

## **BAPTISM SHOULD NOT INVOLVE PERJURY**

Preparation should give an opportunity for integrity and evangelism, argues **Ian Robins**

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**In all my years as a parish priest, I advocated — indeed, insisted — that “it is desirable that every minister having the cure of souls shall normally administer the sacrament of Holy Baptism on Sundays at public worship when the most number of people come together” (Canon B21: Of Holy Baptism).**

**Yet now, in retirement, as I approach our parish church, and see the festive gathering — I wonder. This is going to be all-age worship with a vengeance. The children will not easily be quietened, or even corralled; the service will be far too long even for the genuinely concerned parents; and the regulars who have had to suffer this pantomime at least once a month will struggle to look welcoming.**

**So, as wardens and sidespeople endeavour to control the situation — on standby for the next request for the loo — and the clergy strive to interpret the liturgical texts, the well-meaning parents and godparents search their service copies, and mutter the most earth-shattering affirmation that any human being can make: “I turn to Christ.”**

**Of course, there are many baptisms where at least one parent has some Christian experience. Yet, in my visits as a retired priest to more than 40 churches, I know from observation and from comments from the congregation that the continuing practice of what was once called indiscriminate baptism makes a mockery of all our talk of evangelistic outreach.**

**Sunday by Sunday, the faith is being sold cheap, and the opportunity for patient and welcoming pastoral teaching before Baptism (as allowed by Canon B22 (4)) is being lost. Elsewhere, evangelists may be dancing to the tune of Fresh Expressions of Church in all sorts of courageous innovations, but these popular Sunday jamborees are invitations to fresh perjury.**

**Perjury is a punishable offence, and yet we clergy who put the question “Do you turn to Christ?” could be accused of inciting it. It is no wonder that thoughtful members of our congregations become distressed at what they see; for solemn vows are being made, when it is often quite clear from the body language and the tone of the responses that the parents and godparents are doing no more than follow the script that has been put into their hands.**

**It is significant that in our supposedly secular society infant baptism is still requested; but there has been a dramatic change in social patterns, which challenge us to re-examine what is happening when we welcome a family that has only the most tenuous connection with any church.**

**In his book *Secular Lives, Sacred Hearts* (SPCK, 2004), Canon Dr Alan Billings observes that “while the overall number of baptisms may have fallen, the numbers attending have greatly increased.”**

**Furthermore, often the parents are not married, and “baptism offers the couple the first opportunity to celebrate with family and friends not just the arrival of their child, but also their partnership”**

**(Comment, 3 June 2005). Baptism — cheap, and easy to arrange — has in some cases replaced the marriage ceremony in its family significance.**

**This widens our evangelistic opportunity, but forces us to reassess the way in which the rite is prepared for and administered. We are now faced with large and largely young congregations, bringing into church those very people whom we find it so hard to involve in normal church life.**

**Many of them will be familiar with the current popular humanist and atheist critics of religion. To them, it must seem that we are colluding in a ceremony that encourages dishonesty and superstition. As a baptism proceeds, there is often a distinct feeling of embarrassment for parents and godparents, as they make their responses.**

**To protect the integrity of parents and godparents, and to restore the dignity and significance of the sacrament, much greater priority must be given to a period of preparation. During this, a suitable date for the baptism can be negotiated, as understanding and a feeling of readiness emerges.**

**I have done this, and found that the gift of a date at a right moment in the period of preparation restores a measure of pastoral discipline. It opens a golden opportunity for faith teaching, in an almost Alpha-course style, in the informality of the home or a small group — perhaps supported by parents who have already brought their children to baptism. Young families already involved in the life of the Church have a vital part to play in this nurturing process.**

**In my experience, most parents readily appreciate that their integrity is being respected when they are helped to recognise the implications of their turn to Christ, especially if we encourage them to think in terms of first steps in the journey of faith rather than a revolution in lifestyle and thinking which is beyond their achievement at that moment.**

**We must resist the temptation to water down the implications of what is happening; for a Lord is being acknowledged, a community joined, and an ensuing life of faith envisaged. The covenant relationship implied in baptism must be honoured on the human side, however tentatively.**

**The clergy stand in a vulnerable position. If any change in the policy of a parish is proposed, there will inevitably be misunderstanding and joyful media reaction: “The Vicar won’t baptise our baby.” We all fear such negative publicity: it hurts.**

**An episcopal pronouncement that Canon Law regarding infant baptism should be observed — and that parishes are invited to develop policies whereby preparation is required before a baptism date can be arranged — would open the possibility for mutual clergy support. It would be a return to an ancient Fresh Expression of the faith, linking us to the care with which baptism was prepared for in the Early Church.**

**The Revd Ian Robins is a member of the council of reference of Baptismal Integrity.**