that there is no question as to the validity and efficaciousness of the Sacrament when it is first conferred.

We believe that baptism is a Christian equivalent of circumcision; circumcision, in turn, was a harbinger of Christian baptism. Given that circumcision was performed on boys to make them part of the nation of God – the nation of the Covenant – at the age when they could not realize it, Christian children should also have the privilege and the obligation to become part of the Church, the Body of Christ. Having received the grace of Baptism, Christian children join the New Covenant with the Father through the Blood of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. The Lord came on earth to facilitate our unity with the Father. If children became part of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament and, by virtue of that, were entitled to benefits; why should the status of children get worse, not better, after the coming of Christ?

Baptism is so important and necessary for all people including children that the Church has always urged the faithful to have their children baptized in the first couple of weeks after their birth – or right away in cases of deadly danger. There are clear references to infant baptism since as early as the 2nd century. Hence, we cannot deny that cases of infant baptism were known even in the Apostolic times. Irenaeus, a 2nd-century saint, mentions infant baptism as a completely typical thing. A local Council of Carthage, led by Saint Cyprian (3rd century) also confirmed the legitimacy of infant baptism and pointed out that age restrictions were not set in stone. Likewise, Origen claimed that “the Church has a tradition to baptize even children, passed on by the Apostles.” (Origen, Commentary on Romans 5: 9). First mentions of infant baptisms never incited any dissent in the early Church, which can be taken to mean that it was a time-honored practice, rather than an innovation.

The doctrine of original sin plays an important part in the decision of Orthodox Christians to baptize their children. According to the Church, all people are born flawed because their nature was befouled by the Fall of Adam and Eve, our ancestors. Children are innocent but they carry original sin, nevertheless. That is why they need to be born again, too. They have to be made holy by God's grace and become God's children. Their nature has to be cured. Orthodox Christian children, by Baptism and Chrismation, become full members of the Church. They are baptized, chrismated, and take communion. The Holy Spirit intercedes for these children with groanings which cannot be uttered (Romans 8: 26).

If a Gentile converted to Judaism in the Old Testament, all male members of his household had to be circumcised. Likewise, we read in the New Testament that all members of a convert's household were baptized, which means that children were baptized, too (e. g., Lydia of Thyatire, Crispus the chief ruler of the synagogue, and the house of Stephen).

The Holy Apostle Peter called everyone to repent and get baptized in his sermon on Pentecost, pointing out that the promise of the Holy Spirit belongs to believers and their children (Acts 2: 38-39). The Gospel also contains the Lord's own words, "Then were there brought unto Him little children, that He should put His hands on them, and pray, and the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, Suffer the little children, and forbid them not to come unto Me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19: 13-14). Christians who do not allow their children to come to Christ and forbid them to become members of God's people, act like those disciples whom the Lord rebuked.

This is why we have our children baptized. Our children are adopted by God and revived by the water and the Spirit. Many of them lead a life of piety and partake of the Holy Sacrament since their earliest days, which is undoubtedly going to help them in the future. With that said, we have to remember that the Church lets children to be baptized under the condition that they shall be brought up in the faith and piety by their faithful parents and godparents, so that they would grow unto a perfect person, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13).

Can Baptism be Refused by the Church?

Every Orthodox Catholic Christian has the right under Canon Law to receive the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments) if they opportunely ask for them, are properly disposed to receive them, and are not prohibited from receiving them. If these three conditions are met, then a Sacrament may be validly conferred and received.

But with every right comes a corresponding obligation, and the right to receive the Holy Mysteries is no exception. The law of the Church states that every pastor of souls has the duty to ensure that those who ask for the Holy Mysteries are properly and thoroughly prepared for their reception. In the case of parents who present their infant child for Baptism, it is both the parents and the godparents who must be adequately prepared, as they are asking for a Sacrament on behalf of another person who is too young to request it for himself/herself.

What is the primary purpose of baptizing an infant? The teaching of the Orthodox Catholic Church states that Christ Himself affirmed that baptism is necessary for salvation, and that even innocent children, who are born with the consequences (not the guilt) of original sin, need baptism to be freed from the power of darkness and to become, once again, the children of God. Since canon law follows theology, it should not be surprising to anyone that this teaching of Christ and the Church, that baptism is necessary for salvation, also appears in the Code of Canon Law of the Orthodox Catholic Church. Parents should want their children baptized because they want them to be freed from the bondage of sin and made members of the Church - the Body of Christ, in which there is Life to its fullest.

