

THE NEW ROMAN RITE OF INFANT BAPTISM

Introduction

Since the feast of the Ascension, 15 May 1969, the Roman Catholic Church is in possession of a new and definitive Order for the Baptism of Infants.¹ This is one of the fruits of the liturgical reform set in motion by the Second Vatican Council. It implements the principle stated in article 67 of the Liturgy Constitution: 'The rite for the baptism of infants is to be revised, and adapted to the fact that those to be baptized are indeed infants. The roles of parents and god-parents, and also their duties, should be brought out more clearly in the rite itself.'

The Order was drawn up by a special study group of 'Consilium' – the commission appointed by Pope Paul VI to implement the liturgical reforms. The eleven members comprising the study group represented six countries and three continents. Under the able direction of Rev. Professor Balthasar Fischer of the Liturgical Institute, Trier, the work of revision, begun in 1964, was completed in 1967; after a period of experimentation in various centres throughout the world, it was finally approved in October 1968.²

The rite under consideration here is that for the baptism of several children. Henceforth this is to be regarded as the normal form of celebration which serves as model for the other types of infant baptism: (1) that of a single child; (2) of a very large number of children; (3) baptism of a sick child when conferred by a lay person. (This latter is of great interest, since it invests even an emergency baptism with fitting solemnity.)

Background to the New Rite

It is not necessary to unravel here the complicated history of infant baptism in the Roman church. It may suffice to observe that the rite set out in the *Rituale Romanum* was one originally intended for adults; subsequently, with slight modifications, it was made to serve for infants. A further anomaly becomes apparent in the discovery that this rite was not planned as a single celebration, but as a series of initiation rites accompanying the different stages of the catechumenate and terminating in the baptism proper.³ With the disappearance of the adult catechumate in Rome, these preliminary rites lost their *raison d'être*; rather than discard them, however, the Church annexed them to the baptismal action itself. From this telescoping – the

process seems to have been completed by the ninth century – there resulted the highly complex service of infant baptism that has come down to us. The catechetical value of some of its rites and formulas was doubtful. How, for instance, was one to explain the gesture of breathing on the child, or placing salt on its tongue? How could one justify the strongly-worded exorcisms when applied, not to converts from paganism, but to newly-born infants?

This brief presentation of the *status quo* before the reform gives an idea of the nature of the task presented to the study group. It may be likened to that of renovating an old building. First, the ivy must be removed from the walls to allow the outlines of the building be seen to best advantage; essential architectural features must be conserved, unnecessary accretions removed. Finally, if the building is to be lived in by men and women of today, there will be need for at least a minimum of modern amenities.

One's first impressions suggest that this delicate operation has been a successful one. The new form of infant baptism has conserved all that is best in the old rite, and given it greater clarity. There is a definite continuity here: the old rite is recognizable in the new, minus its repetitions and obscurities. At the same time, something new and meaningful has emerged which better serves the needs of contemporary Christians.

Characteristics of the Rite

In contrast with the old baptismal service, three characteristics of the revised Order stand out very clearly: (1) greater community participation; (2) a more generous provision for the word of God; (3) a stronger emphasis on the paschal mystery.

Community Participation

While the priest (or deacon) is official minister of the sacrament, he is not, as in the past, the sole actor in its celebration. The new rite envisages the presence and active participation of a community. This latter will consist not only of the parents, godparents and relatives, but also, as far as possible, of friends, neighbours, and some members of the local church. Thus the sacrament of baptism appears more clearly as an action of the Church, people of God, and body of Christ, which, in a communal celebration, welcomes new members.

In this gathering of the faithful the parents play a vital role. This is as it should be, since on them falls the responsibility of bringing up their children in the Christian faith. And yet, strange as it may seem, in the rite described in the *Rituale Romanum* the parents did not receive even passing mention. In practice, the mother was rarely present at the baptism of her child. Her absence was due to the

canonical rule of 'quamprimum' (the sacrament to be conferred as soon as possible after birth). Now a sufficient time can elapse to allow both partners to be there. The godparents play an important but secondary role.

