

Motion No. 10

Proposer: Prof Patricia Barker

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Our motion this afternoon follows on from last year's General Synod when the matter of refusing to baptise an infant whose mother is not married was raised. Since last year, a number of accounts of this issue and the impact on families and parishes have emerged.

We ask that General Synod would *affirm* what we believe is fundamentally already embedded in our Canon law. We 're not seeking any change to or modification of Canons.

If I may cite Dr Rowan Williams, it is useful to remind ourselves that law, properly understood, is not an alien imposition on a grumbling public but a way of securing two things for the common good.

The first is consistency: law promises that we shall be treated with equity and in an equal manner, not that we be treated according to someone's arbitrary feelings or according to our own individual status and power.

The second is clarity about responsibility: we need ways of knowing who is supposed to do this or that and who is entitled to do this or that, so that we can act with certainty and purpose: instead of being frustrated by a chaotic variety of expectations and recriminations.

Law in the life of the Church is no different. Canon law begins from that basic affirmation of consistency, equity and equality, for all who are members in the Body of Christ. And it seeks clarity about who may do what and who is answerable to whom.

In relation to the practice of bringing infants to Church for Holy Baptism those two principles of consistency and clarity are being breached in some parishes in our island. Some clergy – indeed most clergy – will baptise an infant brought for baptism, without asking questions about the marital status of the mother of the infant. Our motion underpins our real concern that, in other cases, infants are refused Baptism by virtue only of the marital status of their mothers.

So let me stress that our motion does not seek to change Canon law but to affirm that law must be applied consistently and with clear equality to all parishioners who find themselves in the same situation. In other words, in relation to this one issue of refusing baptism to babies whose mums are not married, our law should not be a postcode lottery.

So, for the avoidance of doubt, let me just refer to the principles of Canon law which are common to the churches of the Anglican Communion.

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Principle 63: states, *inter alia*:

1. Parents or guardians are expected to bring their children to baptism.
2. No minister may without lawful cause refuse or unduly delay baptism of a child in their cure whose parents or guardians desire baptism for the child.
3. In the exercise of pastoral and moral responsibility, a minister may, after due notice, postpone baptism until the parents or guardians and godparents or other sponsors have been instructed and are, in the opinion of that minister, in a position to undertake the spiritual, moral and educational obligations required of them.
4. A minister should not baptise a child without the consent of its parents or guardians.
7. If a minister refuses or unduly delays to baptise any child, the parents or guardians may apply to the bishop, who shall, after consultation with the minister, give such directions as are deemed appropriate.

Nowhere in the Principles or in our Canon 9 is there any reference to the marital status of the mother of the child. So this Motion this afternoon hinges around whether being the baby of a single parent is lawful cause to refuse Baptism to that baby. That is the issue on which you are being asked decide today.

If this Synod believes that being a child of a single parent or of parents who are not married is lawful cause to refuse to baptise that child, the consequence of that decision is that, therefore, all children born outside of marriage should be refused in order to comply with our fundamental principles of consistency, equity and clarity.

If, on the other hand, Synod believes that being the child of a single parent or of parents who are not married, should not, of itself, be a reason to reject and turn the child away from the grace of Baptism, then the consequence of that, because of our principles of consistency, equality and clarity, is that no baby should be turned away because of their mum's marital status.

Sometimes practices like this come down to us from a different time back in the mists of history. We know that our recent history is mired in practices relating to what were known as 'first fall' and 'subsequent fall' women. There was a shameful time in Ireland when illegitimacy was deplored by Catholic and Protestant communities as it damaged the family's standing and threatened the basic social

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fabric. These unmarried mothers were regarded variously, as: wicked, weak-minded or unfortunate and were removed from their family homes and often had their children removed from them and given to adoptive married couples. There is scant evidence of such children being precluded from baptism. Indeed, whatever the treatment of the mother, there was a scrupulous supervision of their attending to their religious duties and to the appropriate baptism of the child. Indeed, in one report on infanticide of children born out of wedlock, there was evidence of a lay baptism being performed first.

It is possible that this refusal to baptise the babies of single parents is rooted in that very different time in Ireland when pre-marital sex and illegitimacy were associated with ‘fallen women’; and pushing such women and their babies out of the sight of respectable people was common. But surely, we have left those dark, cruel, misogynistic beliefs behind us? Surely, now every little innocent baby, whose parent brings him or her for Holy Baptism should be welcomed and blessed and granted the grace to live and grow with the support of the Church to be a fulfilled, kind, balanced and Christian adult? That is – every little baby, regardless of whether his/her mum is married.

So, I beg to propose this Motion that:

Whilst affirming the sanctity of marriage, this Synod acknowledges that it is a reality of modern life that infants are often born to single parents and/or to couples who are not married. In this regard, this synod affirms that, in accordance with Canons, Chapter 9 of the Constitution of the Church of Ireland, irrespective of the marital status of the parents of an infant, a minister must not refuse or, save for the purpose of preparing or instructing the parents or godparents, delay to baptise any child within his or her cure who is brought to be baptised, provided that due notice has been given and the provisions relating to sponsors and godparents are observed.