

The Baptism of Faithful from Eastern Catholic Churches in Germany Opportunities and challenges

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English Abstract: In this article, the author deals with the administration of baptism to a believer of an Eastern Catholic Church. The question of whether a Latin deacon may administer baptism when the recipient of the baptism is a member of an Eastern Catholic Church is explored. The author takes the position that a Latin deacon is not allowed to administer the sacrament of baptism to an Oriental believer. The Latin deacon should only administer baptism in cases of necessity, especially when there is danger of death.

1. Introduction

Because of the immigration of people from Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East, the Catholic Church in Germany has changed greatly. In the meantime, about 200,000 believers who belong to an Eastern Catholic Church also live in Germany.¹

In practice, problems can arise because the traditions of these churches are sometimes very different from the Latin Church. Within this contribution, I cannot address all questions. I would therefore like to single out one problem and deal with it in more detail. Namely, the administration of baptism to believers from Eastern Catholic Churches.

The lecture is divided into two sections. The first section deals with the theological foundations regarding the sacrament of baptism. In a second chapter, I would like to explore the question of whether or not a Latin deacon may baptize an Oriental believer.

2. The sacrament of baptism

2.1. Theological Foundations

At first I would like to take a closer look at the sacrament of baptism. Baptism is the beginning of the Christian life.² According to the teachings of the Catholic Church, it is necessary for

¹ *Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz* (Editor), *Kirchenrechtliche Fragen in der pastoralen Praxis mit Gläubigen der katholischen Ostkirchen. Eine Handreichung* (24.08.2020) (= Arbeitshilfen 316), Bonn 2020, 7f.

² *John Paul II.*, *Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae* (11.10.1992), Città del Vaticano 1997, No. 1213.

salvation for those people to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the opportunity to ask for this sacrament.³

In baptism a person, through the washing with natural water and with the invocation of the name of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is freed from sin, reborn to new life, puts on Christ and is incorporated into the Church which is His Body (c. 675 § 2 CCEO).⁴

In the Latin Church, baptism is usually administered by pouring water on the head, while pronouncing the invocation of the Most Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.⁵ In many Oriental churches, on the other hand, it is customary for believers to be baptised by immersion in consecrated water. For example, in the Maronite and Greek Melkite Church.⁶

„At the invocation of each person of the Most Holy Trinity, the priest immerses the candidate in the water and raises him up again.”⁷ This rite of baptism corresponds to the tradition of the early Church. The Oriental churches have preserved this tradition to this day. However, baptism could also be administered by pouring (infusion). This is the case, for example, in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.⁸

In the Latin Church the baptism is accompanied by the minister's words: "N., I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." In the Eastern Churches, however, the catechumen turns toward the East and the priest says: "The servant of God, N., is baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."⁹ In this way it is expressed that it is not the priest or the bishop who is the minister of sacramental grace, but God who is asked to grant grace in the sacrament.¹⁰

2.2. Minister of the Sacrament

Differences between the Latin Church and the Eastern Catholic Churches also arise with regard to the minister of the sacrament. According to the law of the Latin Church, the ordinary minister of baptism is the bishop as well as the priest and the deacon (c. 861 § 1 CIC).

In the Eastern Catholic Churches, the deacon is not permitted to administer baptism - except in an emergency (c. 677 § 2 CCEO). Only the bishop and the priest are ordinary ministers of baptism (cc. 677 § 1 CCEO). The reason for this is that the Oriental churches have partly different traditions than the Latin Church. In the following, I would now like to discuss a concrete case in practice.

³ *John Paul II.*, *Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae* (11.10.1992), Città del Vaticano 1997, No. 1257.

⁴ On the different theological traditions in the Latin Church and the Eastern Catholic Churches, see: *Marini, Francis J.* (Hg.), *Comparative Sacramental Discipline in the CCEO and CIC. A Handbook for the Pastoral Care of Members of other Catholic Churches sui iuris*, Washington 2003, 13-15.

⁵ *John Paul II.*, *Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae* (11.10.1992), Città del Vaticano 1997, No. 1278.

⁶ However, this is not the case in all churches. In the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, baptism is administered to children by pouring running water over their heads. See: *Lorusso, Lorenzo*, *Eastern catholics and latin Pastors. Issues and canonical norms*, Washington 2013, 162.

⁷ *John Paul II.*, *Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae* (11.10.1992), Città del Vaticano 1997, No. 1240.

⁸ *Lorusso*, *Eastern* (note 6), 162.

⁹ *John Paul II.*, *Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae* (11.10.1992), Città del Vaticano 1997, No. 1240.

¹⁰ *Oeldemann, Johannes*, *Die Kirchen des christlichen Ostens. Orthodoxe, orientalische und mit Rom unierte Kirchen*, Regensburg 2016, 166.

