

Baptism as the Model for a Sacramental Aesthetic

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When Christians of different traditions talk about what they share in faith and practice, at the top of the list would be the universal sacrament of baptism in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In the light of this, there has emerged a growing imperative that the various churches affirm the mutual recognition of baptism on the basis of the shared belief that there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” Given its foundational significance, why is it that baptismal practice seems often to trivialize this fundamental rite of Christian incorporation? In the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, the rite for Holy Baptism embodies a recovered sense of the significant role which baptism plays in the Christian life. But if in our common pastoral practice that significance is undermined, our sense of the magnitude of this sacramental act will be undermined as well.

In November of 2007, Thomas Best gave an address at a celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*.¹ At the time of this celebration, Thomas Best was the Director of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches in Geneva. While reflecting on his work with the Faith and Order Commission, Best commented that the ecumenical influence of the document had been unprecedented: during the quarter-century since its publication, 180,000 copies of *BEM* had been printed in English, and the text had been translated into forty languages. I want to lift up two points from Best’s address. First, he

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¹ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

noted that the document was a sign that ecumenical dialogue among the various churches had moved into a new phase. He said:

Thus after centuries of division, the decades of simply comparing one another's positions, the churches were finally ready for a deeper commitment for the search for unity—and a much more active engagement in the production of ecumenical texts. This opened up the *convergence* method, which meant that the focus was no longer on the distinctive positions of the particular churches, but on what they might say *together* about the nature and mission of the church.²

And so we see *BEM* as a document which shows the movement of churches beyond a comparative or even adversarial model of ecumenical engagement to one in which the various churches were exploring the important areas of agreement which each tradition had preserved.

The second point in Best's address that I want to lift up is an immediate consequence of the first. When Christians talk about what they share in faith and practice, at the top of the list would be the universal practice of sacramental initiation, baptism with water in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. This has led to a growing imperative that the various churches affirm the mutual recognition of baptism in each of our traditions on the basis of the shared belief that there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." So it is that when a person is baptized in any of our various churches, that person is made a member of the body of Christ and consequently a member of the one church. This must be affirmed in spite of the continuing divisions between Christians of various traditions. These baptized persons will live out their lives as members of a particular communion, but through baptism they share a unity which reaches beyond our institutional divisions. It is an affirmation of the unity that we hope ultimately will be fulfilled in the visible church and for which we wait upon God.

If then baptism has the significance that is ascribed to it by all Christian liturgical traditions, if it is the embodiment of a fundamental

² Thomas F. Best, "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: A Continuing Challenge for the Churches," *Centro Pro Unione, Rome, Semi-annual Bulletin*, no. 74 (Fall 2008): 3–10.

unity that is not destroyed by our denominational barriers, if what unites us in Christ is more fundamental than the issues (albeit often important issues) that divide us, why is it that in the sacramental practice of our churches, Christian initiation seems all too often to take an insignificant place in the lived experience of many Christians? If our churches affirm that baptism is theologically significant, why does our baptismal practice often marginalize—or, at worst, trivialize—this fundamental rite of Christian incorporation?

Many years ago, the founder of the Society of St. John the Evangelist (the Cowley Fathers), R. M. Benson, made the following observation: “In Western Christendom, the Holy Eucharist has so entirely overshadowed Holy Baptism, that the food of our life is made to be a gift greater than the life that sustains us.” This is an insightful comment, I believe, because it does not see baptism merely as a rite performed at the beginning of one’s Christian life, but rather as creating an abiding context within which we live out the whole of our lives in Christ.

Our daily life in Christ is the living out of our baptism, as we grow ever more deeply into our baptismal identity. In the early eighteenth century, the English divine John Kettlewell spoke of baptism as creating the community which is then constituted and revealed in the Sunday eucharistic assembly. Here it is important for us to remember that during the early centuries of Christianity, the Eucharist was understood as the final stage in the process of initiation. There was a deep sense of the underlying unity of these two sacramental acts, with the receiving of the eucharistic gifts as the ongoing and repeatable part of initiation. So the Eucharist itself was a constant reminder of the identity which baptism had created.

