

Guidance for the Celebration of Baptism

Introduction

The Government has announced that from 4th July 2020, communal acts of worship will be allowed in our Catholic Churches. This guidance, issued by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales for the Celebration of Baptism, assumes that the general guidance published by the Conference, based on Government Guidance on the safe opening of Places of Worship for individual prayer is in place.¹

The Government maintains that the 2m social distancing requirements should be applied where possible. The Government has also said it is possible to go to "1m plus" (where 2m social distancing is not viable). This means you can space people more closely (with a minimum of 1m) providing a mitigation of risk is also applied. In the case of our churches, the only practical mitigation would be the compulsory wearing of a face covering for members of the congregation.²

The Government guidance on the Opening of Churches for Public Worship³ requires that the number of people attending "life-cycle ceremonies" is **capped at 30 people**. "Life-cycle Ceremonies" are defined as "religious ceremonies to mark rites of passage, which are separate, self-contained ceremonies as opposed to marking a life cycle event or rite in the course of routine communal worship."

The Catholic Church in England and Wales is advising that Baptisms should not take place during Mass (in order to reduce the time that people are gathered in a church building) but at a time separate to any communal worship. This is in accord with the Government guidance which states "it is advised that the ceremonies and services should be concluded in the shortest reasonable time."

The Rite of Baptism

At this time, it is advised that the baptisms which take place in our churches should be for single families; multiple family baptisms are not encouraged as the mixing of people from different family groups increases the risk of virus transmission.

The child to be baptised should be held by the parents only. Other members of the family, including godparents and grandparents should be socially distanced in household groups (or bubbles) in the church. The whole of the Rite should take place around the font to avoid the excess movement of people in the church building. The minister should remain at least 2m away from those congregated unless he has approached the child to perform part of the Rite. The necessary items for the Baptism should be prepared by the minister (or sacristan) after sanitising their hands and then wearing gloves and placed so that they are easily accessible by him and the family members.

The Greeting and Opening Dialogue and Signing with the Cross

This should take place around the font and, after sanitising their hands, only the parents and godparents should sign the child with the sign of the cross whilst the minister speaks the associated words of the Rite.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-announces-easing-of-lockdown-restrictions-23-june-2020>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-from-4-july/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-from-4-july>

The Liturgy of the Word

One short reading should be used and a short explanation of the importance of baptism should be spoken by the minister. If a family member is to read, they should sanitise their hands before and after handling a lectionary or other text, or wear gloves.

Intercessions

These should be brief, and a very short form of the *Litany* used. This should be prayed by the minister only.

Prayer of Exorcism

The minister should pre-prepare a cotton bud infused with the Oil of Catechumens. He should not touch the child whilst praying the Prayer of Exorcism but should extend his hand towards the child. When it comes to the anointing, the cotton bud should be used this should be done at arm's length to ensure a clear distance between the minister and the child.

Prayer over the Water

The font should be pre-filled with water and covered before the baptism. The prayer of blessing should be prayed by the minister without touching the water or the font. He can make the sign of the cross over it in place of the normal touching with the right hand.

Renunciation of Sin and Profession of Faith

These should be recited with the people in their places in the church.

The Baptism

The parents alone should bring the child to the font. They should place the head of the child over the water. The minister, using a shell or a jug, should pour the water over the child's head whilst reciting the sacramental form. Care should be taken to avoid excess splashing of the water. Immediately afterwards, a clean towel from the credence table should be used by the parents to dry the child's head. This towel should be laundered immediately after the Baptism.

The Anointing with Holy Chrism

The minister should pre-prepare a cotton bud infused with the Sacred Chrism. He should anoint the child at arm's length using this, ensuring a clear distance between the child and himself.

**Clothing with the White Garment – can be omitted at this time*

The parents, if they have brought a white garment for the child, should clothe the child with the white garment whilst the minister says the associated prayer. Communal white garments should not be used. The white garment should be taken away with the family at the end of the Baptism.

**Lighted Candle – can be omitted at this time*

The candle should be out of its box before the Baptism begins. The Godparent should light the baptismal candle from the Paschal Candle whilst the minister says the associated narrative.

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This should be omitted from the Baptism rite.

Concluding Rites

The congregation should join in with the minister in the Lord's Prayer and the Blessing and Dismissal given without touching the Father and Mother.

After the celebration of the Baptism, the minister should give clear instructions regarding social distancing for any photographs that would be taken. There should be an orderly egress from the church avoiding crowding at doors etc.

Any cotton buds, cotton wool or paper towels should be bagged for disposal after the ceremony. If possible, these should be burned safely (as is usual with cotton wool bearing the sacred oils). Any towels or cloths should be laundered according to the manufacturer's guidance and dried completely. The baptismal water should be poured into the earth (or through the sacrarium) and the font dried completely before replacing its cover.

If there is cause for concern regarding the possible contamination of clerical vestments worn during the celebration of Baptism, these should be washed in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions, using the warmest water setting allowed for the fabric and allowing time for them to dry completely.

The church should be closed after the Baptism has finished in order to clean the space around the font according to the Bishops' Conference guidelines on individual prayer. Care should also be given to the touchpoints in the church, especially at points of access and egress.

Rev. Canon Christopher Thomas
4th July 2020
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