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Catholics annul baptism of uninformed Jewish boy

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A 7-year-old boy's Catholic baptism has been annulled six months after it was performed by a priest unaware that the boy was a Jew who didn't realize he was being initiated into the church.

The baptism of Robert Roffman took place in March during a legal custody battle between his Jewish father and Catholic mother, who have been divorced since 1981. The argument was over his religious upbringing, unresolved at

the time of the divorce.

Robert's father wanted an exclusively Jewish upbringing for him. His mother wanted him educated in a Catholic school, but was willing for him to attend Jewish services while with his father.

The father, junior high school teacher Barry Roffman, said he protested to the archdiocese last March, immediately after learning that Robert's mother, Maria Isabel

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Robert Roffman:
Considers himself a Jew.

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Castrillo, had taken him to Epiphany Church for baptism.

In a letter dated Sept. 13 and disclosed Thursday by Roffman, Archbishop Edward A. McCarthy declared the baptism invalid.

"The priest was not aware that the mother had told the child that the baptism would place a shield over him so that he would not go to hell," the letter said. "Nor was he aware that the child had not been advised that baptism was a sacrament of initiation into the Catholic Church, that he had not been instructed in the truths of the faith, and that prior to the baptism and to this day, the child considered himself to be Jewish."

Monsignor Bryan O. Walsh, who investigated the case for the Archdiocese of Miami, said there is no record of a case like it coming to the attention of the church locally, and he had reason to wonder if one has occurred anywhere else.

"In the published literature I did not find anything that would indicate that someone ever challenged the validity of a baptism," he said.

Walsh blamed inexperience for the failure of the Rev. David Smith to learn Robert's background and make sure he understood the meaning of baptism.

For the mother to promote the sacrament as a protective shield against hell was doctrinally wrong, Walsh said — an idea he had not heard before, possibly promised as a reassuring but badly oversimplified description of baptism's salvation aspects.

He said the church is strict about the deeply solemn ritual by which it administers baptism and the six other sacraments central to Catholic life. Basically, if all the rules are not followed, it doesn't count.

Walsh said the rules include making sure a child who has reached the age of reason knows what he is doing, does it freely and has an understanding of the Catholic faith adequate for his age.

Roffman said he is grateful for the outcome: "The church has honored my son's right of religious freedom and mine as joint custodial parent."

At the time of the baptism last spring, Roffman and his ex-wife, Castrillo, both were trying in court to win exclusive custody of Robert.

Under a prior agreement for joint custody, the parents had shared responsibility for important decisions concerning Robert. He lived with his mother in Coral Gables, spent three weekends a month with his father in Homestead and attended temple and Hebrew school at the Homestead

Jewish Center, where his father is an officer and teacher.

When Castrillo asked for a voice in Robert's religious upbringing, Roffman refused to agree to a two-religion education. He reminded the court that his ex-wife long ago agreed to a Jewish upbringing.

Documents filed in the court's public record say Castrillo now feels that her ex-husband has used religion to strain her relationship with the boy since they were divorced.

According to Roffman, a court-appointed master, or consultant, recently recommended that he be given custody six days a week. He said his former wife objected and the boy continues living with her pending resolution of the argument.

She has refused in the past to reply publicly to Roffman's complaints. When a response to Archbishop McCarthy's letter was requested Thursday, the endeavor was in vain.

According to the letter from the archbishop, Castrillo was a non-practicing Catholic before and during her marriage to Roffman, and agreed that their son would be reared as a Jew.

The letter said that Smith would not have performed the baptism had he known the facts about Robert's Jewish background and his lack of understanding of baptism.

"Indeed, being aware of the facts and having consulted with experts in theology and canon law, it is my judgment that Robert Altair Roffman is not a member of the Roman Catholic Church," the archbishop concluded. "The baptism was not valid and the records of the church should be corrected to reflect that."

Rabbi Solomon Schiff, the Roffmans' spiritual leader at the Homestead Jewish Center, spoke well of the archbishop for following up and correcting the mistake.

"There was a serious violation of someone's religious rights, but it was inadvertent," the rabbi said. "The priest didn't know, and went along with it in good faith. To recognize the error without trying to make someone a scapegoat, I think, is appropriate. I don't think it's important to find out who the culprit was."

Rabbi Schiff said Judaism holds a deep institutional concern about dishonest baptisms.

"We have sad history over years where Jewish children were baptized by those of Christian faiths because they wanted to save the Jewish soul," he said. "We don't hear about it today, but the history is fresh enough in our collective conscience to make us extremely sensitive."