Neo, Bishop of Ravenna from about 450 to about 473, who surely rejoiced with the rest of the populace over the return of former prisoners of war, surely rejoiced further that many of them were requesting baptism. After all, the Orthodox Baptistry, so called to distinguish it from the Arian Baptistry, is also known today as his Neonian Baptistry, a mosaic-splashed building that evangelized unbelievers and catechized both new and old disciples.

The battle-weary youth, however, launched a theological problem that continues to ripple through the reflective halls of academia, the hopeful dialogues of ecumenists, and the pastoral practice of local churches. The prisoners were so young at their capture that they now did not know whether or not someone had baptized them in their pre-militant infancy. Baptism is to be administered only once, but the fact of their baptism remained irritatingly unknown.

The quantity of these cases so disturbed Neo that he turned for advice to the pope. Fortunately for Neo, that pope was Leo the Great, who had recently discussed this very point at a synod in Rome earlier in the same year, 458. "*Solicita primum examinatione discutite,*" wrote Leo to Neo in Letter 166: "First, break it down with a careful examination, and investigate for a long time - unless death be imminent - whether there is absolutely no one who by personal testimony could come to the aid of the uncertainty of the one who is unaware, and if it is determined that the one who desires the sacrament of baptism is prohibited only by vain suspicion (*sola inaniter suspicione)*, let that person come fearless to obtain the grace of which no trace is known, nor need we fear to open the door of salvation to a person who never before was taught to enter."

Conditional baptism in the Catholic Church today is permitted under either of two circumstances. The first was Neo's quandary: The fact of baptism is unknown. The second is even more slippery: The fact of the baptism is known, but its validity is unknown. In Leo's day, groups outside orthodox Christianity were baptizing, but the baptism was generally presumed valid. Neo was not concerned about neophytes walking out of the Arian baptistry and into his Orthodox baptistry. He worried about kids captured in battle. Leo approached the matter with an uncluttered solution: Do your best to establish the fact; failing that, baptize.

Leo's letter later found its way into the twelfth-century Decretals of Gratian, where it buttressed the argument that those whose baptism is unknown should be baptized (C. 112, D. IV, *De consecratione*). Even the post-Tridentine Roman Catechism of 1566 treated conditional baptism as the solution to a circumstance where the fact of a previous baptism was doubtful (Part II, Question 55-56). It criticized the cases where a priest indiscriminately baptized infants brought to him, without sufficiently inquiring if they had already been baptized, or where he baptized with full ceremonies those who had been previously validly baptized at home. Still, the same catechism acknowledged the legitimacy of some conditional baptisms, and it even supplied this formula: "If you have been baptized, I do not baptize you again; but if you have never been baptized, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Part II: The Sacraments, Baptism, the Effects of Baptism.)

The *Roman Ritual* of 1614 enshrined that formula within its introduction, "On Properly Administering the Sacrament of Baptism" (9). Actually, the formula appeared in both of these post-Tridentine sources without the initial "N." That letter indicated that the one baptizing pronounced aloud the name of the one being baptized as the first word of the formula. The letter "N." does appear later in the *Roman Ritual*'s Rite for Baptism in both the normal and conditional forms; for example, "Benedict, I baptize you…."

From the perspective of the seventeenth century ritual commentary, the doubt concerned the fact of baptism, as it explained in response to several potentially disturbing scenarios. In childbirth, if the head emerged and there was danger of death, the child was to be baptized; if it then lived, no conditional baptism followed. But if some other part of the body emerged first from the womb, and there was danger of death, the body part was to be baptized conditionally, and if the child survived, another conditional baptism followed (20). (At the time, baptism of the head was necessary, and the validity of baptism elsewhere was theologically unprovable.) If if could not be determined that an aborted fetus was alive, the child was to be baptized conditionally (21). If the mother gave birth to a "monster" or some other curiosity, the condition in the formula changed to this: "If you are human, I baptize you…." If the number of fetuses could not be determined, one body part was to be baptized absolutely and the others conditionally (22). Closer to Neo's case, abandoned children were to be baptized conditionally (23). No sponsor was required for conditional baptisms, though a person could so serve, but if a conditional baptism was repeated, the sponsor who may have served in the first instance was expected to serve again (32).

All these descriptions show not only a doubt concerning the fact of baptism, but also the urgent nature of these situations. Consequently, seventeenth-century conditional baptisms by design happened without all the ceremonies accompanying a regular baptism and outside its usual location, the church. They fell into the category of "private baptisms," in order to distinguish them from baptisms administered "solemnly" (28). The other ceremonies could be supplied when the baptism was repeated conditionally (29).

