

MUSINGS

FROM THE

EDITOR



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Each June, the Notre Dame Center for Liturgy gathers together a group of pastoral leaders throughout the United States at our yearly Symposium at the University of Notre Dame. In the summer of 2013, over one hundred pastoral theologians turned their attention to our theme, “Beloved Children, Imitators of God: Deification and the Sacraments of Initiation.” During the four days together, a number of concerns were raised relative to catechesis and the liturgical celebration of the sacraments of initiation. Like Aidan Kavanagh, the intellectual founder of the Center for Liturgy, we approached the theme of initiation through close attention to the sacrament of Baptism. Turning to Kavanagh’s magisterial *The Shape of Baptism* during our preparation for the event, we were reminded:

The quality of Christian liturgy is always determined less by its conformity to past or present than by the extent to which it overflows itself, molding and enlivening the shared identity of its participants according to the criteria of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Baptism does not exist to generate doctrine but faithful Christians. The eucharist is not celebrated to consecrate hosts for communion or Benediction but to constitute and sustain the Body of Christ which is the Church. Good liturgy is named not because it is a work helpful for the Church, but because it is nothing more or less than the Church being most faithfully itself.¹

In the years since Kavanagh’s baptismal imagination shaped generations of liturgical scholars and practitioners, one cannot help but notice a return of initiation to prominence in American liturgical life. Our parishes, despite Kavanagh’s short-sighted invective against infant baptism, regularly celebrate public baptisms during the Eucharist. The Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, although not always practiced according to perfect attention to the genius of the catechetical and liturgical instructions, occupies a central place in the imagination of many parishes throughout the country. First Communion and Confirmation are celebrated often enough as occasions of renewing the domestic church itself through deeper integration into the parish community.

Despite the strides made in the celebration of the sacraments of initiation, our Symposium publicly acknowledged a number of challenges facing catechists and liturgists alike. To a certain extent, these problems are no surprise to even the mildly attentive pastoral leader. The Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults remains too often a marginal facet of adult faith formation within the parish. There are significant declines in the number of parents approaching their local parish seeking formation for their children relative to the sacraments of Baptism, First Communion, and Confirmation. The latter sacrament remains inexplicably tied to a variety of cultural and theological assumptions, ranging from its proper location as a sacrament of initiation to an implicit graduation rite in which the now adult Catholic may choose to

cease attending Church. Most parishes have still not acknowledged the demands of baptismal discipleship, a way of life that necessitates a spirit of mission to the world. It is fair to say, without excessive pessimism, that the renewal of the Church that Kavanagh imagined possible through the celebration of the sacraments of initiation is an ongoing, incomplete project.

As a Center interested in the renewal of the liturgical imagination of the Church, we believe we have a certain obligation to offer a number of points of consideration emerging from our Symposium for the Church in the United States to consider. These considerations may be grouped under three general headings: the sacraments of initiation and culture, baptismal vocation, and the confusion of Confirmation.

THE SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION AND CULTURE

In the final chapter of his *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*, Louis-Marie Chauvet assesses the present state of initiation following the Second Vatican Council. He acknowledges that pastoral leaders decry the reality that the rites of initiation are often treated as mere “rites of passage.” Yet, Chauvet (always careful to attend to the cultural, embodied way that the sacramental life unfolds) does not dismiss the desire for rites of passage. Instead, he introduces a distinction between logics of communion and difference.² The logic of communion, held by traditional religious societies, requires that the individual participate in certain communal rites in order to be a part of the society. The logic of difference separates the individual from social or cultural norms. The latter logic is embodied in those who participate in the regular celebration of the Eucharist: “The attendance at Sunday Eucharist differentiates people from the surrounding milieu and demands a relatively high level of interiorization of the values of the church and of Vatican II.”³ In distinction, the sacraments of initiation, as well as weddings and funerals, operate out of the logic of communion:

The baptism of children and the wedding continue, on the contrary, to be lived as social gestures of *conformation to the surrounding milieu*; here the ‘cultic’ plays a primarily cultural role. One baptizes as much into ‘the American people’ or into ‘the ways of the Western world’ as into ‘the Christian mode of life’ corresponding to theological criteria.⁴

In other words, the theological rationale for Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist as laid out by the Church following the Second Vatican Council operates alongside cultural motivations by those requesting these rites. The Church may see infant Baptism as made possible by the faith of the Church, “a faith proclaimed for them by their parents and godparents, who represent both the local Church and the whole society of saints and believers....”⁵ The couple requesting Baptism for their recently born son or daughter may be more concerned with seeking some formal acknowledgment of the birth of their child. The question of active, Christian faith may be entirely absent from the considerations of this couple operating out of the logic of communion.

