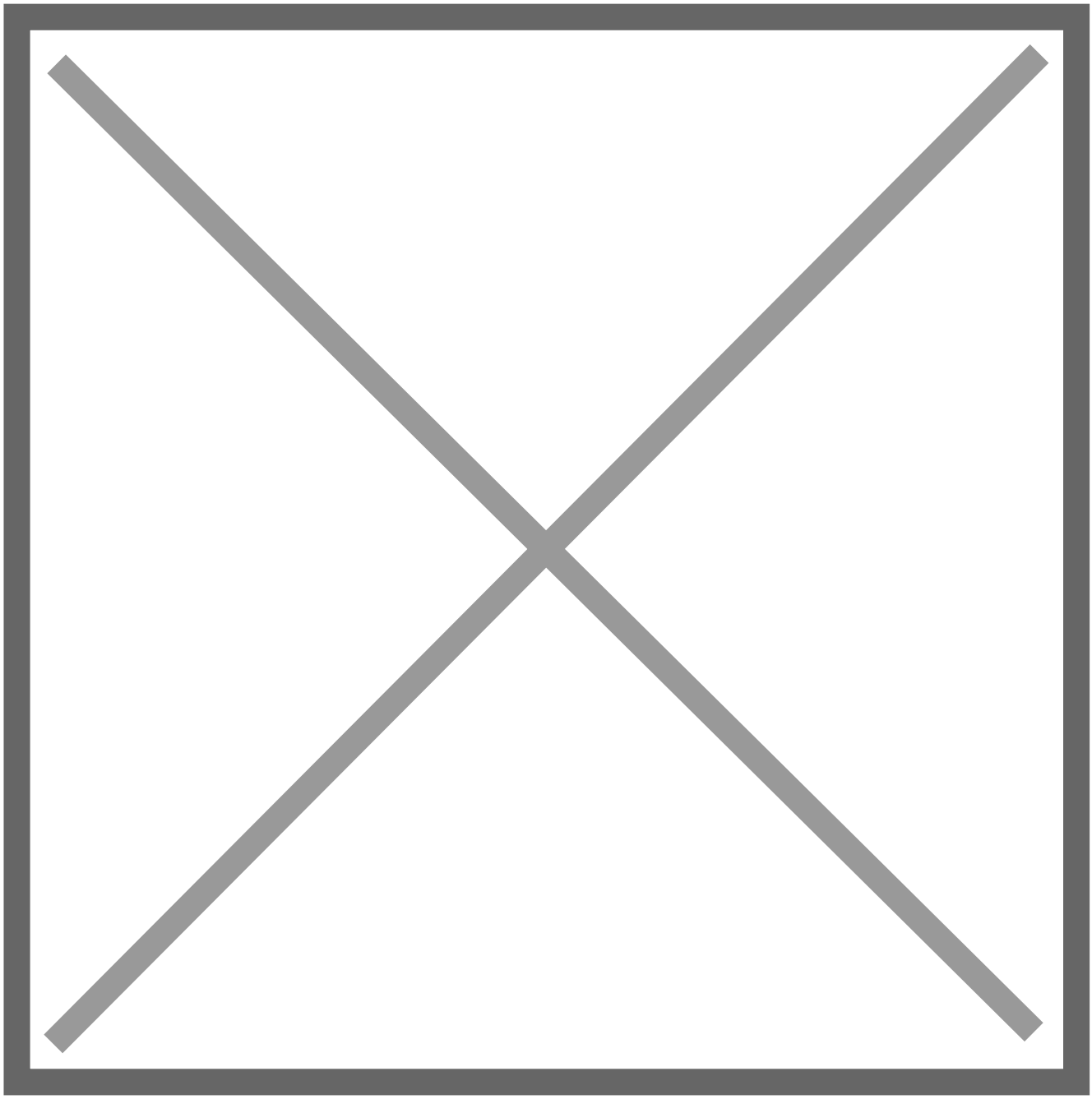
Spirituality
Vatican



Pope Francis baptizes one of 32 babies as he celebrates Mass on the feast of the Baptism of the Lord in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican Jan. 12. (CNS/Vatican Media)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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The Vatican's decision in August to clarify the formula that should be used in the Catholic rite of baptism attracted unusual interest after it caused something of a theological head-scratcher.