In the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, we find two important assertions which must be held together: in the introductory rubrics for the rite of Holy Baptism, we read that “Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ’s Body the Church” (p. 298). And in the opening directions for the entire book, we read in the first sentence that the Holy Eucharist is “the principal act of Christian worship” (p. 13). The design of the 1979 book reinforces those two claims at every opportunity, and certainly the recovery of the centrality of the Eucharist has been generally accomplished in our churches across the nation.

One might have hoped that the recovery of the significance of baptism might also have been achieved and that it would now claim a

central place in the consciousness of our people. In some places, of course, this is true. On the basis of the directions in the rite, first that “Holy Baptism is appropriately administered within the Eucharist as the chief service on a Sunday or other feast” (p. 298); and second, in the Additional Directions, that “Holy Baptism is especially appropriate at the Easter Vigil, on the Day of Pentecost, on All Saints’ Day . . . , and on the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord” (p. 312), the crucial significance of baptism seems evident.

The theological sense of this second rubric is that it associates the celebration of baptism with major feasts of the Christian year, but more specifically with feasts that are directly related to our understanding of what baptism is about. What’s more, the link with the Easter Vigil and Pentecost connects us with early practice in the church since the paschal season, the Great Fifty Days from the Easter Vigil until the Feast of Pentecost, was for centuries understood to be the primary season in which the rites of initiation were to be celebrated. After all, in baptism the candidates, by entering into the pool, joined themselves with the death and resurrection of Jesus. They each became “another Christ.” It would seem that the importance of baptism and its grounding in the paschal mystery of Christ were firmly established.

Yet in spite of all these clear indications of the centrality of the rite in the life of the church, there are many places where quasi-private baptisms continue to take place. Fairly recently I heard of a parish in which a few years ago I had participated in a powerful celebration of the Easter Vigil. In a conversation with the new rector during her first Lent in the parish, she told me that baptisms would not take place at the Vigil because, she said, “It really makes the service much too long and the people don’t want it.” I knew that they had wanted it up through the previous year, as the result of a carefully developed program of education in which the meaning of the Vigil had been brought home to them. What I heard that day was rather, “I do not want baptisms at the Vigil, and I am the rector.”

But this is not an isolated example, nor is this problem limited to the Episcopal Church. A friend of mine who taught liturgy at a Roman Catholic university sent students out as a class project to interview pastors with a set of questions about how the Vigil was being celebrated in their own parish. One of the questions was, “Do you have baptisms at the Easter Vigil?” And one pastor replied

very earnestly, “No. No, indeed. We only do Easterly things at the Vigil.”

It seems to me that there should be some way that the theological and pastoral expectations of the rite might not be so casually ignored. The impoverishment of the understanding and practice of baptism among Episcopalians is distressing because the directions for the rites provided in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* embody a theology which is central to Christian faith—the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When celebrated in their fullness, these rites invite each parish community to enter once again into the mystery of their own redemption.

I have come to believe that far back in the history of the church we find developments—a shift—that created a different rationale for the celebration of the two primary sacraments of Christianity. This rationale still greatly influences the thinking of many of the clergy, and thus inevitably affects liturgical priorities.

Let me briefly summarize the shift to which I am referring. This will serve as a point of reference for the perspective that I want to share in this essay. From all that we know from documentary evidence, and even allowing for differences in ritual between one community and another’s celebration of baptism, it is fair to say that, particularly during the first three centuries of Christianity, the Christian water rite marked a significant turning point in the lives of those who were entering the church.³ The ritually abundant sacramental act was itself the focus of a pattern of progressive incorporation that often extended for a substantial length of time, both prior to as well as after the ritual washing. What we see might be called a process of socialization by which the lives of men and women were reordered according to the values inherent in the making of a Christian profession of faith.

To speak of such “values” involves, of course, more than merely concerns about the rites, even the abundant rites of the early centuries. Conversion to Christianity meant the living out of the moral implications of a Christian profession of faith. This is brought home in a startling passage in *The Great Catechism* of St. Gregory of Nyssa. There Gregory writes of those who have “come to the grace of baptism,” and yet who are “only seemingly, and not really, regenerate.”

³ This point is developed convincingly in Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1999).