The mood had shifted by the time the canon law of the church was codified in 1918. There, in the explanation that baptism, confirmation and ordination can be administered only once, comes this clarification about these three sacraments: "If a prudent doubt exists whether they were conferred either in fact or validly, they may be conferred again conditionally" (Canon 732 §2). And concerning the baptismal ceremony in particular, "When it is administered in keeping with all the rites and ceremonies that are commanded in the ritual books, it is called *solemn*; otherwise, *non-solemn* or *private*" (Canon 737 §2). As Hieronymus Noldin explained in his commentary on the sacraments, "The private option is performed, for example, if the one for whom solemn baptism was conferred is rebaptized conditionally because of a doubt concerning its value. The most frequent case in which baptism is conferred privately without rites and

ceremonies is the case of necessity in danger of death; therefore, private baptism is usually called *baptism of necessity*" (55).

At the time, when baptized Christians of other denominations elected to become Catholic, the receiving minister typically baptized conditionally. The practice proliferated not because of a doubt of the fact of baptism, but a doubt concerning its validity. Anecdotal evidence abounds among today's still-living older Catholics, many of whom can testify that they switched from their previous Christian denomination and joined the Catholic Church by means of a conditional baptism.

With the ecumenical movement of the 1960s, the Vatican put this practice under scrutiny. The Secretariat for Christian Unity's Ecumenical Directory *Ad totam Ecclesiam* changed the rules in 1967. "The practice of the conditional baptism of all without distinction who desire to enter full communion with the Catholic Church cannot be approved" (14). Like the fifth-century Leo, who requested a thorough investigation, and like the seventeenth-century ritual, which required conditional baptism in private, the twentieth-century ecumenical directory applied these same two principles, though now not only to questions of fact, but also to questions of validity. The ecumenical directory also declared that the minister should explain why he is baptizing conditionally (15).

This paved the way for the 1972 post-Vatican II Rite of Reception of Baptized Christians into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church. This ceremony completely replaced its predecessor, the thirteenth-century "Order of Reconciling Apostates, Schismatics or Heretics," found in the *Pontifical of William Durand*. Its very title demonstrated the need for a more ecumenically sensitive modern approach that honored the baptism of other Christians seeking Catholic communion. Because so many Catholic ministers had been indiscriminately baptizing other Christians conditionally, the new Rite of Reception adopted the position of the still-young ecumenical directory: it approved conditional baptism only in cases of "reasonable doubt about the fact or validity of the baptism already conferred." Other points from the ecumenical directory reappeared: a serious investigation, a prior explanation, and a non-solemn form of baptism (*Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* 480). The language chosen by the postconciliar church implies the kind of baptism performed in case of emergency - just the essential words and the actions without other ceremonies. However, the local Ordinary is to decide which rites to include or exclude (480).

Notably, this treatment of conditional baptism comes in the part of the RCIA dealing with previously baptized Christians. Prior to the council, the same topic appeared in the commentary on the rites of baptism. The shift of context suggests that the original historical concerns about the fact of baptism had yielded to theological concerns about the validity of non-Catholic Christian baptisms.

The formula for baptizing conditionally no longer appears in any Catholic liturgical book. Perhaps it was an oversight, a casualty of moving the material out

of the post-Tridentine section on baptism and into the post-Vatican II section on the Rite of Reception. Or perhaps it was something more deliberate: The rules now explicitly call for the minister to explain why he is baptizing conditionally. Perhaps this explanation replaces the previous augmented formula. After all, the typical edition of the *Rite of Pastoral Care of the Sick* does give the priest a conditional formula of anointing to use if he cannot discern whether the person to whom he is ministering is dead or alive (135). (The conditional formula was omitted from the English translation [263]). In the case of baptism, the logical conclusion is that the minister baptizes conditionally by explaining the reason and then using the normal formula.

The 1983 Code of Canon Law embraced these teachings. Canon 869 restated the two circumstances that provoke a conditional baptism: doubt of the baptism or doubt of its validity (§1). It required an examination into the matter and the form of the words used in the baptism, as well as the intention of the person baptized and the minister (§2). If baptism was still required, then an explanation was to be given (§3). The code does not offer a formula for conditional baptism either. At least one book serving as a pastoral companion to the revised code supplied the missing formula, though without the initial letter "N.," which suggests that it was taken from the post-Tridentine catechism and ritual commentary, and without any footnote - because a conditional formula does not appear in any official citable source. (*The Book of Common Prayer*, incidentally, retains a conditional formula: "If you are not already baptized, *N.*, I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.")