But unfortunately, in many cases nowadays, parents who ask for their children's baptism do so only for cultural reasons rather than spiritual ones. Too often, religiously indifferent parents ask for their children's baptism merely because they are being pressured by their own parents to have their child baptized. Many parents and godparents today do not even understand the nature of

the Sacrament, nor do they even believe in God or the Church. In some cultures, the celebration of an infant's baptism is an important social event, quite separate from its religious significance, and baptism is, for this reason, requested by parents who no longer practice their Orthodox Catholic faith themselves. In such cases, the spiritual importance and necessity of the Sacrament is lost.

The Church seeks to avoid situations in which a child is baptized an Orthodox Catholic Christian, but then, due to the negligence and indifference of his parents and godparents, is not raised to practice the Orthodox Catholic Faith. For this reason, Canon Law notes that for a child to be baptized, there must be a realistic hope that he/she will be brought up in the Orthodox Catholic religion. If such hope is lacking, the baptism is to be deferred, and if, at some point in the future, the parents can provide grounds for hope that their infant will, in fact, be raised as an Orthodox Catholic Christian, the priest may then proceed with the baptism.

This requirement routinely presents practical problems for pastors who are faced with non-practicing Orthodox Catholic parents seeking baptism for their children. A priest is obliged by law to determine that there is reason to believe that somehow the child will, in fact, be raised Orthodox Catholic, or else he must tell the parents that their baby may not be baptized until such time as they are able to give a reasonable guarantee that the infant will be raised in the faith. At the same time, denying the parents' request requires great pastoral sensitivity and tact, since the priest does not want to drive such parents away from God and the Church for good.

Deciding what constitutes a "realistic hope" that the child will be raised Orthodox Catholic is often a difficult judgment call, and sincere priests may differ in their opinion about what to do in a particular case. It cannot be automatically assumed that there is no hope of the child's Orthodox Catholic upbringing simply because the parents are less than perfect Orthodox Catholic Christians. For example, the fact that the child's parents were not married in the Orthodox Catholic Church, or perhaps are not even married at all, may not necessarily indicate that they have no intention of raising their child as a practicing Orthodox Catholic Christian. God alone knows whether, in some cases, the decision of lapsed-Orthodox Catholic parents to educate their children in the Orthodox Catholic faith may actually bring about a return to the Church on the part of the parents themselves. Obviously, it is not an easy determination for any priest, or bishop for that matter, to make.

However, to avoid confusion, inconsistency and scandal, it is the norm for most jurisdictions of the Orthodox Church to hold mandatory classes for parents requesting infant baptism (and for the godparents as well) in order to ensure that (1) all parents and godparents truly understand the spiritual obligations that their child's and godchild's baptism will place on them, and (2) the pastor may have the opportunity to determine whether it may be unrealistic to hope that the children of the parents and godparents attending the class will be raised as practicing Orthodox Catholic Christians. Attending baptism preparation classes will show not only the pastor, but the larger community of faith (the parish) that will become the spiritual home of the child, that the parents and godparents are properly disposed for the baptism of the child, and thus welcome the help and assistance of the parish community in educating the child in the faith and bringing him/her up as an active member of the Church.

In the Italo-Greek Byzantine Orthodox Catholic Church, if the priest is unable to discern clearly from interaction with the parents that the child they request to be baptized will not be brought up in the faith, then he is to at least delay the baptism until he has had an opportunity to consult the Bishop. Having given the Bishop a full report regarding the matter, the Bishop will then decide how to proceed. In most cases, it will be necessary for the parents, and the prospective godparents, to meet personally with the Bishop to discuss the matter in further detail. If the Bishop is not reasonably convinced that there is a realistic hope that the child will be brought up in the Orthodox Catholic faith, then it is the Bishop's obligation and responsibility to either confirm the delay of the baptism or to deny it altogether.

The Baptism of Children of Same-Sex Couples

The baptism of children of same-sex couples presents a serious pastoral concern for the Church. Nevertheless, the Church does not seek to refuse the Holy Mystery of Baptism arbitrarily and summarily to the children of same-sex couples. On the contrary, the Church seeks to embrace the children of same-sex couples and welcome them into the Church as members of the Body of Christ, in the same manner, and without any special consideration, as the children of single parents, unwed mothers, and heterosexual couples.