What is startling about this comment is that it suggests that the sacramental act, even the abundant rites of that time, was somehow invalid. Gregory speaks of the necessary link between the reformation of the candidate's life and the profession of faith that takes place in baptism. The new birth effected in baptism, a dying and rising with Christ, is undermined if that new being is not evident. He writes, "I do not see how it is possible to deem one . . . in whom there has been no change in the distinguishing features of his nature, to be any other than he was . . . [since] it is for a renovation and change of our nature that the saving birth is received."⁴ What Gregory is saying is that the rites can be celebrated and yet not effect what they signify. Later developments in the life of the church modified this in the sense that the effectiveness of the sacraments was affirmed to rest upon God's action and that this is not undone by human inadequacy. But Gregory's words remind us that at least in the fourth century, the signification in baptism involved not only incorporation into the church but also the true reformation of one's life. If a Christian's life does not demonstrate transformed living, then, Gregory writes, "the water is but water."

The contrast I want to make is between that pattern of initiation, which flourished particularly in the years leading up to the end of the persecution of Christians in the fourth century, and a pattern which began to emerge within a new social context known as Christendom. The substantial and rich pattern which had developed for the making of a Christian—here I have in mind Tertullian's phrase that "Christians are made, not born." That pattern gave way as the number of adult candidates declined. As infant baptism became dominant, the process was modified and reduced in dramatic ways: the catechuminate, which had been so important for the shaping of mature faith in adult candidates, gradually disappeared. Further, a loss of the association of baptism with Easter/Pentecost resulted from the influence of an emerging preoccupation with original sin. This led parents to have their newborn infants baptized as soon as possible after birth. A rite which for adults had embodied full incorporation into the community of the church gradually became a quasi-private ceremony whose aim was to wash away the inherited sin the newborn child was believed to carry into this world. Nathan Mitchell refers to this disintegration of

⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, second series, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 507–509.

the rites of initiation as “a fundamental decay” which had far-reaching effects in every aspect of the church’s life.⁵ The process of initiation was pushed to the periphery of normal Christian experience.

This later model had an enormous impact upon the celebration of baptism throughout many centuries in the life of the church down to our own time. Only a few years ago, a major church publication devoted an entire issue to the subject of baptism. The editors chose for the cover a picture of a baptism which contradicted what the 1979 Prayer Book rite had proposed as normative: the picture depicts three adults, one of whom holds a small infant; the priest who is officiating stands with them around the small font. The picture gives no indication that a congregation is present, much less that the baptism is taking place at a principal liturgy on a Sunday, nor at a celebration of the Eucharist. We cannot tell either if the baptism is taking place in the Easter/Pentecost period, or one of the other appointed days. We cannot know, of course, the commitment of the parents or godparents to the promises they would make in the rite, but all too often pre-baptismal instruction does not endow those promises with substance.

I speak of this picture because I see it as a kind of icon of the understanding of the editors and of many members of the church regarding the customary model for the celebration of Holy Baptism. Remember that this was a special issue devoted entirely to that subject. This icon speaks louder than thousands of words. Essentially, it shows us a depleted—even trivialized—model for baptism.

We would all acknowledge that such a baptism is valid: it meets the *minimal* expectations for the rite to be an action of the church. But *minimal* is the word to note. If I speak of the inadequacy of the rite depicted in the picture, it is in regard to its signification of the sacred mystery it is intended to embody: incorporation as a member of the body of Christ. If we ask the wrong question, we are very likely to get a wrong answer. The question must be, “What is being signified?” To that question, the picture’s answer is, “A private rite done to a baby for a very small group of people.” Many years ago, the late Aidan Kavanagh commented that we must see the impact of a baptism within the life of the community when an adult or child is incorporated into the holy people of God. It is not simply something done to or for the person. The newly baptized bring their gifts into the life of the

⁵ Nathan D. Mitchell, “Dissolution of the Rite of Christian Initiation,” in *Made, Not Born* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 83–98.

community in which they will worship and in which their faith will be nourished by word and sacrament. The unfolding of their life in Christ can have a profound impact upon the life of that community.

What I have been moving toward is to share with you a deep conviction: I believe that when our sacramental acts are ritually minimized, eventually this diminished ritual undermines the church's understanding of the sacramental act itself. This is true, I believe, whatever may be the initial causes that led to the erosion of the original ritual model. What results is not only ritual change, but eventually a subversion of meaning.