The temptation of liturgical and catechetical leaders, who generally have adopted the rather robust vision of initiation offered by both the rites of the Church and catechetical documents, is to disparage “mere” cultural Catholicism. Liturgists and catechists alike want those being initiated to understand Baptism, Confirmation, and first Eucharist as rites that establish and renew Christian identity. Yet, those seeking out these sacraments are participating in a cultural script in which “tradition” demands involvement in these rites regardless of personal appropriation. Even the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults is often conducted under the latter cultural script in which the catechumen is seeking out initiation into the Church for cultural and social reasons (marriage or religious harmony within family life). While such social and cultural Catholicism is often less “effective” than it once was, Catholicism can never rise above the very human, embodied reasons that people seek out the sacraments. Elsewhere, Chauvet notes:

The fact that there are sacraments leads us to say that *corporality is the very mediation where faith takes on flesh* and makes real the truth that inhabits it. It says this to us with all the pragmatic force of ritual expression that speaks by its actions and works through the word, the word-as-body. It tells us that the body, which is the whole word of humankind, is the unavoidable mediation where the Word of God involved in the most human dimension of our humanity demands that faith requires a *consent to the body*, to history, to the world which makes it a fully human activity.⁶

Strategies of evangelization that dismiss the cultural and social reasons that many seek out the sacraments are fundamentally anti-sacramental insofar as they strive to rise above mediation. The rites of the Church are not to be celebrated solely by those who engage in religious practice out of entirely “pure” motives (whatever such purity means). Instead, these rites are celebrated so that

every aspect of our humanity can enter into the divine-human exchange that characterizes the sacramental life of the Church.

What is the liturgical and catechetical leader to do? Chauvet provides a response that balances the demands of the Gospel with the necessity of the Gospel becoming inscribed in a specific culture. He writes:

Along with participation in catechesis, the preparation for baptisms and weddings is one of the main sources of the renewal of the Christian communities everywhere, cities, suburbs, rural areas. We have little doubt that this source will become more important to our ‘post-modern’ society in which so many people feel the need to rediscover landmarks and to reposition themselves on the religious plane. This requires that dioceses, parishes, services, chaplaincies develop a true concern and strategy in this field. The development of the adult catechumenate—which could be more substantial if more persons and more contributions of competent skill could be engaged in this work—gives a rather clear sign of it. In our kind of society, it is a whole ‘catechumenal’ dimension of the church that should be developed as one of the major ‘strategic’ axes of its mission.⁷

The catechumenate is the model for all sacramental formation not because a version of the RCIA is to be adopted in each of the sacraments of the Church. Instead, the pastoral leader must become attentive to the particular reasons, desires, and cultural assumptions of those seeking initiation into the Church. The pedagogy of the catechumenate recognizes that each person desiring initiation arrives with specific assumptions about human life that serve as a starting point for the announcement of the Gospel. The pastoral leader cannot simply affirm these “anthropological” reasons for

seeking out the sacrament. Instead, through the pastoral interview, the one preparing others for the sacrament of initiation is invited to proclaim the law of the Gospel so that the cultural and social rationale for seeking out the sacrament is “converted.”

Take, for example, those who ask for Baptism of their newborn infant not because of a desire to raise their child as a disciple of Jesus Christ but as a rite of acknowledgment of new life. The liturgist and catechist alike can never dismiss this longing for formal recognition on the part of the parents. The birth of a child into the life of parents forever changes the identity of the parents, and it is not surprising that the parents want some communal and official way of recognizing this fact. The pastoral leader has an opportunity to announce the Gospel in the midst of this “anthropological space.” The birth of the child opens up the parents to the wonder of new life, to the grave responsibility of parenthood, and to an understanding of total, sacrificial love. The Gospel itself provides a vision of a God who

loved humanity even to the point of death itself, whose whole “being” is sacrificial love. The manner in which the narrative of salvation is introduced in this first encounter with these parents may become an invitation to conversion, to see every aspect of reality anew through the kerygmatic proclamation.

