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[News](#)



by NCR Staff

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March 18, 2022

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In early February, [Phoenix Bishop Thomas Olmsted said baptisms performed by Fr. Andres Arango](#) during years of ministry in the diocese are invalid, and the priest resigned as pastor of a local parish. [According to a 2020 instruction](#) from the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the baptisms were invalid because the priest said "We baptize" instead of "I baptize." And [one of Arango's parishioners wonders](#) if our eternal salvation and baptism in Christ really depend on a holy and well-intentioned priest saying "I" instead of "we."

Following are letters to the editor from NCR readers about invalid baptisms. The letters have been edited for length and clarity.

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I'm not at all surprised that the bishop of Phoenix would be distraught at the innocent misuse of a pronoun in baptisms performed by Fr. Andres Arango. The church has struggled with pronouns for centuries, most notably "she" and "her."

## **ROB McDOWELL**

**Atlanta, Georgia**



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And one wonders why the pews are empty. Reading Paulo Coelho's book, *The Witch of Portobello* — a woman was denied Eucharist by a priest, her friend, only because the people of the town knew she had just received her divorce papers. She left the church in tears and ran into Christ sitting on the steps on a tiny street. He asked why she was so upset and she told him. Jesus looked down the street — that church? Oh, they kicked me out years ago.

When will we ever learn? Why will those who feel compelled to honor Bishop Thomas Olmsted's edict continue to bear such unnecessary burdens? If someone told me my baptism was invalid and that I'd have to go through all the necessary sacraments

again, I, too, would go find Christ sitting somewhere, maybe in a dying rain forest, maybe in a Haitian village and commiserate. And I believe he would say, "love me and do what you will."

## **KATHLEEN O'KULA**

### **North Kingstown, Rhode Island**

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I don't think all those baptisms in Phoenix were invalid. I think that saying so smacks of magical "legalistic rubricism." The tradition of "*ex opere operato*" means that the sacramental grace of Christ is not dependent on the morality or frailty or fallibility of the minister. Again, the bishops and the Vatican have made a frittata out of nothing.

The following is from an article in a little-known publication by an author I cannot track down. It says it all: "The traditional belief is that all baptisms administered with a Trinitarian formula are valid. Whenever a minister acts with the intention of doing that which the church does and succeeds in communicating God's grace in an understandable way to the receivers, one may trust that the sacrament is administered validly. Only in those cases in which ministers alter the formulas to express an intention incompatible with what the church does may one assume that this also affects the validity of sacraments."

Based on his considerations, the author concludes that the Congregation's reaction might be considered harsh and that it could easily have rendered a more moderate decision, for instance by identifying the plural formula as illicit (it should not have been done) yet valid, instead of understanding it as invalidating baptism.

We are saved by grace through faith in Christ Jesus and not by our own efforts or works (Ephesians 2:8-9). Jesus performs wonders through the power of God, not through the perfect puppetry of men.

## **TIM MANNELLO**

### **Williamsport, Pennsylvania**

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Kimberly Roland makes many valid points. Let us not forget, however, that Pope Francis, who complains about overly strict interpretations of doctrine, clericalism and the rules of the Pharisees themselves, approved this decree.

A Presbyterian minister in my local community noted that the Catholic Church would invalidate the baptism of Christ, and his ministry, because John the Baptist did not use correct wording. Nothing leads to institutionalism more than changing the facts to fit one's point. It is indeed sad, and shows a terrible illness, when a church fails to recognize that it adheres more to its own canon construct than to the true meaning of the Gospels.

I know of some who wish their baptism was illegal as it would complete the divorce from a church they find demeaning. The church needs a cleansing and a movement toward a merciful message that conforms to the Gospel of Christ. The hierarchy and many priests are so enamored with themselves, their restrictive constructs and an out-of-control institutionalism that they would not recognize the works of the Holy Spirit.

Francis has had the opportunity to cleanse and reform the church, but he is just another institutional man, not desiring to upset the canon cart. In the end, we get a church very good at emptying the pews to meet its declining number of priests. Like those that have left, perhaps the Holy Spirit is tired of being ignored.

## **THOMAS HOVEL**

### **McFarland, Wisconsin**

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I refer to the idiocy of the diocese of Phoenix requiring baptisms to be redone because the word "we" was used instead of "I."

Seriously, why do people in the U.S. put up with this crazy stuff? If our local feudal lords (or bishops who think they are) tried this on here (and a couple would definitely consider it), the ridicule would absolutely pour down on them not only from Catholic circles but also from the secular press and social media. The prelates would be scurrying for cover as fast as they could.

The United States was founded as a republic to get rid of monarchs, yet it seems that all someone has to do is be titled "bishop" or "president" and all deference is paid to them no matter what crazy things they say or do.

**BRUCE STAFFORD**

**Tascott, Australia**

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