

# THE CHURCH IN WALES REVISED RITE OF INFANT BAPTISM:

## Some Theological, Pastoral and Liturgical Reflections

### Background Introduction

In 1957 the document *The Church in Wales Revised Services for Experimental Use: Holy Baptism and Confirmation* was published. The rites contained in the document were authorised for experimental use for a period of ten years. As this period drew to a close the clergy and laity were asked to submit their observations and suggestions with regard to these services. The numerous criticisms offered were given serious consideration by the Liturgical Commission. In 1968 the revised services were published; twelve months later, in September 1969, the Select Committee appointed to consider the subject in greater detail submitted to the Governing Body in Committee their *First Report: A Bill for Revision of Part of the Book of Common Prayer (Baptism and Confirmation)*. After consideration of the recommendations of the Select Committee further amendments were made. In January 1970 the Select Committee issued its Second Report; twelve months later (viz. 1st January 1971) the Church in Wales authorised for use the green book of revised services: *Public Baptism of Infants: Private Baptism of Infants: Baptism of Adults*. On the basis of a Canon promulgated on 8th April 1970 the new forms of service, authorised for use on 1st January 1971, were substituted for those contained in the Book of Common Prayer. They became the definitive initiatory rites for the Church in Wales and the first component of the projected new Prayer Book.

During the fourteen years which elapsed between the publication of the first experimental rites of initiation and those authorised for use on 1st January 1971 a great deal of time and thought had been given to the subject of Initiation and the revision of the rites. Perhaps it was unfortunate that it was five months after the authorisation of the new rites, viz. May 1971, rather than five months before, that another document was published, *Christian Initiation: A Report of the Doctrinal Commission of the Church in Wales*. In this Report the Doctrinal Commission stated:

“What changes, if any, are necessary in our baptismal liturgy in order to make clear the richness of the theological

content of the rite? What must be said of the post-baptismal ceremonies? This, of course, is a matter involving the Liturgical Commission, whose recommendations in the light of this report would be put before the Governing Body of our Church."

The fact that the definitive baptismal liturgy was authorised and published before the publication of the Doctrinal Commission's Report means that any revision anticipated by the Doctrinal Commission is unlikely to be implemented for some considerable time. If the rite is truly definitive, i.e. the final and determinative rite, then no further revision, however theological sound and necessary, can now take place.

In the light of these introductory comments, whatever the shortcomings or defects of the Church in Wales initiatory rites, it cannot be said that these services were produced in great haste. However, it must be admitted that some feel that the end product, after such a long period of experimentation and consideration, still leaves much to be desired. Indeed the Doctrinal Commission expressed grave dissatisfaction on a number of points in the new rites.

But while the Liturgical and Doctrinal Commissions in Wales have been labouring to reform, revise and experiment with the Welsh initiatory rites, what has been happening at parish level? Observations indicate that many parish clergy have failed miserably to respond to the new insights into baptism and the pastoral opportunities offered by the revised rites. There is so much in the new insights in the field of Christian Initiation and in our Welsh revised rite of Infant Baptism which demands change at parish level, that only the ultra-conservative and the pitifully lethargic parish priest can use the new rite and allow everything else to remain the same.

The aim of this paper is to examine the revised and now official rite of *Public Baptism of Infants* and to consider where changes have, or ought to take place. The sub-title is meant to express a certain logical development in the subject: "Some Theological, Pastoral and Liturgical Reflections". 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 to take a firm stand on issues of ultimate importance. When a priest realises the implication of the theological changes and is moved to take full advantage of the new pastoral opportunities he should then recognise the need to implement certain liturgical changes. And so we need to look

at the theological, pastoral and liturgical implications of the new rite. The fact that such a large subject is being examined in one short paper means that we can touch only briefly the main points of a subject which stands at the very centre of much of what the faithful priest tries to do in his parish.

### 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 and not least in the Doctrinal Commission's Report: *Christian Initiation*. This change can be described as a change from an *Augustinian to a Cyprianic baptismal theology*. This is not meant to be a 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 a baptism as the means of cleansing from sin. One could 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 about A.D. 421, Augustine has a section on "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." Augustine's position is very much the theological position reflected in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer 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 the theory that the new rite expresses "a change from an Augustinian to a Cyprianic baptismal theology" one can say that the old rite (viz. 1662) was very much concerned with baptism as a cleansing rite, while the main stress of the new rite