3. Is a Latin deacon allowed to administer baptism to an oriental believer?

As has already been shown, different traditions exist in the Latin Church and the Eastern Catholic Churches. Today, many Christians from the Middle East, from Syria, Iraq, or the Lebanon, also live in Germany. In many cases, they do not have a priest of their own church. They, therefore, often attend the services of the Latin Church. And have their children baptised by a Latin priest.

In practice, this can lead to problems. For example, it may happen that a Latin priest does not have time to administer a baptism and, therefore, assigns a deacon. However, as already mentioned, according to the law of the Oriental churches, a deacon is not allowed to administer baptism. So how is one to proceed in such a case? May the Latin deacon administer baptism? Or must the baptism of an oriental believer be administered by a priest?

One can argue that a Latin deacon may also administer baptism in such a case, since he is the ordinary minister of baptism according to the law of the Latin Church. The second Vatican Council stated in LG 29: "It is the duty of the deacon, according as it shall have been assigned to him by competent authority, to administer baptism solemnly."

However, according to the law, the Oriental faithful have a right to receive baptism according to the rite of their own Church (c. 683 CCEO). The Latin deacon must celebrate the sacraments according to the rite of his own Church *sui iuris*, in this case the Latin Church (c. 846 § 2 CIC). This also applies when he baptises a person who is ascribed to an Oriental Church (c. 846 § 2 CIC).

As said before, in the Eastern Catholic Churches, the deacon is not the ordinary minister of baptism. This means that the Latin deacon cannot fulfil the provision of the Eastern Code, which says, that the baptism must be celebrated according the liturgical prescriptions of the Church *sui iuris* in which according to the norm of law the person to be baptized is to be enrolled (c. 683 CCEO). So we have a little bit of a problem here.

There is also another point. In the Latin Church, the sacrament of confirmation is to be conferred on the faithful at about the age of discretion, unless the conference of bishops has determined another age, or there is danger of death, or in the judgment of the minister a grave cause suggests otherwise (c. 891 CIC). In Germany, the age of confirmation is between 12 and 16 years.

In most Eastern Catholic Churches, however, chrismation¹¹ with Holy Myron is administered together with baptism (c. 694 CCEO). After baptism and confirmation, the faithful also receive the Holy Eucharist for the first time, as this corresponds to the tradition of the Oriental churches (c. 697 CCEO).

The Latin deacon cannot administer the sacrament of confirmation or chrismation after baptism. This is because the ordinary minister of confirmation is a bishop; a presbyter

¹¹ Chrismation with the Holy Myron is the name given in the East to the sacrament, which the Latin Church calls Confirmation. See: *Payyappilly, Sebastian*, Introduction on cc. 692-697, in: *Faris, John D. / Abbass, Jobe* (Editors), *A practical commentary to the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, Volume I, Montréal 2019, 1241.

provided with this faculty by universal law or the special grant of the competent authority also confers this sacrament validly (c. 882 CIC).

For this reason, in my opinion, a Latin deacon is not allowed to administer the sacrament of baptism to an Oriental believer.¹² If Oriental believers do not have their own priest, baptism should be administered by a Latin bishop or priest, but not by a deacon. The Latin deacon, however, should only administer baptism in cases of necessity, especially when there is danger of death.

4. Conclusion

Because of the immigration of Oriental Christians to Germany, pastors are increasingly confronted with new questions in pastoral practice. The question of whether a Latin deacon may administer baptism to an Oriental believer has been referred to in this contribution. Open questions arise, however, not only with regard to baptism, but also with regard to the administration of confirmation, ordination, and so on.

These questions must be resolved in practice. Canon law can make a contribution in this regard, in order to preserve the traditions of the Eastern churches not only in the Middle East, but also in the so called „diaspora“. Because, as the Second Vatican Council emphasizes (OE 5), "the Churches of the East, as much as those of the West, have a full right and are in duty bound to rule themselves, each in accordance with its own established disciplines, since all these are praiseworthy by reason of their venerable antiquity, more harmonious with the character of their faithful and more suited to the promotion of the good of souls."

¹² See also: *Chiramel, Jose*, Sacraments of Initiation in the Latin and Eastern Codes: a Comparative Study, in: *Studies in Church Law* 3 (2007) 327-350; 333; *Holubowicz, Rafał*, La atención pastoral de los fieles católicos orientales por parte de la Iglesia latina: administración de los sacramentos de la iniciación cristiana y el matrimonio, in: *Cuadernos Doctorales* 24 (2010/11) 143-242, 156; *Salachas, Dimitrios*, Problematiche interrituali nei due Codici orientale e latino, in: *Apollinaris* 67 (1994) 635-690, 156; *Pree, Helmuth*, Questioni interrituali e interecclesiali nell' amministrazione dei sacramenti, in: *Folia Theologica et Canonica* 3 (2014) 213-230, 220-222.