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Baptism agreement clears last hurdle

by Nancy Frazier O'Brien by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- With a July 4 vote by the General Synod of the United Church of Christ, a common agreement on baptism by the U.S. Catholic Church and four Protestant church communities cleared its final hurdle.

The "Common Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Baptism," approved by the U.S. Catholic bishops last November, was ratified by the governing bodies of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in June 2009 and the Reformed Church in America and Christian Reformed Church in North America this June.

With the agreement, drawn up by Catholic and Reformed scholars during the seventh round of the Catholic-Reformed Dialogue in the USA, baptisms performed in any of the five churches will be recognized by the others, as long as flowing water and the proper formula of "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" is used and documented.

Calling baptism "the sacramental gateway into the Christian life," the agreement says baptism "is to be conferred only once, because those who are baptized are decisively incorporated into the body of Christ."

While other bishops' conferences around the world have entered into similar agreements with Protestant communities in their regions, the document is unprecedented for the U.S. Catholic Church.

When the agreement was approved by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Nov. 16 in Baltimore by a 204-11 vote, Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory of Atlanta called it "a milestone on the ecumenical journey" and said it would "allow Catholic ministers to presume that baptisms performed in these communities are 'true baptism' as understood in Catholic doctrine and law."

"The presentation of a baptismal certificate by Reformed Christians who wish to come into full communion with the Catholic Church, or to marry a Catholic, assures Catholic ministers that the baptism

performed by a Reformed minister involved the use of flowing water and the biblical invocation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit," added the archbishop, who chairs the USCCB Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.

During debate on the agreement at the United Church of Christ General Synod in Tampa, Fla., Karen Georgia Thompson, minister of ecumenical and interfaith relations, called it "another place of new beginning in our ecumenical work."

The agreement drew the support of 92.8 percent of the delegates voting on it July 4, although some noted during the debate that local pastors and parents will still have the option of choosing words other than "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" to be used during baptism, according to a news report from the United Church of Christ.

Some expressed concern that the wording was not "inclusive language that welcomes all and includes all," the news report said.

The agreement on baptism concluded the seventh round of talks between the Catholic and Reformed churches, who have been in dialogue since 1965.

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