A priest in Detroit cited the measure, which specified that ministers must use "I baptize" and not "We baptize" at the beginning of the formula, as reason to go for a three-for-one offer: re-baptism, re-confirmation and re-ordination.

Fr. Matthew Hood had recently watched an old home video of his original 1990 baptism, in which the deacon administering the sacrament had used the "we" language.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had said in an Aug. 6 instruction that such baptisms should not be considered valid. The Catholic Church, it noted, believes that the minister of a baptism is not acting on behalf of only himself or the local community, but as "the sign-presence of Christ."

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For those still scratching their heads, theologian and Charity of Leavenworth Sr. Susan Wood explains it succinctly.

"What the 'I' means is that the person who is baptizing is acting in place of Christ," Wood, a former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, told NCR. "Christ is the primary actor in all the sacraments. It's Christ who forgives sins. It's Christ who baptizes."

"The Vatican's ruling [keeps] to the forefront that Christ is the primary actor of the sacrament," she said.

Several other theologians and ecumenical leaders widely agreed with that analysis, even if some were a bit uncomfortable with the Detroit model of looking backwards to evaluate historic baptisms. (One Vatican official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, called that approach "fundamentalist.")

Dirk Lange, assistant general secretary for ecumenical relations at the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva, said the Vatican clarification is "totally in keeping with the tradition observed in many churches."

He described Lutheran theology around the act of baptism as seeing the sacrament "in the midst of and into a community, but it's not the community that's doing the baptism."

"The decision, from that point of view, makes total sense also to Lutherans," said Lange, also a professor of worship at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.

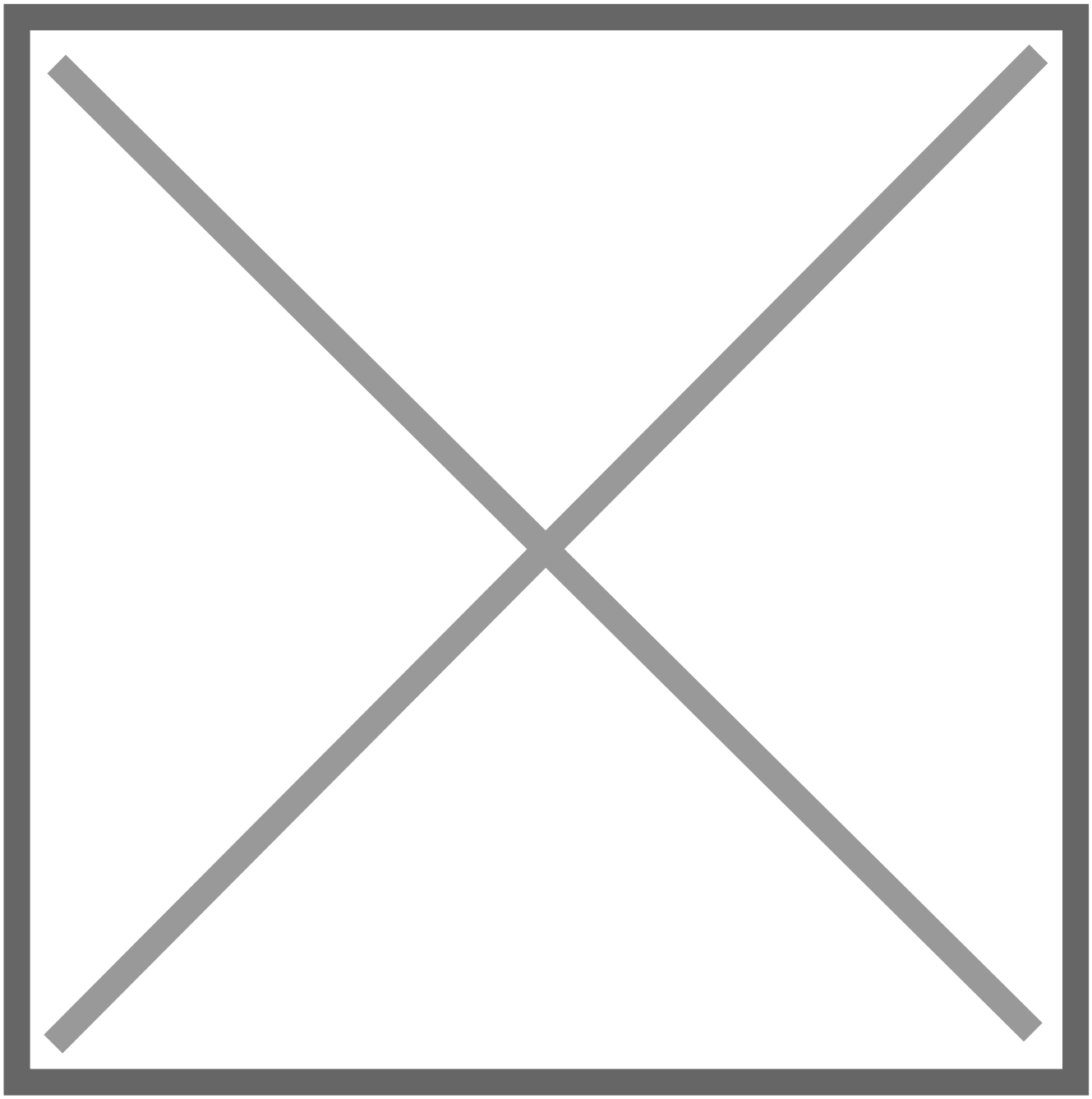
The Rev. Margaret Rose, the ecumenical and interreligious deputy to the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, said simply that "the first-person singular is the right formula." Rose said that while some might think that a minister using the term "we" to baptize could represent the local community's role in the sacrament better than one saying "I," it is the reverse, as Christ acts through the community.