Ministry of the Word

The absence of sacred scripture was a serious lacuna in the old baptismal service. Now, a very complete liturgy of the word, modelled on that of the mass, forms one of the main constituents of the rite. This includes one or two readings from the gospels, followed by a homily and prayers of intercession.

This inclusion of a ministry of the word serves a very important aim: to deepen and strengthen the faith of all taking part, especially the parents and godparents. Baptism is a 'sacrament of faith', of that faith by which men and women, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, respond to the gospel of Christ. Infants, it is true, are incapable of an act of faith. Nevertheless, they are – to use an expression dear to St. Augustine – 'baptized in the faith of the Church'. Later on, having been instructed in the rudiments of the faith, the children must make a personal response to the gospel message.

The Paschal Mystery

We read in the General Introduction (N.6): 'Those who are baptized are engrafted in the likeness of Christ's death (Rom. 6:4-5). They are buried with him, they are given life again with him, and with him they rise again (Eph. 2:6). For baptism recalls and effects the paschal mystery itself, because by means of it men and women pass from the death of sin into life. Its celebration, therefore, should reflect the joy of the resurrection, especially when it takes place during the Easter Vigil or on Sunday.'

Many features of the new rite express this paschal aspect of baptism, e.g. the consecration of the water, songs and acclamations to express 'Easter joy', the use of the Easter candle, the recommended practice of baptism by immersion as more clearly expressing the death-resurrection theme. Also, the time for conferring the sacrament – ideally Easter or Sunday – is expressive of the paschal mystery.

COMMENTARY ON THE RITE

The service may be divided into four main parts:

- (i) Reception of the children.
- (ii) Celebration of God's Word.
- (iii) Conferring of the sacrament (with preliminary and post-baptismal rites).
- (iv) Concluding ceremony.

Rite of Reception

The celebrant greets all present, especially the parents and godparents. He questions the latter on the name they wish to give (or have already given) their child and on their real desire to have it baptized. Gone is the fiction of questioning the children directly as though they were responsible beings. Henceforth, the dialogue is between priest and parents. The latter are made aware of the serious obligations they have contracted in submitting their children for baptism.

Addressing collectively the different groups of parents, the celebrant instructs them on their duty to train their children in the practice of the faith. Each group in turn expresses its willingness to undertake this duty. The godparents are then questioned on their readiness to help the parents in giving a christian upbringing to their children. Together they give their assent.

Having obtained the assent of parents and godparents, the celebrant now addresses the children for the first time. He welcomes them into the christian community. The formula of greeting explains the gesture that follows – the tracing of the sign of the cross on the forehead of each child: 'In its name I claim you for Christ our Saviour by the sign of his cross'. Thus, the ancient rite of the *signatio*, symbolizing Christ's protection and ownership, has been preserved. The parents and, if it seems appropriate, the godparents, repeat the gesture.

Celebration of God's Word

The liturgy of the word aims at deepening the faith of parents, godparents and people, making them conscious of their own christian commitment and preparing them for the profession of baptismal faith which immediately precedes the sacrament. This does not directly concern the infants and is not intended for them; in fact, one of the rubrics suggests that the infants be removed to a separate place during the liturgy of the word; many modern churches are equipped with 'cry rooms'!

The parents, godparents and others go in procession to the place where the liturgy of the word will be celebrated. This begins with the readings. A choice of four gospel passages is provided. These are: John 3:1-6 (Unless a man is born through water and the Spirit), Matt. 28:18-20 (Make disciples of all nations), Mark 1:9-11 (Baptism of Jesus), Mark 10:13-16 (Let the children come to me). The new Roman Lectionary offers a further choice of readings.

There follows the homily which, it has been suggested, should be of the mystagogical kind, i.e. expounding the mystery of spiritual birth which takes place in baptism. It will also have a pastoral

emphasis, exhorting the parents to a generous acceptance of their responsibilities. After the homily a period of silence is recommended.

