

Baptism and Godparenthood in Catholic Europe

Guido Alfani

For most Christian confessions, baptism is the fundamental ritual of birth, through which the newborn child is welcomed into the community.¹ The ritual act of baptism maintained its importance even in the face of secularization, as it arguably answers a need that is not purely religious. This chapter shows the resilience of the baptismal rite in contemporary Catholic European societies, which is even more apparent if we control for changes in the religious composition of the population. The social relevance of baptism, though, is more encompassing than merely marking the birth of a child—as the ceremony requires the presence of godparents, with whom many children (and their parents) will acknowledge a special relationship through life. The practices regulating the choice of godparents changed in time, reflecting transformations in culture and society. In many Catholic countries today, godparenthood practices are deeply influenced by demographic change, and indeed, they represent an aspect of religious demography that is worthy of greater attention.

Catholic Baptism in Europe, 1970–2015

Baptism is one of the sacraments recognized by the Roman Catholic Church and more generally, it is a fundamental component of the Christian religion. Catholics are usually baptized during their infancy. Indeed, up until the 19th century baptism was performed shortly after birth (Gourdon 2006; Minello, Dalla Zuanna and Alfani 2017) and while current practice favors some delay, the mean age at the Catholic baptism can be assumed to be about six months (Alfani, Gourdon and Vitali 2012: 483).

Statistics about the celebration of baptisms are provided by the Roman Catholic Church in its statistical yearbook, the *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae*. There, information about the baptisms performed in every diocese of the world is provided and aggregated by country. This information can be used together with the official statistics about live births to calculate the percentage of the newborn baptized each year in predominantly-Catholic countries. Table 6.1 presents this information for a selection of countries in the period 1970–2015. In some countries/years the ratio of baptisms over live births assumes values over 100%, probably as a consequence of the rapid decline in births in

¹ I would like to thank Sonia Schifano for her help in collecting the data used in table 6.1, and Vincent Gourdon for many useful comments on a first version of this article.

TABLE 6.1 *Catholic baptisms per live births (%) in selected predominantly-Catholic European countries, 1970–2015*

	Austria	France	Italy	Poland	Spain
1970–74	95.9	75.9	96.4	91.3	94.6
1975–79	93.0	72.8	99.0	92.6	99.3
1980–84	88.3	65.7	101.6	103.0	106.0
1985–89	88.2	63.0	93.9	98.5	97.9
1990–94	81.8	60.8	90.8	99.8	86.3
1995–99	79.9	56.0	90.3	100.2	82.6
2000–04	72.1	49.7	85.2	98.9	75.4
2005–09	67.9	42.8	77.9	94.9	66.0
2010–14	61.8	37.0*	76.9	98.4	61.0
2015	57.9	N/A	78.7	100.0	55.1

* Notes: For France, the time period “2010–14” actually covers 2010–13 only, as information about live births in “metropolitan France” is not made available by Eurostat after 2013.

SOURCES: DATA ON BAPTISMS FROM *ANNUARIUM STATISTICUM ECCLESIAE*, 1970–2015; DATA ON BIRTHS FROM EUROSTAT, *POPULATION STATISTICS*.

southern European countries like Italy and Spain, coupled with the relatively late age at baptism, leading part of earlier and larger cohorts to be baptized in the year of birth of smaller and younger cohorts.

In the 1970s, baptism was an almost-universal rite in Catholic Europe and well over 90% of all children received it—except for France, where already at that time, one child out of four went unbaptized. In the following decades, the share of children receiving baptism generally declined. In France in the early 2010s it fell below 40%, but even in countries like Spain or Austria the proportion of children baptized declined by more than 30 percent points, to slightly over 60%. The exception is Poland, where baptism is today almost universal and involves a higher prevalence of children than in the 1970s. Indeed, the proportion of baptized children seems to have increased after the election of the Polish Pope, John Paul II, in 1978 and then throughout the crisis of the Communist regime in the 1980s. From the beginning of the new century, Catholicism seems to have become again an essential element of the culture and national identity of Poland. Finally, Italy is an intermediate case, as there the decline in the prevalence of Catholic baptism was more limited and in recent years there have been some signs of a recovery: from the low point of 74.9% touched in 2010, the percentage of children receiving Catholic baptism rose slowly up to 78.7% in 2015. Also note that in European Protestant countries, the prevalence of children baptized seems comparable to the lower range found in Catholic countries (for example, it was about 44% in Sweden in 2016).