



DIOCESE OF FORT WORTH
THE BISHOP'S OFFICE



September 18, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

Last week, the bishop of another diocese informed me that one of his priests, while watching a video, discovered that he had been invalidly baptized as an infant by Deacon Philip Webb, a permanent deacon ordained for the Diocese of Dallas, but assigned at that time to Saint Catherine of Siena Catholic Church in Carrollton, Texas, in the Diocese of Fort Worth. Like the priest of the Archdiocese of Detroit who recently discovered that he, too, had been invalidly baptized, the man has subsequently been baptized, confirmed, given first Holy Communion, ordained a deacon, and ordained a priest. However, his invalid Baptism had horrible effects on the lives of those who thought that they were validly receiving sacraments administered by a man whom they thought to be a priest, and who thought himself to be a priest, but was in fact neither a priest nor even a Catholic.

There is positive and probable doubt that Deacon Webb validly baptized infants because it was his regular practice to use a substituted and invalid formula in the hundreds of baptisms he is believed to have administered while assigned to Saint Catherine of Siena Catholic Church. I am making his name public to alert anyone who is recorded as having been baptized by Deacon Webb. Notations have been made to the sacramental records at Saint Catherine of Siena Catholic Church which state that anyone baptized by Deacon Webb should be conditionally baptized and confirmed unless there is evidence that he validly baptized on a specific occasion. Where it is applicable, issues regarding the validity of marriages should be addressed with the assistance of the Tribunal.

This case along with the case of the priest in Detroit has prompted many people to review videos of their own baptisms or those of their children to see whether they have been validly baptized. It is possible that we will learn that this aberrant practice of changing the valid formula for Baptism may have occurred more often than we know right now. I write to you to offer encouragement and guidance in the face of fear and doubt that otherwise might take root in your lives because of these human errors in the administration of the sacraments.

1. St. Thomas Aquinas consolingly reminds us that “God did not bind His power to the sacraments, so as to be unable to bestow the sacramental effect without conferring the sacrament” (ST III, q. 64, a. 7, resp.). Regarding Baptism specifically, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us (1257): “God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but He Himself is not bound by his sacraments.” God is always giving us His Grace and He will never fail us even when we fail in our stewardship of the sacraments in their appropriate celebration. Yet, Christ instituted the sacraments as the ordinary way by which God gives us His sanctifying grace and has instructed us in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition in the stewardship of these treasures.
2. You should presume the validity of your Baptism and the subsequent sacraments you have received unless you can establish positive and probable doubt in its validity. This means that one must have evidence (e.g., a video recording of the ceremony, an affidavit provided by an

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eyewitness, or the established fact of the regular and aberrant practice by a specific priest or deacon—as in the case of Deacon Webb) that his or her Baptism was not validly administered. If you discover such evidence in watching a video or through the other means mentioned above, please contact your pastor or the pastor of the parish where the Baptism took place.

3. As a reminder to each of us, the valid formula for baptizing anyone is “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” These are the words given to the Church by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. These are the exact words to be spoken by the minister of the sacrament while the same minister (and no one else) also pours the water over the head of the person to be baptized. No other words can be used. No other words can be added. As the Second Vatican Council taught in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* #23, “Therefore no other person, even if he be a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority.” Such changes would include “WE baptize you...” or “I baptize you in the name of the Creator, of the Redeemer, and of the Sanctifier.”
4. Water must be used for a Baptism to be valid.
5. If it is determined with positive and probable doubt that you were in fact not baptized, please notify and work with your pastor that you might be baptized, confirmed and address any issues involving the validity of marriages.

Finally, I apologize to all those whose lives have been adversely affected by the discovery that the sacraments they thought that they had received they, in fact, did not receive. Our priests and deacons stand ready with me to rectify these injustices to the best of our ability. I recognize that the priests and deacons who committed these grave errors of judgment did so without malice and were even attempting to do good. Nevertheless, the Church requires of her ministers not just good intentions but also sufficient knowledge of what is expected and necessary in the administration of the sacraments. Let us always bear in mind that the People of God have a right to receive the sacraments in the form that the Church has prescribed them to be administered. Let us continue to pray for each other. I remain,

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

+ Michael F. Olson

Most Reverend Michael F. Olson, STD, MA
Bishop of Fort Worth