"I would say that I seems to me to be a way of engaging the community in even a larger way, because the 'we' … presumes that the person who is the celebrant can encompass all of that by the words," she said.

"For the Episcopal Church, our understanding would be that 'I' is actually the right word," said Rose.

Wood, the academic dean of Regis College, the Jesuit School of Theology at the University of Toronto, said she saw "absolutely no implications" for the Vatican's clarification on current ecumenical dialogues.

The theologian said that in researching her 2009 volume *One Baptism: The Ecumenical Implications of the Doctrine of Baptism*, she could not remember any modern baptism formulae in which the minister uses the plural "we."



Fr. Matthew Browne pours water over the head of 5-month-old Rocco Richard O'Toole during his baptism Aug. 16 at St. Dominic Church in Oyster Bay, New York. Also pictured are Rocco's parents, Lauren and Tim O'Toole. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Jesuit Fr. Bruce Morrill, a theologian at Vanderbilt University's divinity school, concurred.

"The concern on the part of the [Vatican] in these cases isn't to be putting up walls against the other Christian churches, or Christian unity," said Morrill. "The whole thing is an internal disciplinary issue in the Roman church, not intended to have any repercussions ecumenically."

Like several of the other theologians, Morrill however did note that Eastern rite Catholics and Eastern Orthodox use a different baptismal formula entirely. Instead of the minister declaring the event of the sacrament with an "I" or a "We," those traditions phrase it using a past participle: "Person X is baptized."

"You can't reduce this to the current formula as the only way it's valid," he said. "The fact is the Roman church recognizes all Eastern Orthodox baptisms, for example. And they use a different opening."

Maxwell Johnson, a Lutheran theologian at the University of Notre Dame, pointed to the Eastern Orthodox example and the historic development of the baptismal rite through the centuries to argue that the Vatican's ruling should not be used retroactively.

Johnson said there is evidence that some baptisms in the early Roman and Milanese churches did not use a formula at all.

"To apply the recent [Vatican] ruling retroactively could mean that no one was validly baptized for several centuries in the Milanese and Roman Rites, including St Augustine," he said

As to whether people looking at the new Vatican instruction should worry about the validity of their own baptisms, Wood suggested that Catholics "should not be overly nervous about this."

"I think we shouldn't be unduly anxious or unduly doubtful about the sacraments we've received," she said. "I don't think people should be overly anxious, and they should trust in the grace of God and the church."

[Joshua J. McElwee is NCR Vatican correspondent. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac.]

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