The word of God having been expounded and meditated upon, there follows, in logical sequence, the communal prayer. The latter consists of a litany of intercession (prayer of the faithful) and a short litany of the saints. The petitions are on behalf of the children, their parents, godparents and families, and all the baptized.

Before the litany of the saints the children, if they had been removed, are brought back. The celebrant invites all present to invoke the saints. The list consists of the Mother of Jesus, St. Joseph, St. John the Baptist, SS. Peter and Paul; other names may be added, in particular the patrons of the children and those of the locality.

This part of the ceremony is rounded off by the Prayer of Exorcism and the pre-baptismal Anointing. In the old baptismal service the exorcisms loomed very large. They have now been reduced to one moderately-worded formula. No longer is the Evil One addressed directly ('I adjure thee, Satan, . . .'). Instead, we have a prayer addressed to God, acknowledging what he has done for his people – rescuing them from the power of darkness and transferring them to the kingdom of his Beloved Son (Col. 1:13). It ends with a petition that the children may be set free from original sin and made temples of the Holy Spirit.

The anointing with oil of catechumens is a vestige of the old catechumenate liturgy. It expressed spiritual strengthening (as athletes anointed their bodies before the contest). For contemporary christians the sign-value of such a rite must be very limited; there is also the disadvantage that it could easily be confused with the more important post-baptismal anointing. For these reasons the rite is partly optional, i.e., the episcopal conference of each country or region may opt for or against its retention. (The hierarchies of Great Britain and Ireland have retained it.) The essential idea of spiritual strengthening is conveyed not so much by the rite itself as by the formula that accompanies it. Even if the anointing is omitted a similar formula takes its place: 'May you have strength in the power of Christ our Saviour, who lives and reigns for ever and ever'; having spoken these words, the minister lays his hand on each child in silence.

Conferring of the Sacrament

A procession now forms to the baptistry. If the latter is too small to hold a congregation, the font will more appropriately be located in the sanctuary; in which case the celebrant, parents and godparents will go there with the children, while the others remain in their places.

The celebrant begins with a few words of explanation on the rite that is to follow. He then proceeds to the blessing of the baptismal water. Three formulas are provided: one is a shortened version of the prayer of blessing used at the Easter Vigil; the two alternative forms are drawn up in the style of litanies of praise and petition.

The blessing of the water at each baptism is a new feature in the Roman rite. Hitherto, the baptismal water, blessed on Easter Eve, was stored in the parochial font and used for all baptisms throughout the following year. The former practice had the merit of associating each baptism with the paschal mystery from which the sacrament derives its power. From a catechetical point of view, however, it was regretted that this prayer of blessing, so rich in baptismal theology, should be heard only once a year. An exception is made for the Easter season. The water, solemnly blessed at the Vigil, is used at baptisms throughout paschaltide. But even at this privileged time the minister of the sacrament will speak a prayer of blessing and invocation over the water. He will use one of the litanic forms of blessing, omitting the petition which begins 'Lord, make holy this water', and replacing it by a more appropriate formula.

There follows the Renunciation of Sin and Profession of Faith – both traditional elements in the baptismal rite. It is the parents and godparents, not the infants, who are called upon to renounce Satan and profess their faith. They thereby renew their own baptismal promises and confirm their intention to bring up their children in the same faith. The renunciation is, as before, in the form of a threefold interrogation: 'Do you reject Satan? – And all his works? – And all his empty promises?' To each of these the parents answer (collectively): 'I do'.

Next, the celebrant asks for the threefold profession of faith from the parents and godparents. His three questions contain the essential doctrines of Christian faith: 'Do you believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth' – 'Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, died, and was buried, rose from the dead, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father?' – 'Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting?' The reply each time is 'I do'. It is noteworthy that the second question gives fuller expression to the redeeming mystery of Christ than did its counterpart in the old baptismal rite. Formerly the question was: 'Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord, who was born into this world, and who suffered for us?' It thus stopped short at the Passion.

It is appropriate that the celebrant himself should now declare his faith. This he does, together with the congregation, in the

formula: 'This is our faith. This is the faith of the Church. We are proud to profess it in Christ Jesus our Lord'; to which the people reply 'Amen'. Alternatively, a suitable song, expressive of the assembly's faith, may be employed.