and the report *Christian Initiation* is upon baptism as entrance into the Church, the Body of Christ. The 1662 Book of Common Prayer can be quoted to support this conclusion for 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 Curate 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 "Public 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 baptised "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 dominant theme, running through the whole service, is that of the Church. In his opening remarks to the parents and sponsors the priest says: "In Baptism our heavenly Father will make this child a member of Christ. . . . You must see that he is brought up to worship with the Church. . . ." And those baptised are to "serve God faithfully in the fellowship of the Church". In the prayer which follows Priest and People pray "receive him into the family of Christ's Church . . .". And at the signing "This child has now been made a member of Christ's flock". In the prayers following the signing the priest prays: "Now that this child is by Baptism . . . grafted into the Body of Christ, which is his Church . . ." and "We thank thee . . . that it has pleased thee to . . . make him a member of thy holy Church." The new rite contains only one explicit reference to baptism for the forgiveness of sin, and that is in the blessing of the Baptismal Water, where we have the words: "sanctify this Water for the mystical washing away of sin . . .".

So far we have looked at only 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 witnessed a re-emphasis, and a more

emphatic emphasis, upon what is called "the Body of Christ theology". Undoubtedly this insight into the nature of the Church as the People of God, as the Body of Christ, has influenced the revision of the baptismal liturgy, not only in the Church in Wales, but in many branches of the Church in Western Christendom.

The Doctrinal Commission's Report stresses above all else that Baptism is *Incorporation* into the Church and thereby into Christ. The report states: "By the concrete event of baptism . . . the child is incorporated into the visible community, in which the Spirit is active in redeeming power." With the importance of the ecclesial emphasis of baptism before us we take a very brief look at a number of other theological changes found in the rite.

Within the British Isles popular ideas and practices give the impression that baptism is an end in itself, rather than the beginning of the initiatory process. For most of those baptised in infancy Confirmation and Communion are looked upon as "non-essential, optional extras". Both the revised rite of Infant Baptism and the report *Christian Initiation* see baptism as very much the beginning of a process. The second rubric states: "It is the duty of Christians to bring their children to Holy Baptism. Further, it is their duty to see that their children are instructed in the Catechism and brought to the Bishop to be confirmed." The priest is to remind the parents: "You must see that he is brought up to worship with the Church. . . . You are to take care also that he is brought to the Bishop to be confirmed." Parents and sponsors promise to pray for the child and to "help him to keep the promises you will make on his behalf". The baptised child is to "continue Christ's faithful soldier and servant unto his life's end". While the priest, after the giving of the lighted candle, prays: "that this child may lead the rest of his life according to this beginning". In the final prayer we have: "give such grace and wisdom to all who have the care of him, that by their word and good example he may learn truly to know and love thee . . .".

An examination of the Church of England Series II infant baptismal rite reveals how this lays an even greater stress on this point than in the Welsh rite. But the Report *Christian Initiation* makes it clear that for the Church in Wales baptism is indeed the beginning of a life long process and not an end in itself. Section 34 of the Report states: "So the incorporation of the member into the Body of Christ, though in one sense effected by initiation, proceeds step by step dynamically throughout earthly life up to the moment of death. . . . Christian Initiation is the

sacramental act which effects the relationship of the individual to Christ. The subsequent life within the sacramental fellowship of the Church cements and perfects that relationship." Paragraph 38 states: "The relationship, effected by the rite of initiation, provides and marks an opportunity for the child to grow, in the context of the community, into that response to Christ which mature and responsible membership of the Church involves." While in the next section we are told: "The child is capable of growing into a direct and personal experience of God, involving decision."

Baptism is thus seen by both rite and report as the beginning of a new relationship and one in which there must be growth. Parents are to play their part in this growth for they are to see that the child is brought to worship, instructed in the faith, presented to the Bishop for confirmation, encouraged by their life and example and supported by their prayers and encouraged to grow in the life into which he has been baptised.

We have seen how the new rite stresses the part played by the parents and godparents in the Christian upbringing of the child. In the rubrics the parents are placed before the godparents. But one duty still carried out on behalf of the child, but now found to be theologically unacceptable is their expression of vicarious faith: the rubric states: "parents and godparents shall answer on behalf of the child". The expression of vicarious faith by the parents and sponsors finds no place in many recent liturgical revisions. It finds no place in the Church of England Series II rite, the faith professed in that rite by parents and sponsors is their own faith: "Those who bring children to be baptised must affirm their allegiance to Christ and their rejection of all that is evil." The three-fold profession of faith immediately before the baptism in the Church of England rite is that held personally by parents and sponsors, and not a profession on behalf of those to be baptised. In the English rite parents are asked to make a public profession of their Christian faith in which they will bring up their baptised child.

