

SOME THEOLOGICAL, PASTORAL AND LITURGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE NEW RITE OF INFANT BAPTISM (SERIES II)

This paper* is to be neither long nor deep, but I hope it will be though provoking and practical. I am in no doubt that the new baptismal rite, known as Series II, ought to be stimulating the thoughts of parish clergy far more than it is. Where a parish priest has sat down to read through and think out the implications of this new rite of infant baptism, practical results have been inevitable. There is so much in the new rite which demands change, that only the ultra-conservative and the pitifully lethargic parish priests, can introduce the rite, as their form of baptismal service, and allow everything else to remain the same.

Let us then reflect on the rite and see where changes have, or ought to take place. The order of my title is meant to express a certain logical development in the subject. Some Theological, Pastoral and Liturgical Reflections on the New Rite of Infant Baptism. Behind and within the new rite a number of theological changes can be seen or detected. Some of these theological changes are such that they open up several pastoral opportunities for the parish priest who is willing to work and take a firm stand on issues of ultimate importance. Having realized the theological changes, and been stirred to take full advantage of the new pastoral opportunities, the parish priest then observes that he must implement certain liturgical changes. Following his first baptism, according to the new rite, the cycle has been completed and the priest reflecting on what has happened, realizes how radical and yet how necessary the change has been.

Strictly speaking each of the three areas we are to consider demands at least one separate paper. The fact that we are to cover the whole spectrum, and allow time for discussion and, perhaps, decision making, means that we can touch only the main points, and these only at a surface level. With these qualifications let us begin our examination.

1. Some Theological Reflections

Much of what is to be said stems from a fundamental theological change which can be detected in the rite, and in much recent baptismal theology. In my own thoughts and research I find it best

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to think of this change as a change from an *Augustinian* to a *Cyprianic baptismal theology*. This is not meant to be a tight or theologically accurate description, but rather a general way of describing some of the changes which have taken place.

While St. Augustine had much to say on the subject of baptism, his chief emphasis seems to be on baptism as the means of cleansing from sin. One could, I suppose, attribute this emphasis to a number of things, his early life, the ethos and secular situation of the time, the Pelagian controversy. In the *Enchiridion*, written (perhaps about) A.D. 421 Augustine has a section Baptism and Original Sin, in which he states: 'For whether it be a newborn infant or a decrepit old man – since no one should be barred from baptism – just so, there is no one who does not die to sin in baptism. Infants die to original sin only; adults, to all those sins which they have added through their evil living, to the burden they brought with them at birth.' *Enchiridion* 43. In his Fourth Homily on the First Epistle of John, he states the stock defence of the doctrine of original sin: 'If we are born with no sin, there is no reason for hastening with our infant children to baptism for their absolution.' This is very much the theological position reflected in the 1662 BCP rite of infant baptism. Cleansing from sin does find a place in the teaching of St. Cyprian, as in the first of his Catechetical Lectures where he says: 'Great is this baptism to which you are coming: it is ransom to captives and remission of sins. It is the death of sin and the soul's regeneration. It is a garment of light and a holy seal that can never be dissolved' (para. 16). But for Cyprian, baptism is seen above all else as entrance into the one holy Catholic Church.

To sum up what I mean by saying that the new rite expresses 'a change from an Augustinian to a Cyprianic baptismal theology' one can say that the old rite was very much concerned with baptism as a cleansing from sin, while the new rite emphasizes baptism as entrance into the Church, the Body of Christ. If you are in any doubt about this then consider these quotations from the 1662 BCP. Behind the opening rubric of the rite of Private Baptism is the doctrine of Original Sin, thus the urgent need for Baptism as an assurance of Salvation. 'The Curates of every Parish shall often admonish the people, that they defer not the Baptism of their Children longer than the first or second Sunday next after their birth, or other Holy-day falling between, unless upon a great and reasonable cause, to be approved by the Curate.'

In the actual rite of 'Publick Baptism of Infants' references abound. The opening exhortation begins: 'Dearly beloved, forasmuch as all men are conceived and born in sin . . .' The first prayer speaks of the 'washing away of sin', while immediately following the priest prays that the child to be baptized 'may receive remission of

his sins'. This note of washing, cleansing and remission of sin, runs through the whole of the rite. It is true that there are references to being received into 'Christ's holy Church' and the 'ark of Christ's Church', but this is not the dominant theme.

