

Bishops OK baptism pact with Reformed churches

by [Daniel Burke](#) in the [December 14, 2010](#) issue

In a "milestone" pact six years in the making, the U.S. Catholic bishops approved a mutual agreement with four Reformed Protestant denominations to recognize each other's baptisms as valid.

The American bishops, assembled in Baltimore for their annual fall meeting, voted 204 to 11 on November 17 to approve the baptism agreement with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, the Christian Reformed Church and the United Church of Christ.

Archbishop

Wilton Gregory of Atlanta, chairman of the ecumenical and interfaith committee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, called the agreement a "milestone on the ecumenical journey."

Added Gregory:

"Together with our Reformed brothers and sisters we Catholic bishops can once again affirm baptism as the basis of the real, even if incomplete, unity we share in Christ."

"This is a significant moment in ecumenical history," said Robina Winbush, who directs the PCUSA ecumenical department. "In the context of so much that divides us and upon which our churches may not agree, we remind ourselves that our fundamental unity begins and is rooted in our baptism."

The Roman

Catholic Church has recognized the validity of most Christian denominations' baptisms since the groundbreaking Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s. In 2002, however, concerns arose over practices by

Reformed Christians such as baptism by sprinkling and substituting different names for the Holy Trinity, according to the Catholic bishops.

Under

the agreement, Catholic clergy will presume that baptisms performed by the four Reformed denominations will be in accord with Catholic doctrine, which requires an authorized minister to use flowing water and invoke God as "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," Gregory said. The agreement could be particularly useful for Reformed Christians who wish to convert to Catholicism or marry in the Catholic Church.

The PCUSA has already approved the agreement. The other three denominations are expected to approve it in the near future. —RNS