The requirements that must be fulfilled by same-sex couples for the baptism of their children are the same that must be fulfilled by the parents of heterosexual couples. There are no exceptions or special treatment given when such a serious matter as the salvation of the soul of one of God's children hangs in the balance. Most importantly, there must be a well-founded and realistic hope in the heart and mind of the Church that a child of a same-sex couple will be brought up in the Orthodox Catholic faith by the child's guardians. This must always be the prime concern when considering whether or not to approve or deny the baptism of a child of same-sex guardians.

When a pious and right-believing Orthodox Catholic family brings their child to the Church to be baptized, that infant, at the moment of baptism, dies to the original sin in which it was born, comes out of the water risen to new life with and in Jesus Christ, is sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit, and becomes a tabernacle of the Most Holy Trinity, now beginning life as a son or daughter of God. When two same-sex guardians bring an infant to the Church to be baptized, that infant, at the moment of baptism, dies to the original sin in which it was born, comes out of the water risen to new life with and in Jesus Christ, is sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit, and becomes a tabernacle of the Most Holy Trinity, now beginning life as a son or daughter of God. As we can see from both examples, there is no difference between the baptism of a child of biological parents and a child brought to Church for baptism by a same-sex couple. The criteria for baptizing the children in both cases is exactly the same: there **MUST** be a well-founded and realistic hope that the child will be brought up in the Orthodox Catholic religion.

Many people today believe that the Church is only about the "Sacraments." This is an absolutely erroneous and false belief. The Orthodox Catholic Church has always taught, even from Apostolic times, that the Church is more than just the Holy Mysteries and rituals. It also includes Holy Tradition, Sacred Scripture, Faith, and Morals. All of these are intimately bound together so that the Truth, which the Church holds without blemish in her bosom, shines brightly from within

her and bathes all her members in a light that leads them along the path to salvation and eternal life and communion with the Holy Trinity.

So, we come now to a very important, even critical, question. Can the Orthodox Catholic faith be transmitted by same-sex guardians to a child? Yes. I am sure that many same-sex guardians of children can teach a child to believe in the Divinity of Christ and most of what the Church teaches. Will same-sex guardians bring a child to other Sacraments after Baptism? Yes. I am sure that many baptized children will be brought by same-sex couples to the Holy Mysteries of Confession, Holy Eucharist, Holy Anointing. But what about teaching a child all the morals of the Orthodox Catholic Faith? Will same-sex guardians include in their daily catechesis all sins against the sixth and ninth commandment? Will they include that sodomy is the most grievous sin against the 6th commandment? No, of course they will not include that in their catechesis. If they will not teach that, then they cannot honestly say that there is a “well-founded hope” that the child will be brought up in the Orthodox Catholic Faith.

Obviously, the same questions can be asked of heterosexual couples. Sadly, we must admit to the fact that even the children of heterosexual couples very often receive poor catechesis in the faith. Here now, we must also consider the defects of negligence and opposition. There has always been a difference in the pastoral discernment of the Church between parental negligence in catechesis (which the Church has always been quite patient with) versus active opposition to morals of the Orthodox Catholic Faith (a malice against the salvation of a child which the Church has, and rightfully so, no patience with.) For example, if a “straight couple” told me that they were going to expose their child to “straight porn” from the age of five years old onwards, I would, without hesitation, refuse to baptize that baby. Such an attitude on the part of the parents indicates opposition to the salvation of a child, as well as opposition to the articulated faith and morals of the Orthodox Catholic Church. So also, with sodomy. Sodomy is not only a mortal sin against the 6th commandment. It is one of only four sins that the Orthodox Catholic Church infallibly teaches “cries out to heaven for vengeance.” The other three are homicide (including abortion), oppression of the poor (especially the widow and orphan) and injustice to the wage-earner. Thus, a family missing Sunday Divine Liturgy for a soccer game is indeed a mortal sin, but it is not a mortal sin that “cries out to heaven for vengeance.” If the legal guardians of a child are going to teach that sins that cry out to heaven for vengeance are not offensive to God, then it can be reasonably said that they cannot and will not raise that child in the Orthodox Catholic faith.

Homosexual actions may be serious sins, but does any child in the care of a same-sex couple deserve to be sacramentally deprived because of the sins of his or her guardians or parents? Certainly, any child in danger of death, regardless of the sins of its straight parents or “gay guardians,” should immediately be baptized. But for a priest to baptize a healthy child without a well-founded hope of success in catechesis in later teenage years is actually more of a detriment to the salvation of that child than not.