The Doctrinal Commission rejected the idea of the parents and godparents acting in a vicarious capacity — this they saw as incompatible with their understanding of the rite. They wrote: "It is our contention that no one can rightly perform such acts or give such promises on behalf of another person, whether a child or an adult; and that no one is under an obligation to confirm such acts or to fulfil such promises allegedly made in his name. Thus the acceptance of our report would entail the

revision of the rite of initiation and of the Catechism in this as in other respects.” (para. 46.)

The inclusion of vicarious faith does not, however, exclude the important part which parents now play in the rite, nor does it exempt them from personal responsibility. In the new rite parents play the chief role, and not “godparents” or “sponsors” as in former rites. The 1662 baptismal service made no mention of the parents of the children being baptised, thus they made no promises within the rite to bring up their children in the faith in which they have been baptised. In the new Welsh Rite parents have an essential role, while it could be said that the sponsors/godparents play only a supporting role. Any future revision must give very serious consideration to the removal of an expression of vicarious faith and must make it even more explicit that parents play the most important part in the rite and in the Christian upbringing of their children.

## 2. Some Pastoral Reflections

We have looked briefly at three theological changes found in the revised rite of infant baptism or at least made more explicit than formerly; with a fourth change suggested by the Doctrinal Commission. First the ecclesial emphasis, secondly, the emphasis on baptism as the beginning of a life-long process, thirdly, the role played by parents, fourthly, the proposed removal of the expression of vicarious faith. 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 a very clear involvement of the local church. The child is to be brought up to worship with the local Church. It is the local Church which joins the priest in praying “Almighty God, our heavenly Father . . . receive him into the family of Christ’s Church. . . .” While in the benediction of the Font we have the words “Hear, therefore, the prayers of thy Church . . .”. Throughout the service the congregation play an important part. In the English Series II rite their part is made crystal clear for after the baptism they declare “We therefore welcome you into the Lord’s family”.

Having examined the problem of vicarious faith *Christian Initiation* states: “Underlying all these changes one continuous thread is discernible, namely that sponsors represent the wider family of the Church and its vicarious responsibility for new members incorporated into the Body of Christ. . . . We believe that sponsors still have a role to play under these new circumstances. The personalising of the vicarious responsibility

of the whole people of God, in the activity of particular individuals, not only reminds the congregation of its own function, but also secures that his function be discharged.”

The local Christian community, the Body of Christ, has a responsibility for all those baptised in their midst and whom they welcome in the Lord's Name into the fellowship of the Church. Among them the newly baptised will be nurtured in the faith into which they have been baptised and will increase in a knowledge and love of Christ. They will offer the Christian environment, and Christian support that the parents will need in the upbringing of their children “within the family of Christ's Church”. From this evolve a number of pastoral implications.

First, the rite implies that the parents should be committed Christians. The opening rubrics make the matter quite clear, for it anticipates that those who bring infants to be baptised will be Christians: “It is the duty of Christians to bring their children to Holy Baptism . . . and to see that they are instructed. . . .” By presenting their children for baptism, according to this rite, they are declaring in the presence of God and his Church that they are believing Christians. Indeed the second rubric states “It is desirable that they should be regular communicants . . .”.

If they are either unbaptised, or do not believe and practice the Christian Faith then, strictly speaking, they cannot present their child for baptism. Parents and godparents are not asked simply to make sure that the child is taught the faith or sent to Sunday School or the local church. Baptised children are to be brought up to worship with the local Church and taught the faith. The implication is that parents will be responsible — it is they who are to bring up their children as practising Christians. It is unfortunate, however, that the rite does not give a much clearer statement on this subject, something along the line of the new English rite in which the parish priest is to elicit from parents the 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 . . .”.

The new stress upon the responsibility of parents both within the rite and especially in the report *Christian Initiation* 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 and ministry seriously, cannot

leave people in ignorance, they must be made to realise the implication of what they seek from the Church. This is also true of the local Church whose presence is essential to witness the baptism and to welcome the newly baptised into their midst, and with the godparents provide support to the parents in the Christian upbringing of their children. Thus the local Church needs to be instructed more thoroughly in baptismal theology and in its responsibilities in offering Christian care and support for the newly baptised. The second pastoral implication is implicit in what has been said, viz. 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 congregation, the Body of Christ. The rite, the Commission's Report, and sound baptismal theology, all demand careful preparation of those who seek baptism for their children. The revised Canons of the Church of England lay such baptismal preparation upon the priest, indeed they give baptismal preparation as the only ground on which a priest can delay baptism (e.g. Canon B. 22. 4).