The celebrant now invites the first of the families to the font. Using the name of the individual child, he questions the parents and godparents: 'Is it your will that N should be baptized in the faith of the Church, which we have all professed with you?' They reply, 'It is'. He then baptizes the child saying: 'N., I baptize you in the name of the Father (he immerses the child or pours water upon it), and of the Son (repeats the immersion or pouring), and of the Holy Spirit (third immersion or pouring).'

Of chief interest here is the mention of baptism by immersion, a form of conferring the sacrament which for many centuries had ceased to be in use in the Roman church. It was permitted in the rite of adult baptism, though rarely if ever employed; in the case of infant baptism it was permitted only in places where a long-established custom of thus conferring the sacrament existed. The revival of this traditional practice may give rise to difficulties of a practical order: infants of such a tender age need to be handled with the greatest care. But there is no doubt that the rite of immersion is a fuller expression of the sacramental sign: it manifests more completely the candidate's identification with Christ in the saving mysteries of his passion, death and resurrection.

Even in the heart of the sacred action the role of the congregation is not a passive one. After each baptism, it expresses its participation by an acclamation, recited or sung, such as: 'Think of how God loves you! He calls you his own children, and that is what you are' (1 John 3: 1). The parents are intimately involved in all that happens. In the past it was one of the sponsors who held the child over the font while the priest poured the water; now it is preferable that the mother or father perform this task; if the baptism is by immersion it is again one of the parents who removes the child from the font.

There follow the post-baptismal rites: anointing with chrism, clothing with white garment, the lighting of candles and the prayer over ears and mouth (the *Ephphatha*). These symbolize, in its different aspects, the new life of grace conferred through baptism.

The anointing with chrism is very important. It may not be omitted unless the number of children to be baptized is very large. Its significance is quite different from the pre-baptismal anointing with oil of catechumens. Here it expresses that spiritual anointing which assimilates the newly-baptized to Christ. Through baptism the christian is given a share in the priestly, prophetic and royal offices of Jesus Christ, the Anointed One *par excellence*. The doctrine of the priesthood of the faithful, of such consequences in the life and

worship of lay christians, has its foundations here. The anointing gives it vivid ritual expression.

The clothing with the white garment and, especially, the ceremony of the candles, express the eschatological aspect of baptism. Both rites figured in the old Roman Ritual, but in a less striking manner. The garments are provided by the families themselves. (In the past it was the priest who produced a rather nondescript white – or faded white – garment for the occasion, and this had to serve for countless baptisms!) As in ancient times, the white garments express the neophyte's sharing in the life of the risen Christ. After the clothing ceremony, the celebrant takes the Easter candle and says: 'Receive the light of Christ'. Then someone from each family lights the child's candle from the large candle. During the lighting of the candles a baptismal song may be sung. When the candles have been lit, the celebrant again addresses the parents and godparents. He reminds them of their responsibilities towards the children: they must be guardians of this divine light imparted to the newly-baptized. The spark of divine life, communicated to these children at baptism, must never be extinguished, but burn ever more brightly until the day of Christ's return.

The strange ceremony of the *ephphatha* previously belonged to the pre-baptismal rites which took place outside the font area. (It is another vestige of the catechumenate liturgy.) In its old form – touching of ears and nostrils with spittle – many found it objectionable. The revised rite is more acceptable and more meaningful. The priest now touches with his thumb the ears *and mouth* (thus more in accord with Mark 7:32-35) of each child, saying: 'The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father'. Thus transformed, this rite expresses the truth that formation in the christian life is an ongoing process; and, moreover, that the acceptance of baptism implies an obligation on the part of the recipient to spread the faith by word and example.

Concluding Ceremony

It is a commonplace of modern sacramental theology that baptism, confirmation and the eucharist form a unity. Together they constitute the sacraments of christian initiation. This relationship is given liturgical expression in the new baptismal services. It is more clearly seen in the baptism of adults when the candidate is baptized, confirmed and admitted to the Lord's Supper – all in the course of a single celebration. In the case of infant baptism the linking of the three sacraments can be expressed only in a symbolic way; and yet,

it teaches very effectively that christian initiation, begun at the font, is perfected in the eucharistic mystery.