When we turn to the new rite we find that the dominating theme, running through the whole service, is that of the Church. Parents must promise to bring up the child 'Within the family of Christ's Church'. Prayer is offered that the children to be baptised may be brought to know God 'in the family of thy Church'. In the blessing of the water the priest says: 'thou hast made us new men in the family of thy Church'. The priest declares that the Baptism is taking place 'in the presence of God and his Church.' Following the baptism all join together in saying 'God has received you by Baptism into his Church'. Thanks are offered to God that the newly baptized have 'become thine own by adoption, and members of thy Church'. An examination of the rite leaves us in no doubt that the baptismal theology it expresses is ecclesial. There is only one explicit reference to baptism for the forgiveness of sin, and that is in the blessing of the Baptismal Water 'that being baptized into his death, and receiving forgiveness of all their sins . . . '.

So far we have looked only at one theological change, which, strictly speaking, could be described as a change in emphasis. However we wish to describe or interpret this change, it is fundamental, and most of what follows results from this one change. The ecclesial significance of baptism has always found expression in the theology and liturgy of the Church, but in recent years we have seen a re-emphasis, if not a more emphatic emphasis, upon what is called 'the Body of Christ theology'. Undoubtedly this insight into the nature of the Church and the People of God, as the Body of Christ, has influenced the revision of the baptismal liturgy, not only in our own Church, but in many branches of the Church in Western Christendom. With this fact firmly fixed in our mind let me now enumerate, rather more briefly, other theological changes to be found in the rite.

Within our own country popular ideas and practice give the impression that baptism is an end in its self, rather than the beginning of the initiatory process, thus Confirmation and Communion are looked upon as 'non-essential, optional extras'. *Here baptism is seen very much as the beginning of a process.* The opening rubric states very clearly the position of the Church of England: 'It is the practice of the Church of England to admit to Baptism those who are not old enough to profess the Christian faith. But this is done on the understanding that they will receive a Christian upbringing.' Parents are to promise that 'they will encourage him in due time to come to Confirmation and Communion'. At 'The Decision' parents and

sponsors are reminded, 'It is your duty to bring up these children to fight against evil and to follow Christ.' While at the Baptism they are told '... You must now make the Christian profession in which they are to be baptized, and in which you will bring them up'. While in the thanksgiving after the baptism all pray 'Grant that they may grow in the faith in which they have been baptized. Grant that they themselves may profess it when they come to be confirmed ...'.

When we look at the Profession of faith in the new rite we find that *there is no expression of Vicarious Faith*. The Faith professed by Parents and Sponsors is their own faith. 'Those who bring children to be baptized must affirm their allegiance to Christ and their rejection of all that is evil.' Immediately prior to the baptism the three-fold profession of faith is that held personally by parents and sponsors, and not a profession on behalf of those to be baptized.

Parents play the chief role in the rite, and not 'godparents' as in former rites. The 1662 rite makes no mention of the parents of those being baptized, thus they made no promises within the rite to bring up their children in the faith in which they have been baptized, nor was there any profession of their own faith. But here they have an essential role, while the sponsors/godparents play only a supporting role.

2. Some Pastoral Reflections

We have looked at four theological changes found in the new rite, or at least made more explicit than formerly. First, the ecclesial emphasis. Secondly, the emphasis on baptism as the beginning of a process. Thirdly, that there is no expression of vicarious faith. Fourthly, that parents and not godparents play the chief role. These four things offer the parish priest new pastoral opportunities.

With the emphasis upon baptism as the means of entering the Church, the Body of Christ, we have the very clear involvement of the local church. They are the 'family of Christ's Church' into whose midst the child has been received. With the Priest they join in welcoming the newly baptized: 'God has received you by Baptism into his Church. We therefore welcome you into the Lord's family, as fellow members of the Body of Christ ...'

Amongst them the newly baptized will be nurtured in the faith into which they have been baptized. They will offer the Christian environment, and Christian support that the parents will need in the upbringing of their child 'within the family of Christ's Church'. From this evolve at least three pastoral implications.

First, the parents must be made to realize that they are to profess, 'in the presence of God and his Church' that they hold, believe, and

practice the Christian Faith. If they are either un-baptized, or do not believe the Christian Faith then, strictly speaking, they cannot present their child for baptism. They are not asked simply to teach the faith to their child, or to send him along to the local church to be taught the faith. The parish priest is to elicit from them some assurance: 'whether they are prepared to the best of their ability to give him a Christian upbringing within the family of Christ's Church; whether they will help him to be regular in public worship and in private prayer, not only by their teaching, but also by their example and their prayers . . .'

