

# Joanna is Baptised

*Whilst this story relates to events that took place over 20 years ago its message remains current today.*

St Andrew's Shared Church, Cippenham, was founded in 1971 but, surprisingly, it was not until 1994 that any attempt was made to share in the celebration of baptism, the one commonly recognised sacrament. Shared by Anglicans and Roman Catholics, St Andrew's is a comfortable place of worship for my husband Paul and me, a place where we can worship together and where we hope the pain of the separation that belonging to two churches sometimes forces on us is understood. We are both actively involved in both the Catholic and Anglican congregations, working ecumenically and within our own traditions and contributing our abilities to both. When, in 1993, we announced that our first child was on its way, members of both congregations shared our joy. Joanna was born in October.

## Two Traditions

We began planning the baptism several months earlier. It was very important to us that both traditions should be equally involved in the service, and so it would need plenty of time to arrange — especially if it was to happen in time for Joanna to fit the family christening gown! In our marriage, both the Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions are of equal importance, and we want this to be reflected in Joanna's upbringing, with the emphasis on belonging to the Body of Christ rather than to a particular church. After all, if she does not grow up to love Jesus then any church membership will be meaningless. So it is important to us that Joanna's baptism into the Body of Christ involved both our churches. However, although the churches recognise the validity of baptism amongst themselves, the ceremony carries the additional aspect of being an entry into denominational membership.

Like all Catholics marrying members of other churches, before receiving a dispensation to marry me Paul had to make an undertaking "to do all I can within the unity of our partnership to have all the children baptised and brought up in the Catholic Church". Although this effectively gives Paul a "get-out clause", I have no

such undertaking with the Church of England and so it seemed reasonable to agree on Catholic baptism for Joanna. In the long term, this gives Joanna more options later on when she is old enough to make her own decisions about church membership. However, it was a great relief to me when, in 1993, the Catholic Church's new *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* recognised that I too have strong feelings about Joanna's relationship to my tradition. It states, in paragraph 150: ... *At the same time, it should be recognised that the non-Catholic partner may feel a like obligation because of his/her own Christian commitment.*

In August 1993 we approached both the Catholic parish priest and the Anglican vicar. Both priests, quite rightly, prefer public baptism in the context of a regular service. However, if both traditions were to be fully involved in Joanna's baptism it would have to be a separate service — although we hoped that an open invitation to both congregations would retain the feeling of a family welcome to the church for Joanna. The parish priest delegated preparation of the service to his assistant priest, who arrived to meet us armed with a copy of the *Ecumenical Directory*.

Many of our ideas came from a baptism service already used by an interchurch family who like us had wanted a Catholic service with lots of Anglican participation, and had liberally mixed parts of both rites. Our priest agreed that it was a good basis for our planning. It was the first time he had seen the Anglican *Alternative Service Book*, and he was particularly keen on the prayer blessing the waters of baptism, asking us to include it in preference to the Roman Catholic versions, which are much less poetic. After establishing that in order for the service to be seen as Catholic baptism, the anointing with oil and with chrism and the pouring of water would have to be done by the Catholic priest using Catholic words, we were left to plan a service based on our own preferences; he would then check it over.

To our delight this meant that the questions and promises of the parents and godparents could use the Anglican form, which we preferred. For the rest of the service we looked at the poetry of the words and how meaningful they are to the congregation, as well as trying to keep a quantitative balance between Anglican and Catholic sections. In planning which priest was to lead various parts of the liturgy, we sometimes asked them to lead each other's traditional words. So, for example, the Anglican priest led the Catholic questions at the entrance (with the Catholic priest joining for the words of welcome), and the Catholic priest asked Anglican questions of the parents and godparents.

### A Eucharistic Context

When the draft service was complete, copies were given to both clergy. The Anglican priest immediately replied that he was happy, while the others spent longer checking the details. We wanted to have the service in a Eucharistic context, but were very aware of the divisions that can cause, so we were pleased with our Catholic priest's suggestion of a communion service. As St Andrew's church has a double tabernacle, it was easy to arrange for the reserved sacrament to be available in both kinds for everybody. Although there was still a Catholic/other Christians division, it was preferable to a divided eucharistic prayer. While we may need to experience the pain of division in order to prevent ecumenical complacency from setting in, a baptismal celebration is not the place for that pain.

With the order of service agreed (and Joanna safely arrived), we had to choose godparents. We felt it important to reflect our double background in our choice of godparents, as well as to ensure that they are firm followers of the Lord who will help us in bringing up Joanna as a Christian. The *Ecumenical Directory* told us that godparents "do not merely undertake a responsibility for the Christian education of the person being baptised (or confirmed) as a relation or friend, they are also there as representatives of a community of faith,

standing as guarantees of the candidate's faith and desire for ecclesial communion. However, based on the common baptism and because of ties of blood or friendship, a baptised person who belongs to another ecclesial community may be admitted as a witness to the baptism, but only together with a Catholic godparent" (para. 98). Paul and I found it impossible to accept that of three people making the same undertaking only one could be a godparent, and the other two would be witnesses. Their commitment to Joanna is as great, as is their readiness to bring Joanna to confirmation as a Catholic, and so, in our view, all view three are, and will remain, godparents to Joanna.



The baptism itself was a lively, happy and thoroughly God-centred service. Three priests were involved; we had invited a friend to preach, a vicar within the Church in Wales. All three worked well together and enjoyed the event. Importantly, some members of the congregation who are not regular churchgoers made a point of telling us that the service was the most enjoyable, most meaningful, most happy, most welcoming, or the most easy to understand in their experience. Our witness to others is of vital importance, and we feel

that the ecumenical nature of the service was a good witness.

### Dual Registration

Afterwards, Joanna's baptism was entered in both the Roman Catholic and Church of England baptismal registers, with notes being made of the ecumenical context of the service. Having the baptism entered in the Anglican register was important to us to underline the double belonging which we practise in our marriage and hope to convey to Joanna as she grows up. It places the baptism in context, and we hope will help Joanna to understand, as she grows to grapple with her own loyalties, what priorities we have. It is not for Paul and me to choose a church for Joanna. With her godparents, we pray that she will choose to follow Christ, for us that will be wonderful enough.