Demons target a baptized child more than an unbaptized child, just as demons target a priest more than a baptized layman. To increase the crosshairs on a child’s head without having all the instruments at one’s disposal to engage in spiritual warfare (including the rejection of the sins of sodomy) would only be to exacerbate the spiritual attack that such child is subjected to.

Sodomy is a magnet for diabolical oppression in a home, and even full possession of its inhabitants. Even if you do not believe in demons as I do, ask yourself a practical question: Do you really expect a child being raised in a household of constant and unrepentant sodomy will make it to the age of 10 without some type of sexual sin, even if heterosexual sin?

Let us see what the Holy Spirit in the Bible tells us about returning to habitually and unrepentant grave sin after coming to Christ via Baptism. The Holy Spirit tells us through St. Peter, that “the last state has become worse for them than the first” and that “it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness.” Here is the full exhortation of the Holy and Illustrious Apostle: “For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. What the true proverb says has happened to them: “The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire” (2 Peter 2:20-22).

So where does this leave us when it comes to the baptism of children of same-sex couples? Do we want these children to go through life unbaptized, remaining in the state of sin in which he/she was born? Of course not! We would betray our own baptism if we desired such a thing. We want the child or children of same-sex guardians (and even the guardians themselves) to come to all the Sacraments, but faith and repentance must come first.

If the same-sex guardians of a baby actually do claim to teach the fulness of the Orthodox Catholic faith to that child while growing up, then perhaps there is a good chance that he or she will want to be baptized an Orthodox Catholic Christian in his or her teenage years. This decision may also include the difficult decision of that teenager having to reject the homosexual sins of his or her guardians, at least in an implicit manner (as no charitable priest would demand an explicit rejection of such sins in public!) In any case, I would baptize such a teenager who was raised by same-sex guardians if he or she were to strive his or her best to be a devout, faithful, and practicing Orthodox Catholic Christian. Nevertheless, the blatant, conscious, and manifest rejection of any part of the Orthodox Catholic Faith (including the 6th Commandment) is not an acceptable approach to any sacrament. In such circumstances, baptism is to be denied

The early Catholic Church in the Roman Empire often baptized children of the age of reason who had rejected the paganism of their parents, even if the teenager’s approach to Christ was opposed by his or her parents (See Luke 14:26 and Matthew 10:37.) Of course, it would be even better if his or her parents would accept Jesus Christ and also be saved. This is the same today for those in same-sex civil unions. In fact, if a same-sex couple had confessed their sins with repentance and firm resolution of amendment never to commit sodomy again and then approached me for the baptism of their baby or toddler, I would indeed baptize that baby. Still, I would ask that couple to refrain from Holy Communion until they lived separately, yes, even after a good confession. This is because Holy Communion is a public act, and reception of Holy Communion (even by celibate chaste people living together) is still a scandal. I hold this even for heterosexual couples awaiting a canonical dissolution of their marriage, too, even if they are chaste. In other

words, any straight or “gay” couple receiving Holy Communion while living together (even in continence) remains a public scandal.

No adult should approach baptism (or any of the other Holy Mysteries) without first demonstrating supernatural faith and repentance of all their sins. What about infant baptism? Can an infant demonstrate supernatural faith? Of course not, as infants do not yet have the use of reason. Thus, the Church has always taught that both the parents and the godparents must demonstrate supernatural faith in proxy (in place) of the child. Remember: The Holy Mysteries are not magic tricks. The Holy Mysteries are not only ineffectual without faith, but they are even dangerous to salvation without faith. In short, the Holy Mysteries are quite worthless to salvation without supernatural faith.

It is, therefore, incumbent upon every parish priest, through the prudent oversight of the Diocesan Bishop, to ensure that anyone approaching any of the Holy Mysteries does so worthily and is properly disposed to receive them. This requires proper preparation as set forth by Church law and Holy Tradition. It is the duty, obligation, and responsibility of every priest and bishop to discern prudently whether all the required prerequisites are met for the proper and valid reception of the Holy Mysteries of the Church. If even but one of the requirements is not met or is deficient in some way, then prudence dictates that the administration of the Sacrament should be delayed until such time as it can be properly and efficaciously received by the one requesting it.