Thus, “cultural Catholicism” is not inimical to an approach toward initiation concerned with personal appropriation or discipleship. Through those fundamental desires that cultural Catholicism inscribes in the heart of each man and woman, a fuller appropriation of the foolishness of the Christian life is made possible. Pastoral leaders who desire for the sacraments of initiation to become central to the renewal of the Church will begin to devote far more attention to the initial encounter with those seeking out of the sacraments of the Church. These “rites of return” can become, as Chauvet notes, a pivotal engine in renewing the entire life of the Church.

BAPTISMAL VOCATION

Of course, a major problem with the renewal of the sacraments of initiation is the, at times, bland Christian identity of the existing parish community. Rather than live the life of grace made possible through Baptism into the triune God, members of the parish may incarnate a vision of Christian life as a mere appendage to day-to-day life. As *Gaudium et Spes* made clear, “One of the gravest errors of our time is the dichotomy between the faith which many profess and their day-to-day conduct” (§43). This problem was further articulated, most recently, by Pope Francis in his *Evangelii Gaudium*. He writes:

a clear awareness of this responsibility of the laity, grounded in their baptism and confirmation, does not appear in the same way in all places. In some cases, it is because lay persons have not been given the formation needed to take on important responsibilities. In others, it is because in their particular Churches room has not been made for them to speak and to act, due to an excessive clericalism which keeps them away from decision-making. Even if many are now involved in the lay ministries,

this involvement is not reflected in a greater penetration of Christian values in the social, political and economic sectors. It often remains tied to tasks within the Church, without a real commitment to applying the Gospel to the transformation of society. The formation of the laity and the evangelization of professional and intellectual life represent a significant pastoral challenge (§102).

The purpose of initiation into the Church is *not* so that a private group of citizens may enjoy common worship together. Rather, the duty of the Church is to evangelize the world, transforming society from within. As a sacrament, it presumes the responsibility to act within the world as those whose identities have been reformed through life in Christ.

Forming women and men into their baptismal vocation is a fundamental task of the Church today throughout the world. As Maxwell Johnson writes, “the primary vocation of all Christians is that very call of baptism itself to share in the one priesthood of Jesus Christ in a great variety of ways through a variety of Spirit-given charisms.”⁸ Baptism comes with a vocation to transform the world through publicly proclaiming and living the Gospel. Initiation into this public vocation of baptism (and the entire liturgical life of the Church) is a difficult task within the United States. Religion is fundamentally considered a private affair of the heart rather than related to the *polis*. Politicians who separate their religious convictions from their governing are expressing a general truth that underlies American public life: religion is oriented toward individual sanctification or family identity, not public action within the world.

Yet, Baptism is necessarily a public and thus in some sense political reality. The anointing after both the Baptism of children and those adults who will not be confirmed testifies to the public nature of the sacra-

ment: “The God of power and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin and brought you to new life through water and the Holy Spirit. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation, so that, united with his people, you may remain for ever a member of Christ who is Priest, Prophet, and King.” Through Baptism, the Christian has become a member of a new people, a *polis* of the triune God. This language resonates with ancient Greek political discourse. Turning to Hannah Arendt:

The *polis* properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location: it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together, no matter where they happen to be. ‘Wherever you go, you will be a polis’: these famous words became not merely the watchword of Greek colonization, they expressed the conviction that action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere. It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly.⁹

Baptism creates an identity of a people—an identity that is not tied to a specific race or geographic location. The person becomes a public figure, existing in Christ, whose vocation is to share in the priesthood, prophecy, and royal nature of Christ’s mission to the world. This mission, of course, is not a matter of power as we might understand it in the arena of American politics but as that power of weakness “obtained” only through total, self-emptying love. Insofar as our entrance into the *polis* of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit necessitates an appearance to the world, it can never be a private matter alone. Instead, it must involve public action within the world.

Of course, public action within the world is not adequate without speech. Again turning to Arendt on this topic:

Without the accompaniment of speech, at any rate, action would not only lose its revelatory character, but, and by the same token, it would lose its subject, as it were; not acting men but performing robots would achieve what, humanly speaking, would remain incomprehensible. Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words. The action he begins is humanly disclosed by the word, and though his deed can be perceived in its brute physical appearance without verbal accompaniment, it becomes relevant only through the spoken word in which he identifies himself as the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do.¹⁰

In this way, it strikes me one way of fostering the baptismal vocation of Catholics within our parishes is through a renewal of both the action and speech of parishioners within the public arena. Baptismal discipleship demands that we act within the world as those whose identity is *in Christ*. Maintaining programs within parishes is an inadequate approach to the transformation of the world that evangelization itself demands. Baptismal formation will necessarily include a missionary spirit, one that capacitates the lay Christian to integrate religious life with one's existence in the world: "Let Christians follow the example of Christ who worked as a craftsman; let them be proud of the opportunity to carry out their earthly activity in such a way as to integrate human, domestic, professional, scientific and technical enterprises with religious values..." (*Gaudium et Spes* §43).

Of course, action alone is not enough. The baptismal vocation requires a renewal of proclamation in which the lay Catholic can learn to speak articulately and persuasively about his or her mission within the world. In some ways, the Church is more prepared for this task of forming women and men in expressing their baptismal vocation. Electronic media, including blogs, podcasts, and digital media provide a voice for Catholics to practice articulating how the deepest values of the Gospel can infuse culture. Organizations like Catholic Voices, recently founded in the United States after a number of successes in the United Kingdom, promise a renewed approach to forming Catholics in expressing their faith in the public sphere without falling into diatribes or the kind of bitterness that has become a hallmark of cable news.¹¹

Practices of initiation, no matter how robust, will not renew the Church alone. What is needed is a deeper awareness among lay Catholics of the gift of their particular vocation as those baptized, confirmed, and "eucharistized" into life in Christ. The joy of the Gospel needs to spill over into the public sphere wherever baptized women and men articulate in speech and action that their lives are oriented not to the economy of exchange, to the politics of power and coercion but the grammar of love unto the end. The great mystagogical task of the present-day is not simply explaining the symbols and rites of the Church. Instead, it is forming lay Catholics into the supreme gift of our baptismal vocation. As Virgil Michel notes, "In all our participation in the life of the Church, both at official worship and in daily life, it is the baptismal grace that continues to live and grow in us."¹²

SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION

It is by no means surprising that the topic of Confirmation surfaced often in our discussion of challenges relative to the sacraments of initiation. The dislocation of Confirmation from its proper place in the sacraments of initiation is a relatively new phenomenon, brought about by the lowering of the age of communion by Pius X's *Quam singulari* in 1910. In a recent book, Timothy R. Gabrielli describes how the sacrament of Confirmation has been used in the twentieth century for a variety of theological and pastoral projects around Christian identity, many of which are unrelated to the theology of the sacrament itself.¹³ Summing up his argument, he writes:

That individualism is a problem for ecclesial formation is not shocking. If the argument pursued throughout this book—Catholics' changing relationship to the wider U.S. culture heavily impacts confirmation theology and practice—is correct, then it is clearer why the struggles to form young Catholics in the church brought about by this changing cultural relationship are often associated with confirmation. The relationship is mutually informing. *Quam singulari* opened the possibility of inserting confirmation into the tenuous teenage years and popular psychology encouraged the same. With a theology that was far from crystal clear to start, confirmation became a suitable beast of burden for various post-subcultural solutions to the problem of making young Catholics adult Catholics.¹⁴

Yet, what is the Church in the United States to do presently when the popular imagination has so closely linked Confirmation with entrance into adult, Catholic faith?

The options are two-fold. As suggested by Maxwell Johnson, Christianity as a whole should:

take with the utmost seriousness that Christian baptism *is* full initiation in water *and* the Spirit, and that, theologically, 'confirmation,' or whatever we might call it, is but the ritualizing or sacramentalizing of the Spirit gift inseparably connected to the water bath itself. . . Confirmation should be placed back where it belongs—as the inseparable concluding seal of the baptismal rite itself whenever baptism takes place, and, as a consequence, all the debates about knowledge, preparation, and age for confirmation should be terminated.¹⁵

Johnson's proposal is by no means a radical one but highly traditional. A theology of Confirmation that places emphasis on our willful decision to accept Catholic faith, common in youth ministry programs throughout the country, is not simply a twentieth-century novelty. It is a sacramental heresy in which initiation becomes a marking of a human decision rather than a celebration of the triune God's action in the Church. Insofar as infant Baptism is normally followed by chrismation, Johnson's proposal would be relatively easy to implement. Bishops, no longer responsible for the annual visit to a parish to confirm young women and

men, could direct their attention to a pastoral visit to the entire parish. Parishes, placing all of their emphasis on sacramental preparation, might begin to develop the robust, mystagogical approach to baptismal and eucharistic identity discussed above. Johnson's proposal demands serious attention by bishops, clergy, and lay leaders alike both within the United States and beyond.

An alternative approach is suggested by Gabrielli. Rather than reform the normal way of conducting Confirmation, he suggests that dioceses make a conscious effort to move away from an emphasis on Confirmation as the sacrament of individual responsibility and move toward an approach that accentuates the pneumatological and ecclesial emphases of the rite. Gabrielli's suggestion is more than a compromise position. It recognizes that Confirmation's accidental separation from Baptism has some benefits, and local churches can testify to many of these. Perhaps, Confirmation's movement into the adolescent years is an authentic theological and spiritual development in the Church.

Our Symposium recognized that there is no clear answer relative to the reforming of practices of formation, as well as the proper age of Confirmation. Such questions remain under the authority of dioceses, which will need to discern the precise approach within the context of the local Church. Nonetheless,

the present pastoral strategy of using Confirmation to hold onto adolescents for as long as possible is a deficient one, increasingly so by those adolescents who both acutely notice and decry inauthenticity. For too long, theological debates about Confirmation have remained within the academy. The time has come for dioceses to seriously consider the deleterious effects of the implicit theology of the sacrament of Confirmation as practiced within parishes. Confirmation is not a graduation rite, a sacrament of Christian adulthood, or an occasion to meet the local bishop. Instead, it is that sacrament which transforms the *confirmandi* into "witnesses before all the world to [Christ's] suffering, death, and resurrection."¹⁶ This capacity to witness to the radical love of Christ, made possible through the gift of the Spirit, is not limited to those who have reached developmental maturity. Instead, every infant, every child, every adolescent, every young adult, every mature man and woman, every Christian is to become such a witness. The more closely that the sacrament of Confirmation is tied into the theme of baptismal vocation addressed above, the more likely that it will become part of the Church's mission of the New Evangelization.

CONCLUSION

The pastoral work of initiation remains integral to the evangelizing mission of the Church. The *telos* of this process of initiation is not simply upon the rites that we celebrate. Rather, we celebrate these rites so that the logic of love revealed in the Cross might deify the entire created order. Indeed, as Nathan Mitchell once reminded us, the Eucharist is the ever-recurring sacrament of initiation into the agapic logic of the kingdom:

How does the Christian participate in this ‘living sacrifice’? By surrendering. By letting go of the compulsion to control the world’s creatures and to manipulate history’s outcome. That is why the great sacrificial act of the Christian assembly is neither a ritual slaughter nor strategic planning but *eucharistia*, a sacrifice of thanksgiving that returns all of created reality to its source in the Spirit. For in the face of God’s extravagant gestures of creation and salvation, all the Christian can do is praise, acknowledge, surrender, serve, bear witness and open the self like a shutter to receive the light. Only then is the Christian afforded an intuition of what a world in transformation feels, sounds and tastes like.¹⁷

We care about initiation not simply for the sake of those seeking entrance into the Christian life. Rather, initiation is a reality that every Christian experiences Sunday after Sunday, as we become practiced in the sacrificial and political grammar of the Eucharist. What we experience at our Baptism is simply the beginning of an apprenticeship into loving as God first loved us. We do not initiate for the sake of parish membership. We initiate so that the world might know what it means to say that God is love.



NOTES

- 1 Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1978), 165.
- 2 Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*, trans. Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001), 177-78.
- 3 Ibid., 178.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 “Baptism for Children” in *The Rites: Volume 1* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990) §2.
- 6 Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Madeleine Beaumont and Patrick Madigan, SJ (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995), 376.
- 7 Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 199.
- 8 Maxwell Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, rev. ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 472.
- 9 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 188-89.
- 10 Ibid., 178-79.
- 11 See Austen Ivereigh, *How to Defend the Faith without Raising Your Voice* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2012).
- 12 Virgil Michel, *Our Life in Christ* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1939), 119.
- 13 Timothy R. Gabrielli, *Confirmation: How a Sacrament of God’s Grace Became All About Us* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013).
- 14 Ibid., 72-73.
- 15 Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, 458-59.
- 16 “Confirmation” in *The Rites: Volume 1*, §22.
- 17 Nathan Mitchell, *Eucharist as Sacrament of Initiation* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2003), 124.