The absence in the Church in Wales of a revised book of Canon Law, similar to *The Canons of the Church of England* is a grave omission which needs rectifying at the earliest possible date. Such a work is a valuable source book and guide to the parish priest in so many matters, pastoral, liturgical, theological and legal. It is regrettable that the Church in Wales is unable to offer such a book and has to refer clergy and others to the Canons of the Church of England before 1921 (disestablishment) and the few new Canons promulgated in Wales in recent years.

While the Canons of the Church of England stress the baptismal preparation of parents, 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. With such neglect we cannot justly complain about the general abuse of this sacrament by the "masses" who simply want their children "done", and do not understand the Church's teaching on the subject, nor what the Church expects from them. Such adequate preparation should include at least four or five sessions with small groups of parents who are seeking baptism for their children. The content of the course, the practical problems and many other related issues are beyond the scope of this article.

The third implication is that we must put an end to extra-parochial baptism — i.e. of those who neither live in the parish nor can claim to be regular worshippers. The Church in Wales is

unfortunate in not having a Canon which gives a clear guide-line on this subject. The English Canons see such baptisms as an exception to the rule and by implication the Series II baptismal rite rules out such baptisms. There are many pastoral reasons for taking a firm stand on this issue. To mention only one: "How can a priest possibly give adequate baptismal preparation to parents living in some distant town or country?" To give full and adequate instruction to parents living outside the parish is virtually impossible for most parish priests and such extra-parochial baptisms are also contrary to the spirit and teaching of the new rite. It is also impossible for the local congregation to make any realistic offer of Christian help and support, and the environment of Christian worship, and the encouragement of private prayer to children and parents from distant parts. Most extra-parochial baptisms are based upon sentimentalism or some social convention. When a parish priest allows parents from another parish to have their child baptised in his church, on these grounds, he denies a fellow priest of a valuable pastoral opportunity, and trivialises 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. Private or Sunday afternoon baptisms do not and cannot meet these requirements. Even the 1662 B.C.P. rite of Infant Baptism, with all its shortcomings, gives clear instruction concerning the ideal liturgical setting of the rite. It states: "It is most convenient that Baptism should not be administered but on Sundays and other Holy-days, when the most number of people come together; as well as for that the congregation there present may testify the receiving of them that be newly baptised 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.

Unfortunately the new Welsh rite is not emphatic on this point and tries to meet every possibility. The rubric states: "As far as possible, Baptism shall be administered on Sundays or on

other Holy Days in the presence of the congregation". It then gives at least four possibilities first, Morning or Evening Prayer, or a celebration of the Holy Eucharist or "When Baptism is administered other than at the Holy Eucharist or Morning or Evening Prayer, the Minister shall first use the Ministry of the Word set out therein". The insistence on the congregational nature of baptism is to be commended but it would have been better if, like some other members of the Anglican Communion, the Church in Wales made it clear that the Eucharist offers the ideal liturgical setting and that the other possibilities are second best and not normal.

The final point of the Report *Christian Initiation* shows how the Doctrinal Commission were much clearer on this point and took a firm line, for they recognised the implications of the theology and position recommended in their report. They state:

"We would lay our final stress on one point, implicit in all we have written, namely the *corporate character* of Christian Initiation. For too long church people have thought of this basic sacrament as a private individual affair. The four o'clock-on-Sunday-afternoon mentality, together with a narrowly individualistic concept of grace, are to be deplored most strongly. Christian Initiation is concerned before all else with the bringing of new lives into the life of the worshipping community, the gathering of living fragments of humanity into the living whole of the new manhood which is Christ. Let the Church get its priorities right. The recovery of a pattern of theology and practice consistent with the New Testament will then follow, for it is the corporate and witnessing character of the Christian community that necessitates the new approach advocated in this report."

The *corporate character* of Christian Initiation demands that a congregation be present to witness the baptism, to offer their prayers and support and to welcome the newly baptised into the worshipping community. The administration of the sacrament in this context also serves a didactic purpose, that of reminding the congregation of their own baptism and what it means to be baptised into Christ.

Unfortunately the new Welsh rite of Infant Baptism, in the third rubric, moves away from the ideal of the 1662 B.C.P. The new service states "As far as possible, Baptism shall be administered . . . in the presence of the congregation". Whereas the Prayer Book insisted that it be administered at a public

service “when the most number of people come together”. In other words at the main service on Sunday or a feast day.

For many parishes today the Parish or Family Communion is the main service, when the most number of people come together. In most parishes today this service provides the ideal liturgical setting for the administration of baptism. 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 in the Eucharistic Meal. They are there to pray, to welcome and to support the newly baptised and the parents. Within this context baptism is seen as the 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 baptised, 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 baptised 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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