My point can be easily demonstrated in the shift from normative adult baptism to the predominance of infant baptism to which I referred. The ritual shift was an inevitable consequence, I admit, of the emergence of a Christianized society in which the great majority of adults had been baptized as the children of Christian parents. The baptism of infants, which had always depended upon the Christian faith of their parents, continued as a legitimate expression of the solidarity of the family. Infant baptism is a powerful affirmation of God's initiative in our lives. But in the early centuries of Christianity, it was always done with reference to the faith of the parents, who would have the immediate responsibility for the Christian nurture of their child. In fact, in the earliest times, adult candidates were often baptized together with their children.⁶

Problems began when the memory of baptism as incorporation into the body of Christ became obscured by the emergence of a particular understanding of what was called "original sin." This development gradually led to a significant shift of emphasis in the meaning of baptism itself.

The genius of the sacraments is that they engage our whole physical humanity: they are sensual. The fullness of their meaning is not contained within neat catechism definitions. Our fundamental engagement with the sacraments is not cerebral; it is visceral. This is the reason that in the title of this essay I refer to "a sacramental aesthetic." Because of our physical nature, all aspects of our lives engage us not only with our minds, but with the whole of that physical nature. We "know" through our senses. This sensual knowing engages us in

⁶ Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1960), 19–24.

ways that are much deeper than words alone.⁷ As precious as words are, we engage our world with a special intensity through our senses, an engagement which is beyond words.

One of the great privileges of my life, when I was a liturgy student in Paris, was hearing a series of lectures by Marie-Dominique Chenu, the great Dominican theologian and certainly one of the giants of theology in the twentieth century. Father Chenu spoke to us of what he called “the anthropology of the liturgy.” I shall never forget the class in which he burst out with some passion and said, “The sacraments must border on the vulgar.” His point was that the meaning should be evident in the action itself, in the abundance of the signification, in the richness of the ritual texture. One should not need an explanatory paragraph telling us, “Now this is what the ritual means.” We do not need to explain a symbol: we enter into a symbol and are thus embraced by its meaning. For us as physical human beings, this is how we are touched by the deepest levels of meaning.

It is this “abundance of the signification” that became radically obscured as the full process of initiation came gradually to be reduced simply to the pouring of a small amount of water over the head of an infant with the Trinitarian formula. Valid, yes. Minimal, certainly. Adequate to the meaning which this minimal rite was now intended to carry in itself alone—it is there that we find the heart of the problem. As baptism was pushed to the periphery of the church’s life, in which the assembly was not generally expected to participate, the profound link between baptism and Eucharist came to be undermined.

During the first week of January 2009, I attended the annual meeting of the North American Academy of Liturgy in Baltimore. It has been our custom for many years that the upcoming president of the Academy gives an address on the first day of the meeting. Often the subject of the address is related to the speaker’s current research projects. At this meeting, the opening address was given by Professor Richard Rutherford, a Roman Catholic priest and liturgical scholar. His subject turned out to be his recent work at the excavations of ancient Christian churches (from the early seventh century) on the island of Cypress. Fortunately, he had visual projections of the ruins of several churches and diagrams of their various floor plans. I was astonished by what I saw in these pictures. Beside each church there

⁷ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967).

was a baptistery. This in itself was not surprising: many of us have seen great churches in Europe which have a baptistery standing beside them, often of considerable size. But for these ancient churches on Cypress, the baptisteries were on a whole different scale: they were enormous, almost as large as the nearby buildings in which the people gathered for the Eucharist.⁸

I found myself immediately reflecting on the impact a great building has upon us. I suspect that many people have had the experience of walking into a great and glorious building, and the building itself impinges on all of our senses. Many years ago, I had such an experience in Ely Cathedral in England, when this extraordinary building brought to me an overwhelming awe for the centuries of Christians who had gathered there, week after week, for the celebration of the Eucharist. But of all the pictures that Richard Rutherford showed to us, it was those of the baptisteries that amazed me. These, too, were buildings for the gathering of the *ecclesia*—the people of God—who could gather there as a new group of men and women were being initiated into their fellowship, were being incorporated into the body of Christ.

I remembered the picture on the cover of the church magazine I mentioned earlier, of a small group in a corner of a church. These two contexts offer a powerful expression of abundance contrasted with minimalism. Remember: we must ask the right question. The issue here is not validity; it is signification. A candidate brought into one of the baptisteries on Cypress would in the experience itself, as it engaged all of the senses, have known that what was taking place was profoundly important for the candidates, but also for the people who had gathered with them for the rites of initiation. This rite would then be brought to completion when the newly baptized, with the entire community, gathered in the nearby church for their first celebration of the Eucharist.