This part of the ceremony begins with a procession to the altar, unless the baptism was performed in the sanctuary. The lighted candles are carried for the children. During the procession a baptismal chant may be sung. Standing in front of the altar, the celebrant addresses the congregation. He briefly explains the significance of each of the three sacraments: how the sacrament of re-birth and the strengthening of the Holy Spirit give access to the 'banquet of Christ's sacrifice'. He then invites the whole congregation to recite the Lord's prayer: the prayer which, in Roman liturgical tradition, has always been regarded as the ideal preparation for holy communion.

A solemn blessing rounds off the celebration. It is made up of four parts. It invokes God's blessing, first, on the mothers, then on the fathers, and, finally, on all present that they may be faithful members of God's holy people. In conclusion, the priest blesses the assembly in the name of the Holy Trinity.

A final rubric directs: 'After the blessing all may sing a hymn which suitably expresses thanksgiving and Easter joy, or they may sing the song of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Magnificat'.

Some Reflections on the Rite

Reactions to the new rite have so far been favourable. Some would judge it to be the most successful of the reformed Roman rites. Among its attractive features are its clear-cut structure and flexibility. The average layman should be able to follow the ceremony without the need of lengthy explanations. The minister has much more scope than in the past to adapt the celebration to particular circumstances, to select from a generous choice of scriptural and other texts those most suited to the occasion. In particular, one is impressed by the note of authenticity that runs through the rite from start to finish. Obviously this rite was drawn up to meet a real pastoral situation and elicit a genuine response from parents, godparents and representatives of the people of God.

Ecumenical Significance

The rite described above is not unique of its kind. A comparative study of the revised services now in use among the various denominations would reveal many common features. For example, the Church of Ireland experimental Order for Infant Baptism (introduced in Advent 1969) has many points of comparison with our own: e.g. the stress on parental responsibility, the role of faith, fuller community participation.

To what should we attribute this convergence of liturgical practice? No doubt, it can partly be explained by the process of mutual borrowing. Rev. E. F. Lengeling, in his commentary on the baptismal rite, admits that the study group which produced it was influenced by the Eastern rites and also by the baptismal services of the Reformed Churches. In particular, he informs us that one of the alternative formulas for the blessing of the water was inspired by the liturgy of the Church of South India. At a deeper level, however, this convergence is the result of scriptural and patristic *ressourcement*, greatly helped by ecumenical dialogue.

Of ecumenical significance, too, is the clear recognition of baptisms conferred by non-Roman-Catholic ministers. It is stated in the General Introduction (N.4): 'It [Baptism] is a sacramental bond of unity linking all who have been signed by it. Because of that unchangeable effect . . . the rite of baptism is held in highest honour by all Christians. It may never lawfully be repeated once it has been validly celebrated, even if by fellow Christians from whom we are separated.' Of interest, too, is the directive on the sponsors (N.9): 'A baptized and believing Christian from a separated church or community may act as a godparent or Christian witness along with a Catholic godparent, at the request of the parents and in accordance with the norms for various ecumenical cases'.

NOTES

1. *Ordo Baptismi Parvulorum* (editio typica), Vatican Press, 1969; official English-language edition: *The Rite of Baptism for Children* (London, Chapman, 1970).
2. In preparing this commentary the following articles have been consulted: E. J. Lengeling, 'Die künftigen Taufriten des römischen Ritus' in *Liturgisches Jahrbuch* 18 (1968), pp. 193-209; and C. Braga, 'In Ordinem Baptismi parvulorum' in *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 84 (1970), pp. 43-55.
3. For a commentary on the old rite, see my study 'Baptism in the Roman Rite' in *Ecumenical Studies: Baptism and Marriage*, edited by Michael Hurley, S.J. (Dublin, Gill & Son, 1968), pp. 121-38.

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