Ecclesiastical godparenthood in Early Modern Murcia

Antonio Irigoyen López

An important provision of the Council of Trent was to reduce the number of godparents at the baptism of a child.¹ By the end of the Middle Ages, godparenthood had become a means of establishing social ties that unified the community and gave an opportunity to obtain an official friendship with people of higher rank (Alfani, 2009a). As a result, baptism involved and also underpinned the principles of the ‘gift economy’ of the Ancien Régime (Alfani and Gourdon, 2006). At the Council of Trent, in an attempt to restore the exclusively religious nature of baptism, the Church ruled on how the sacrament was to be celebrated and the number of godparents admissible. This chapter aims to verify the success or failure of the Tridentine reform in two ways. First, a review is made of the ecclesiastical literature written in Spain so as to become acquainted with the theoretical basis regarding godparenthood. Second, the application of this ecclesiastical theory is tested through a study of the presence of clergymen godparents in two parishes located in the city of Murcia in south-east Spain.

Godparenthood in priesthood treaties

Literary production in Early Modern Spain was dominated by religion. Based on the work of Nicolás Antonio, both Caro Baroja (1985: 49–62) and García Cárce1 (1989: 119–22) have shown the overwhelming predominance of religious themes during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which declined later in the eighteenth century (Simón Díaz, 1983–84; Aguilar Piñal, 1981–2001). Vast numbers of works that could be classified as religious were produced. In order to gauge the importance attached to baptism, we can refer to books intended exclusively for the clergy, who sought better training and preparation (Peña Díaz, 1997: 335–95). Included in this category of salutary literature are breviaries, missals and sermons; confessor manuals and compendiums; and treaties on the sacraments or writings for training priests (Betrán Moya, 2009; Irigoyen López, 2008).

Baptism has always been one of the main sacraments for the Catholic Church. At the beginning of the Early Modern Age, its main principles were...
established by the Council of Trent. Not only did it celebrate the admission of a new member to the community of believers, but it also symbolised conversion, the birth of the soul into a new life: ‘as dressing in Christ for the baptism, we become His creatures, achieving full redemption for the sins’ (Session 14, chapter 2). Baptism signified the reception of grace because the infants ‘re-born with the Baptismal waters, and incorporated into Christ, cannot at that age lose the grace of God’s children that they have already achieved’ (Session 21, chapter 4); it was the cleansing of original sin:

And as with this rule of faith, in accordance with the tradition of the Apostles, even those infants who have not yet been able to commit any personal sins, receive with full truth baptism in redemption of their sins; so that re-birth purifies in them what they contracted through birth: Since only he who has been reborn from the water and the Holy Spirit can enter the kingdom of God. (Session 5, decree on the original sin)

Finally, baptism represented the break with the Devil:

The behaviour of the divine justice seems to state, without a doubt, that God accepts in different ways in His grace those that due to ignorance sinned before Baptism, and those who, once free of the servitude of sin and the devil, and enriched by the gift of the Holy Spirit, did not commit the horror of desecrating with due knowledge the temple of God, nor of offending the Holy Spirit. (Session 14, chapter 8)

All of this demonstrates the importance the Church attached to the celebration of this sacrament, and the great solemnity demanded for the baptismal ceremony. It also explains why so many works were written for priests, dealing with all the aspects of baptism. In many of them, theological reasoning is combined with the explanation of ceremonial aspects. This is the case of Alonso Moscoso’s book written in 1634 that deals with the definition, subject, ministering and form of the sacrament of baptism (Moscoso, 1634). His method was to devote a chapter to every single word that the priest pronounced: Absoluto Corporis Exterior Ego Te Baptizo In nomine Patris, et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. Some years earlier, Francisco de Toledo (1619) had addressed this issue in greater detail in a book that was widely disseminated: Instrucción de sacerdotes y suma de casos de conciencia (Instruction for Priests and Compendium of Cases of Conscience). Yet, of course, the work that best examines this entire issue was written in 1637 by Father José de Santa María. As its title – Sacros ritos y ceremonias bautismales (Sacred Rites and Baptismal Ceremonies) – leaves no doubt concerning its content, this work clearly shows that the Church sought to regain the religious sense of the ceremony. It is true that there was an important pedagogical and disseminative element to the text: ‘These baptismal rites (says Saint Thomas) are also useful