The bishops of the United States of America addressed the situation in their National Statutes for the Catechumenate in 1986. The very last statute, which also concludes the section on the Rite of Reception, repeats the appeal to investigate "the fact and/or validity of baptism, namely, to ascertain whether the person was baptized with water and with the Trinitarian formula, and whether the minister and the recipient of the sacrament had the proper requisite intentions" (37). The same statute goes on to require that conditional baptisms be celebrated privately; the reception into the full communion of the church is to come later. The conditional baptism is meant to fill up what is missing: It removes the doubt pertaining to the fact, but especially to the validity of the non-Catholic baptism. The person, now a privately-certified baptized Christian, celebrates reception into the full communion of the Catholic Church at a later date in public.

All this reached its zenith with the 1993 *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* from the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Fostering Christian Unity. As one would expect, the document tries to sway pastoral practice away from indiscriminate conditional baptism. With regard to other major Christian bodies, "where an official ecclesiastical attestation has been given, there is no reason for doubting the validity of the baptism conferred in their Churches and ecclesial Communities unless, in a particular case, an examination clearly shows that a serious reason exists for having a doubt about one of the following: the matter and form and words used in the conferral of baptism, the intention of an adult baptized or the minister of the baptism" (99c).

The directory then rehearses the expected points: a careful investigation, a serious doubt, an explanation for the baptism, and administration in private.

Two of the Vatican's recent concerns, however, seemed to turn the table. In 2001 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith responded to a *dubium* concerning the validity of baptisms conferred by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons). The answer to the query was simply, "No." The reason pertains to the Mormon theology of the Trinity; that is, to the meaning of the words "Father, Son and Holy Spirit," not to their utterance. The difference from Catholic doctrine is considered so great that it affects the validity of baptism. In 2008 the same Vatican Congregation fielded a question about baptismal formulas employing a non-gender specific vocabulary for the Triune God: "I baptize you in the name of the Creator, and of the Redeemer, and of the Sanctifier," and "I baptize you in the name of the Creator, and of the Liberator, and of the Sustainer." Are these formulas valid? "No," responded the Congregation. These cases are corrected with an absolute baptism, not a conditional one.

This has led the archdiocese of Philadelphia, for example, to request greater scrutiny into the validity of the baptisms of those seeking admission to the full communion of the Catholic Church. Its policy flips the coin from the resolution of "prudent doubt" to the obtaining of "moral certitude." Leo had been content to dismiss "vain suspicion."

All these approaches aim to respect the broadly-held Christian belief that baptism may be administered only once. Yet when the discussion moves from the realm of fact into questions of validity, ecumenical concerns come to the fore. In recent decades, the indiscriminate use of conditional baptism has waned in the Catholic Church, but it has not completely disappeared.

In 2014 Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) completed an as yet unpublished study documenting how American parishes have implemented the National Statutes on the Catechumenate passed by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1986. The results on conditional baptism will probably not surprise: 61% of responding parishes practiced at least one conditional baptism in the previous year. Of those 29% performed the ceremony at the Easter Vigil, and another 2% at Sunday Mass. The results suggest that parishes practice conditional baptism more broadly than the Vatican's ecumenical offices had hoped, and that parishes ignore the preference for using the private form in over 50% of the cases. One wonders if the percentages are even higher in Latin America. It is unknown how many ministers publicly explained the reasons for the conditional baptism. These statistics are especially frustrating because at baptism and reception priests hold within their hands the power to draw more tightly the bonds of friendship among Christian Churches. They thwart this effort whenever they baptize conditionally without sufficient previous investigation and every time they perform the ritual in public.

The fact of baptism is becoming easier to establish. Beyond relying on fallible ministers and secretaries to remember to record the information and to do

so accurately, photographs, videos, and social media posts all lend additional testimony. Even the question of validity can often be resolved when evidence of the actual ceremony surfaces.

Ministers still placed in the awkward situation of needing to determine the fact or validity of a baptism should perform their due diligence. If there is a doubt, they should strive to settle it, and either baptize or not baptize accordingly. If the doubt persists, then it is resolved in private and in relative haste, much the same way that a minister would perform an emergency baptism for someone in danger of death. The Rite of Reception should follow later in public.

Otherwise, some Christians who seek a new Church home will find themselves unnecessarily keeping camp with Neo's returning prisoners of war. Their discernible past is judged cloudy, and the ecumenical future shares their fate.

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