This implies that they are practising Christians, worshipping members of the local church, and not simply people seeking the ministration of the Church in order to fulfil what to many has become no more than a social convention. All this points to the fact that the priest, who takes his vocation seriously, cannot leave people in their ignorance, they must be made to realize the implications of what they seek from the Church. This is also true of the local church who are to welcome the newly baptized into their midst, and with the sponsors provide support for the parents in the Christian upbringing of their child. Thus the local church needs to be instructed more thoroughly in baptismal theology.

This brings us to the second pastoral implication, which is really implicit in what I have just said, that Baptismal Preparation of the Parents is essential. We can no longer ask people to turn up for baptism at three o'clock on a Sunday afternoon, without any real preparation and without the presence of the local church, the Body of Christ. The rubrics, and indeed the whole of the new rite, demand careful preparation of those who seek baptism for their child. Canon Law gives baptismal preparation as the only ground on which a priest can delay baptism.

'No minister shall refuse or, save for the purpose of preparing or instructing the parents or guardians or godparents, delay to baptize any infant within his cure that is brought to the church to be baptized . . .'

One of the appalling things in many city and country cures is the failure of the priest to give full and adequate baptismal instruction to parents. While this continues we cannot justly complain about the general abuse of this sacrament by the English people; the fault lies at our own door-step!!

The third implication, and here the Established Church needs to put its own house in order, is that we must put an end to extra-parochial baptisms. Canon Law sees such baptisms as an exception to the rule: 'A minister who intends to baptize any infant whose parents are residing outside the boundaries of his cure, unless the names of such persons or of one of them be on the church electoral roll of the same, shall not proceed to the baptism without having

sought the good will of the minister of the parish in which such parents reside.'

While Canon Law may indeed, under closely controlled circumstances, allow such extra-parochial baptisms, they are completely contrary to the spirit and teaching of the new rite. To give adequate and systematic instruction to parents living outside the parish would be virtually impossible for most parish priests; while the welcome offered by the local congregation in the words 'We therefore welcome you into the Lord's family', and their supporting role in promising the parents a Christian environment of worship and life, along with their encouragement and prayers, would be a mockery and a lie if offered to children and parents from some distant part. If we are honest, we have to admit that most extra-parochial baptisms are based upon sentimentalism or some social convention. To allow parents from other parishes to have their child baptized in our parish church, on these grounds, is to deny a fellow priest of valuable pastoral opportunities, and to trivialize a Sacrament which stands at the very centre of the faith.

3. Some Liturgical Reflections

A meaningful presentation of the rite, which somehow indicates that baptism is but the beginning of the initiatory process, and which points forward to Confirmation and active participation in the local Eucharistic fellowship, is the liturgical implication of what has been said. With no stretch of the imagination can a private, or a Sunday afternoon baptism be seen to meet these requirements.

Even the old rite of Infant Baptism with its many faults and failings gives clear instruction as to the liturgical setting of the rite: '... it is most convenient that Baptism should not be administered but upon Sundays, and other Holy-days, when the most number of people come together; as well for that the Congregation there present may testify the receiving of them that be newly baptized into the number of Christ's Church; as also because in the Baptism of Infants every Man present may be put in remembrance of his own profession made to God in his Baptism . . .' The main service of the day, in the presence of the active and committed local congregation of Christ's people, the Body of Christ, is seen by the Prayer Book as the ideal and necessary setting of the rite. This is quite the opposite of the ridiculous and untheological views on the subject expressed at one of our recent Deanery Synods, where quiet, family and individual baptisms were being recommended and supported with much enthusiasm. The congregation are to be present to witness the baptism, and welcome the newly baptized. The administration of the sacrament in this context also serves a didactic purpose, that of

reminding the congregation of their own baptism. I was speechless when, at a recent baptism in one of my own churches, a churchwarden of around 70, afterwards told me that it was the first baptism he could remember attending, one is left in no doubt as to what the past baptismal policy had been.

What the Prayer Book says on these things is more explicitly and emphatically taught in the new rite. From what the Prayer Book, and the new rite say, as to the ideal liturgical setting for the administration of baptism, in most Parishes today the Parish Communion provides that ideal. Within the liturgical context of the Parish Communion all the requirements are met. Here the active and fully committed local congregation, the true body of Christ, gather together to meet with Him at His Table to share the Eucharistic Meal. They are there to pray, to welcome and to support the newly baptized and the parents. Within this context baptism is seen as entrance into the Eucharistic Fellowship. It is seen as the beginning of the process of initiation into the Body of Christ. Within this context the child must be baptized, within this context the child must be nurtured in the faith week by week, year by year, into a full and meaningful faith, within this context the baptized will ultimately participate in the completion of their initiation into the Body of Christ, through the laying on of hands and the reception of the Lord's Body and Blood in the Eucharistic Feast.

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