



The Irish Episcopal Conference

Columba Centre, Maynooth, Co. Kildare.

Principles of responsibility regarding priests who father children while in ministry

Upon ordination, priests promise to live a life of celibacy in their dedication to Christ and to pastoral ministry in the Church. However if, contrary to this obligation, a priest fathers a child, the wellbeing of his child should be his first consideration.

The following principles of responsibility attempt to articulate a position based on natural justice and subsequent rights regarding the children of priests. This does not replace the responsibility of arriving at practical decisions which pertains to those charged with the common good (whether in the family, Church, or State).

1. The birth of a child to a couple brings into being a unique person with a mother and a father. The two parents have a fundamental right to make their own decisions regarding their care of their new-born child.
2. In justice and in love, the needs of the child should be given the first consideration. In the case of a child fathered by a Catholic priest, it follows that a priest as any new father, should face up to his responsibilities - personal, legal, moral and financial. At a minimum, no priest should walk away from his responsibilities. His relevant Church authority (bishop or religious superior) should also direct such a priest in addressing his responsibilities.
3. Each situation requires careful consideration¹ but certain principles present themselves on which the decision of the priest should be made:
 - The best interests of the child
 - Dialogue with, and respect for, the mother of the child
 - Dialogue with Church superiors
 - Taking into account civil and canon law²
4. It is vital in discerning a way forward that the mother, as the primary care giver, and as a moral agent in her own right, be fully involved in the decision.
5. In arriving at a determination regarding these cases, it is important that a mother and child should not be left isolated or excluded.

¹ In particular, cultural contexts can have an important bearing. However, the moral agency of the mother still remains important in all cultural contexts.

² Such laws or norms may include rights of custody and maintenance (civil law) or the process of laicization (canon law).