We are not living on Cypress in the seventh century; for the most part, we have the buildings we have, and given economic realities even the extensive remodeling of a space that contradicts the understanding of Christian initiation I have proposed will often be economically problematic. Yet it is true that, as many of us have heard with

⁸ H. Richard Rutherford, CSC, "Baptismal Anointing in the Eastern Mediterranean," *Proceedings of the North American Academy of Liturgy*, Annual Meeting, Baltimore, Maryland, January 2–5, 2009, 3–27.

regard to the impact of the building upon the liturgies that take place in it, “the building always wins.” We must get our priorities in order. If, as I believe strongly, a diminished ritual model of Christian initiation has shaped a highly privatized understanding of what baptism means, then it is imperative that every pastoral effort possible be made to create models of celebration in which the abundance of the signification may be embodied.

The trivialization of baptism—and I know this is a strong word, but I believe that it is often justified—the trivialization of baptism has created a situation in which some people are asking, in the name of a certain concept of inclusivity, if we need baptism at all in the life of the contemporary church. After all, cannot the Eucharist be itself a sacrament of welcome and inclusion? Please do not misunderstand me: I would not turn away persons who present themselves at the altar for Holy Communion. This question is often posed in terms of inhospitality or exclusion. I am by no means indifferent to the importance of hospitality and inclusion. But again, it is important to ask the right question, or rather, in this case, to see that several questions are tied together on this matter.

What I have called the trivialization of baptism costs the church dearly because it ignores the essential link between initiation and Eucharist. An open invitation to Communion before baptism—and I know of places where this is seen as the desirable norm—obscures the integral relation between these two sacraments. As we have seen, Eucharist was during the early centuries of Christianity understood to be the final and culminating act in the initiatory process; Eucharist was the repeatable part of that process.

I have pleaded for an abundance in the signification, an abundance of the signs, because I believe that through that abundance, the signs speak with particular power to our physical humanity. As Father Chenu said, “The sacraments must border on the vulgar.” Many years ago, when I officiated at the baptism of the newborn child of one of my students, after the water rite I carried the child into the midst of the community for the signing. I had a small pitcher filled with consecrated chrism, and I poured the oil upon the crown of the child’s head and then took both hands and spread the oil over his head. As I poured the oil, some people who were there gasped: they were accustomed to a bit of oil in a pyx on a piece of cotton, of which perhaps a drop would be signed upon the head—hence, the gasp. But as I spread the oil, the fragrance of the balsam permeated the chapel. Not

a word of explanation was needed: the entire community smelled the fragrance of Christ.

Many years ago, Liturgy Training Publications in Chicago produced a video titled "This is the Night." It is a film about the Easter Vigil as celebrated in a Roman Catholic parish in the blue-collar town of Palestine, Texas. I knew the pastor as a student in the summer liturgy program at Notre Dame University. With his leadership, this wonderful community of very ordinary people had developed a celebration of the Vigil marked by an abundance of the signs, including a splendid pool for baptism by immersion. A few years ago, in a parish in California, we showed this film in connection with a program in adult education and as preparation for the upcoming Easter Vigil. Afterward the parishioners were asked what they thought of the film. One woman said, "It was really too much." A seminarian who worked in the parish replied, "If we really believe that we are transacting the rites of eternity, how much is too much?"

"The sacraments must border on the vulgar" may not be the way we would express this idea, but Father Chenu's comment is, I believe, at the heart of the meaning of the sacraments. A couple of years ago I discovered in, of all places, the writings of John Cotton, an English Puritan of the seventeenth century, a phrase which carries the significance of this appeal for abundance in the sacramental actions of the church. Cotton wrote: "There is such a measure of grace as a man may swim as a fish in water. . . . He runs the way of God's Commandments; whatever he is to do or suffer, he is ready for all, . . . [so] in every way, drenched in grace." That is a wonderful image for reminding us what the purpose of the sacraments is: "drenched in grace." But these sacraments must not be only words; they must be embodied so that the physical abundance of the signs will convey to us sensually—touching us in our physical humanity—the awesome abundance of the grace of God.