

## WHY “MATTER AND FORM” MATTERS: THE COUNCIL OF TRENT AND BAPTISM

The moment the news broke, I knew the vitriol would flow from the press! Wrong pronoun equals invalidity? The controversy over a priest who was suspended for using an **invalid baptismal formula** made national news. Turns out he had been doing so for years. Whether he knew better, I am no position to judge. But he **should** have known! Seminary profs are **adamant**—no grey areas here: “Always use the proper words for the sacraments!” **Canon Law** is crystal clear. Baptism “is validly conferred only by a washing of true water with the proper form of words.” (Can. 849) Regarding the sacraments, the Church exhorts clergy to observe the liturgical norms: “In celebrating the sacraments the liturgical books approved by competent authority are to be observed faithfully; accordingly, no one is to add, omit, or alter anything in them on one’s own authority.” (Can. 846 §1) Folks, that’s pretty clear!

Still, as the vast majority of lay faithful are neither theologians **nor** canon lawyers, they sincerely wonder how could this be? Not a few feel the teaching appears to verge on the “magical,” for lack of a better term. In fact, the essentials for celebrating the sacraments dates back centuries, but nowhere is it as clear as the **Council of Trent**. The Church has insisted— and rightly so— on using the proper **matter** and **form** when conferring the sacraments. What exactly do these terms mean? By the *matter* of a sacrament is meant either the proper *material* substance (i.e. **water** for Baptism or **bread and wine** for the Eucharist), or a spiritual act, such as our sins constituting the “matter” of the Sacrament of Penance. Our Catholic faith teaches us that through baptism, we are freed from sin, reborn as children of God and incorporated into the Church.

In the sacramental terminology of the Church, two words are often used: **valid** and **licit**. Think of it this way. For a sacrament to be valid means that it “took,” that the **essence** of a sacrament was in fact effected according to the rites of the Church. Calling a sacrament “licit” connotes that all applicable liturgical norms were observed, that the ceremony was “lawful,” so to speak. Session VII (1547) of Trent outlined the **necessities** of Baptism, including the use of natural water only (what were they using?) and the baptismal formula “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” combined with “the intention of doing what the Church does.” Those are the **only words** for conferring baptism. Furthermore, Trent condemned an **erroneous** view that small children “are to be rebaptized when they have attained to years of discretion,” as it denied the efficacy of infant baptism, an issue among some reformers.

The 2020 **clarification** from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) cited Vatican II’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (SC #7) “when a man baptizes it is really Christ Himself who baptizes.” That phrase was inspired by the words of **St. Augustine**, who in his writings held firmly that it is **Christ** who **baptizes**. He went so far as to say that he feared not the baptism of a drunkard, adulterer or murderer, because in the sacrament, “I give heed to the dove through who it was said to me, ‘He it is who baptizes.’” (*Tractate on the Gospel of John* V,18) Read the **CDF clarification** in full [here](#). Additionally, the one who pours must be the same person who says the words— it is a singular sacramental action. And (Can. 870) further adds: “An **abandoned infant** or a foundling is to be baptized unless diligent enquiry establishes that it has already been baptized.” Been there, done that—I’ll **never forget** that night five years ago!

A lay person (e.g. hospital staff) administering an emergency baptism must at least have the **intention** to do what the Church does when baptizing. It is also desirable that, as far as possible, one or two witnesses to the baptism be present. Today, we call them sponsors or godparents. In the

words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, (CCC #1213) baptism is “the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments.” Trent also clarified that it is possible to commit a grave sin **after** baptism, against those who denied this. Baptism is necessary for salvation, though there are forms other than water Baptism, including Baptism of blood (martyrdom) and Baptism by desire. Most Catholics are aware of these variants. It is the last that may come to play here.

Forgive the “old-fashioned” language, I am quoting from my edition of the *Summa Theologica*: “And such a man can obtain salvation without being actually baptized, on account of his **desire** for Baptism, which desire is the outcome of *faith that worketh by charity*, whereby God, **whose power is not tied** to visible sacraments, sanctifies man inwardly.” (III Q. 68. Art. 2.c) Here’s the rub. Those who had **every reason** to believe they were baptized **ought not despair** of God’s grace. He can work **outside** the **visible lines** of the sacraments. I fear that this was **not adequately** communicated, leading to dismay. Certainly, media outlets did not cover this aspect. John 6:60 comes to mind, in that case regarding the Real Presence of the Eucharist: “Then many of his disciples who were listening said, ‘This saying is hard; who can accept it?’” I pray that this error may never happen again.

- Speaking of Baptism—our **new icon** found its home in the Baptistry. It is both my solemn duty and a joy to baptize! I gently remind parents of their duty to have their babies baptized shortly after birth. The Church recommends this “within the first few weeks.” (Code of Canon Law, 867 §1) First-time parents attend a **Baptism Class**, held monthly. See the contact information on page 7.
- Each year, the early 5th century [Basilica of Santa Sabina](#) welcomes the pope for Ash Wednesday Mass. It is a venerable tradition at one of my favorite churches in Rome. There is a **poignant** funerary inscription very near the Basilica, dating to ca. 300 A.D. A toddler had died, and the parents ask for her intercession: “Pray for your parents, Matrona Matrona. She lived one year, fifty-two days.” Intercessory prayer is an ancient tradition.
- While Russian Orthodox **Patriarch Kirill** of Moscow’s statement following the invasion into Ukraine was ambiguous, his homily last Sunday wasn’t! Citing a “deterioration of the political situation in the Donbass,” a region of Ukraine, he condemned Ukraine’s movement towards “excess consumption, the world of visible ‘freedom.’” So, it is **their fault** they were invaded? My prediction—the possible meeting between the Pope and the Patriarch just got squashed!
- The Saint Paul Public School District narrowly averted a teachers strike, literally minutes before the deadline. The Minneapolis public school did not— hopefully that strike will be short-lived!
- Join us for Stations of the Cross each **Friday at 5:30 p.m.** during Lent. The next Soup Supper is on Friday, April 8. That same evening, we present a sacred concert— *The Chemin de la Croix*— organ meditations by **Marcel Dupré** on the Stations of the Cross.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector