



Antoine Coypel (1661-1722);
The Baptism of Christ, detail (ca. 1690);
Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Image courtesy of Public Domain
High Resolution images (www.lacma.org)



REVISITING AIDAN KAVANAGH

AND *THE SHAPE OF BAPTISM*

BY COLLEEN REISS VERMEULEN, M.DIV.



The New Evangelization requires that each believer have the audacity, confidence, ardent desire, urgency, and, as Pope Francis emphasized in *Evangelii Gaudium*, the joy to share the Gospel. This *formation for witness*, however, will never be effective if it is limited to what we commonly think of as “religious education,” and disconnected from the abiding power of the sacraments of initiation. The bishops in the United States emphasize this power of initiation pointedly, asking:

Do we realize that our Baptism, Confirmation, and reception of the Eucharist bestow on us the grace we need to be disciples? ... The answers to these questions underlie the evangelizing mission of the Church, especially in the call of the New Evangelization.¹

The existence of a call to a New Evangelization that includes a focus on the baptized who have drifted from the Church and the immense efforts taken to spur practicing Catholics to evangelize certainly indicates that many (if not most) Catholics do *not* realize that the sacraments of initiation do indeed “bestow on us the grace we need to be disciples.” This is a critical problem, since without witnesses to go forth, the movement of the New Evangelization from concept to concrete action will be limited. Within our dioceses and parishes in the United States, much is being done to help adults come to the mature faith required of evangelists. This is truly important for the New Evangelization, but it is a retroactive response, a stopgap measure that is required because our initiation practices have not been bearing the fruit of mature Christians, ready to evangelize.

As I reflect on the relationship between the sacraments of initiation and the New Evangelization, I cannot help but think of Aidan Kavanagh, a Benedictine monk and liturgical theologian. In the years following the release of the reformed Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, Kavanagh asserted, “the structures and rites for becoming a Christian lie on the turbulent leading edge of the Church’s mission of ministry in the world.”² In his *The Shape of Baptism*, Kavanagh challenges us to ask how we can continue in the Church’s long, historical tradition of ensuring the processes and practices of sacramental initiation “change in response to a changing world.”³

Writing nearly four decades ago, Kavanagh recognized that the disintegration of Christendom demanded shifts in our understanding and practice of the sacraments of initiation—shifts that are congruent with our setting of the New Evangelization. Even though the United States has never had an official state religion (a true “Christendom” as Kavanagh describes it), for many years a correlation between an unspoken civic religion and Christianity did exist in a way that allowed

evangelization and catechesis to occur within Catholic culture itself, through tight-knit ethnic parishes and social networks.

This is no longer the typical Catholic experience in the United States.⁴ Those who are baptized, receive first eucharistic communion, and are confirmed (usually in that order) are socially, economically, and culturally free to drift or deliberately walk away from the Church at any point in that sequence, never to return. Only 18 percent of those “who were once Catholic” (a self-identification that likely includes reception of Baptism in a Catholic Church) continue to attend Mass weekly, revealing the limited effect Baptism seems to have on personal appropriation of the life of discipleship.⁵ Thus, the answer the USCCB’s aforementioned question in *Disciples Called to Witness*—“Do we realize that our Baptism, Confirmation, and reception of the Eucharist bestow on us the grace we need to be disciples?”—seems to be a clear “No.”

So where does this leave us? What do we need to do better? In Kavanagh’s thinking, *memory* is fundamental for initiation in a post-Christendom setting. Memory flows from both the vibrant use of signs and symbolic elements, and the experience of the person being initiated. Christians, Kavanagh argues, should possess

the strongest possible sense of their own Catholic identity, an identity not rooted primarily in their ethnic past or even in the religious rhythms of family and school, *but an identity rooted in the living memory of their own Baptism into Christ in his Church.*⁶

Memory of conversion, memory of waiting and longing to be baptized, memory of the water and oil; all of these memories help to cement the paschal, baptismal experience in one’s life. This sounds like a description of the witnesses for the New Evangelization the

bishops have called for, witnesses who realize that the sacraments of initiation “bestow on us the grace we need to be disciples.” When one has personally experienced a significant life event, it is more natural to share and proclaim in the most authentic, heartfelt way. Memory of the sacraments of initiation, and most fundamentally, of Baptism, then emboldens and invigorates the New Evangelization.

One way we invigorate our memory of initiation is through the “regular participation in the Baptism of others,” something that has become more common, as parishes find ways to schedule Baptisms during Masses or plan baptismal liturgies for many children that include the wider parish community.⁷ The “better” way, however, is to remember one’s own Baptism—an option that Kavanagh suggests could become more common through the solemn enrollment of infants in the catechumenate (“begin[ning] the sequence of Baptism”) and the celebration of the stages of initiation “over a period of years according to the child’s growth in faith.”⁸ This has not yet become a typical option for parents in Catholic parishes, but the demands of the New Evangelization should lead us to reconsider the wider use of an infant catechumenate for the sake of forming Christians with the “strongest possible sense of their own Catholic identity” and most direct experience of the grace that Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist provide for evangelization.⁹

Writing in the 1970s, Kavanagh explained the logic behind the importance of memory of sacramental initiation:

In a culture trained largely by words and visual “messages” that try to develop intellectual conceptualization, it is even more crucial than it ever has been to give Christians more than concepts alone, important as these are.¹⁰

Is this not even more true today? If concepts alone were important, there would be no need to introduce (or re-introduce) the Gospel of Jesus Christ to so many in the United States since nearly every person in our country has the ability to access the Bible, look up information about Catholic doctrine, or read Christian apologetics online. There is no shortage of information in our world, or even in our parishes. The call of the New Evangelization, however, reveals that we do have a shortage of witnesses able to share something more than mere concepts, more than just information about Jesus Christ and his Church. Kavanagh goes on to highlight the specifically *experiential* nature of the memory he believes is so important:

Christians individually and corporately also need access to a radical experience and sense of rightness; of standing at an axial spot from which everything radiates out and to which everything falls home; of dwelling splendidly at the center of things. This experience and sense form the basic orientation that must undergird the whole of ecclesial life, going far beyond the audio-visual aids of the classroom or the devotional aids purveyed by ecclesiastical goods companies. . . . Perception fuses in space with time, and a thing is not just known but possessed with so indelible an intensity that it will never be forgotten. But it can never be put into words alone. No liturgical complex in the Church’s repertoire is so capable of attaining this sort of power as that of sacramental initiation.¹¹

This memory of our initiation is both personal and corporate. It is refreshed through witnessing the Baptism of others, but memory of *our own* Baptisms must be intensely possessed by continual recollection of its personal transformative power. And though robust celebration of initiation sacraments with easily understood sacramental signs is important, sacramental

initiation is more than simply the liturgical act—it is the before and after, the conversion and community that leads the initiand to the sacraments, and the mystagogy that extends into every aspect of parish life.

Revisiting *The Shape of Baptism* with an eye towards the New Evangelization gives us a powerful vision: a vivid memory of conversion and growth as a disciple of Jesus Christ, with the sacraments of initiation as hinge moments of wonder and awe that form evangelizers. We share most authentically and passionately when we are utterly convinced of the transforming power of a sacrament. When typical Catholics are freely sharing their stories of initiation, of conversion, of water and oil, of grace, and of the community that formed and welcomed them, then we will know that initiation is memorable—that we're doing it right, allowing the graces of these sacraments to form witnesses for the New Evangelization.



Colleen Reiss Vermeulen, M.Div. is a STEP facilitator, Master of Non-Profit Administration candidate in the University of Notre Dame's Mendoza School of Business, Adjunct Professor in the Theological Studies Program at Siena Heights University, and writer for NewEvangelizers.com.

NOTES

1 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Disciples Called to Witness: The New Evangelization*, (Washington, DC: 2012), Preface.

2 Aidan Kavanagh. *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1978), 154.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 179.

5 Mark M. Gray. “A Micro-scoping View of U.S. Catholic Populations” in *Nineteen Sixty-four*, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), 11 May 2012, nineteensixty-four.blogspot.com/2012/05/microscoping-view-of-us-catholic.html.

6 Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism*, 176.

7 Ibid., 176.

8 Ibid., 175–176.

9 Ibid., 176.

10 Ibid., 178.

11 Ibid., 178–179.