If a priest, or the Bishop, reasonably and genuinely believes (without malice or prejudice toward the same-sex couple) that the guardians of the child or children are seeking baptism not for the salvation of the child or children but rather as a form of legitimizing their union, then the Sacrament is to be denied.

The Holy Mysteries of the Church are never to be politicized, either by those in positions of authority in the Church or by the baptized members of the Church who dissent from the teachings of the Church, or by those outside the Church who may be hostile to her for whatever reasons. Same-sex couples who come to the Church requesting the Holy Mystery of Baptism for their child/children as a symbol or sign of Church acceptance of their lifestyle should be informed, charitably but firmly, that the Sacrament cannot be administered.

As I mentioned earlier on, the baptism of children of same-sex couples poses a difficult pastoral problem and situation for the Church. Why? Because of the visibility of the sin involved. The sin of an active homosexual lifestyle is very rarely kept private these days. In fact, the vast majority of contemporary societies today celebrate the homosexual lifestyle as being a normal alternate lifestyle, one which can peacefully co-exist with traditional heterosexual relationships, namely the marital relationships between one man and one woman.

Because of this abnormality in thinking that homosexual relationships are equal to heterosexual relationships, especially in regard to marital and family rights, it would be virtually impossible for any priest or bishop, in charity, to presume that a homosexual “couple” living together openly, in a culture that suddenly decided to “celebrate” their “lifestyle” would make an admission of wrongness regarding their relationship when asking to have their child or children baptized in the Church. Because of this, the pastoral problem for the Church becomes how to baptize children

being brought up in irregular situations, especially those in same-sex relationships, that are far more public situations that give the appearance of acceptance and even celebration of something the Church must oppose.

Discretion Should be the Norm

The Church must make every good faith effort to baptize the children brought to her who are the fruit of or who have been brought into irregular relationships. After all, why should a child be punished for the sins of his/her parents or guardians? However, we must balance the common good of avoiding scandal with the individual good of each child by seeking to perform their baptism discreetly, giving no opportunity for public confusion and scandal regarding what we must reasonably and biblically oppose, as in the case of same-sex “marriage.”

Countering any trend to curb the baptism of children who are part of an irregular relationship, the longstanding presumption in Church teaching is that no child is to be deprived baptism. And herein lies the delicate balance: the good of the child versus the common good to avoid scandal. To achieve this balance, the key moving forward is discretion.

With the possible exception of the Holy Mystery of Penance, all the Sacraments of the Church are public celebrations, ones in which all the members of the Church are invited to participate, as all are members of the one and the same Body of Christ. That is why we find members of parishes always in attendance at weddings and baptisms of fellow parishioners.

While all Sacraments are public celebrations, it may become necessary now to revisit this practice with regard to the baptism of children from irregular relationships. It may be that attendance at such baptisms will, of necessity, have to be restricted; that the baptism take place in the presence of only the immediate family (i.e., parents or guardians and godparents) and maybe a handful of the members of the parish, who will act as witnesses to the Mystery, representing the parish community and providing its assent, prayers, and support. This policy will need to be extended to fornicators, adulterers, and other irregular parents.

While we in the Italo-Greek Byzantine Orthodox Catholic Church have never been presented with the pastoral consideration of baptizing a child or children of same-sex couples, I have found it necessary, in light of the events which recently took place in Athens, Greece, to address the matter, so that there is no misunderstanding what our position is regarding the baptism of children in the care of same-sex guardians.

In the coming weeks and months, the Italo-Greek Byzantine Orthodox Catholic Church will develop and publish a unified set of norms that will assist us in our archpastoral ministry and governance and that will ensure that we are walking on solid ground when it comes to such a delicate and most serious matter as the baptism of children in the care of same-sex couples and homosexual and lesbian guardians.

In the meantime, we will carefully listen to and watch the reactions, responses, and actions of the other Local Orthodox Churches, especially those of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, regarding the matter discussed herein. It is our fervent prayer and hope that each

of the other Local Orthodox Churches will contribute their own wisdom and thoughts about the matter and share them with one another so that, in the end, a uniform policy of action and standard pastoral norms will be implemented throughout the Orthodox Catholic Church.

In closing, I ask all of you to pray for peace and unity in the Church, and that we may all be of one mind in all things that pertain to the salvation of souls and this frail world in which we live.

Asking God's blessing upon you all and assuring you of our unworthy prayers, I remain,

Paternally yours in Christ,

+ Archbishop Stephen

+Archbishop Stephen