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SACRAMENTAL FORMATION & THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

BY XIMENA DEBROECK

INFANT BAPTISM AND THE EUCHARIST

INFANT BAPTISM

The celebration of infant Baptism offers insights for the New Evangelization.

The practice of infant Baptism has been challenged throughout the centuries. Restoration of the RCIA emphasizes the gradual journey of conversion leading to Baptism, which presents some further considerations about the theology of infant Baptism. The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, aware of concerns regarding this practice, issued

the *Instruction on Infant Baptism* in 1980, eleven years after the revised *Rite of Baptism of Children* was issued. In this instruction, the main points on the doctrine of infant Baptism are presented, answers to some difficulties raised by this practice are provided, and pastoral directives are discussed. The purpose of this article is not to present a full theology

of infant Baptism, but rather to build on the theological view presented in the previous issue of this volume by presenting specific opportunities for evangelization in the context of this common pastoral practice.

For the parents, the Baptism of their infant is an invitation to ongoing faith formation. As Mark Searle explains, during the celebration of Baptism, parents not only make a promise to teach the child what they know, but also commit themselves to a continued learning and living of the faith.¹ He continues by affirming that Christianity “is caught more than taught,”² and the witness of the family is a better model than any classroom.

A critical element of baptismal preparation is to help parents to understand their responsibility for continuing their own faith journey. The preparation offered at our parishes should not just be a box checked off by the parish staff and by the parents; rather, it must be a formative, reflective opportunity. Many times parents who have had other children baptized ask if it is necessary to come back for the “class.” In this regard, we must be intentional about the language we use for faith formation: baptismal preparation should not be referred to as a “class”; instead, the terms “session” or “formation” are preferable, as they do not have the finite connotation that the term “class” brings. The ministers who coordinate baptismal preparation have the great responsibility to communicate clearly and with all charity to the parents that they are invited to attend the sessions prior to the Baptisms of each and every one of their children, because each time is a new occasion to be re-evangelized. Each child comes into their lives at different times, not just in the temporal sense, but

at different points on their faith journey. Each time parents participate in baptismal preparation, they are offered a new opportunity to hear Christ proclaimed; they are invited to journey at a deeper level toward a more mature faith and a life of discipleship. Often we lament that parents no longer teach children how to pray, but how can they if they themselves do not know how to pray? How can they fulfill their responsibility of forming their children in the faith if they do not know Christ or do not have a personal relationship with him?

For the community, infant Baptism—especially when celebrated during Mass with the assembly present—offers parishioners the unique opportunity of renewing their own baptismal promises with a two-fold reflection. First, they are reminded about their identity as children of God who are called to holiness, and secondly, they have the opportunity to reflect further about their baptismal consecration as a sharing in Christ’s mission as priest, prophet, and king. As Pope Francis states in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), all the baptized are called to be missionary disciples and as such, they are agents of evangelization:

In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. (EG §120)

EUCHARIST

The Eucharist is the only sacrament of initiation which is received again and again.

As explained in the RCIA, with their reception of the Eucharist, the newly baptized are “raised to the ranks of the royal priesthood” (§§217, 125). In other words, their baptismal consecration as priests can now be fully actualized as they share—individually and together with the community—in the offering of Christ: the complete gift of self to the Father, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. God created us freely out of love, freely shares his life with us, and invites us to respond freely with a gift of self. Participating in the Eucharist again and again enables us to give of ourselves to God again and again.

When a gift is received many times over, we might begin to take it for granted and not realize its magnitude. For instance, how often do we pause to think how blessed we truly are in having daily nourishment, health, etc.? Unless we are faced with hard times and find ourselves unable to have the means for sustenance, or unless we struggle with an illness, we might take for granted the gifts of nourishment and health. It seems that often the gift is underappreciated until it is lost or in danger of being lost.

And so it could be with the Eucharist: because we are able to receive it again and again, it is quite possible that we might forget the true meaning of its celebration, as well as the full extent of our participation in that celebration. Pope Francis reminds us of the importance of the memory dimension of our faith. He explains that

Jesus gave us the Eucharist as a “daily remembrance of, and deeper sharing in, the event of his Passover” (*EG* §13). In order to participate consciously in Christ’s Passover, we need to know his story; we need to know the story of God’s love for us and his ongoing invitation to a personal and committed relationship. In short, we need to be re-evangelized. Receiving the Eucharist again and again should be much more than the ritual of passively attending Mass. In hearing Scripture proclaimed again at every liturgical celebration, we can be evangelized again. As Pope Francis so clearly articulates, the proclamation of God’s Word in the context of the Eucharistic celebration should be “a dialogue between God and his people, a dialogue in which the great deeds of salvation are proclaimed and the demands of the covenant are continually restated” (*EG* §137). A well-prepared homily centered on God’s message should contribute to our evangelization, not distract us from it. And then, when our hearts are burning within us, we can recognize Christ in the breaking of the bread and enter into communion with the triune God in order to be strengthened for mission.

We must be mindful of this missionary dimension of the Eucharist: we receive Christ and have a profound encounter with him and then we are sent out to be instruments of encounter with Christ to others. This dimension is intimately connected to evangelization. Almost forty years ago, Pope Paul VI expressed this reality thus:

Evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of man's concrete life, both personal and social. This is why evangelization involves an explicit message, adapted to the different situations constantly being realized, about the rights and duties of every human being, about family life without which personal growth and development is hardly possible, about life in society, about international life, peace, justice and development—a message especially energetic today about liberation. (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, §29).

The Eucharist sends us to be Christ to others, to proclaim the Good News, and we have to do this in concrete, relational ways, not just in abstract doctrinal statements.

Sacramental formation offers unique opportunities for renewed evangelization. Parents, families, the entire community, and also the pastoral and catechetical leaders are invited to deepen their understanding of the encounter with Christ, which is mediated through the sacraments. As has been presented, the practice of infant Baptism can offer parents and families a unique possibility of encountering God anew, as they ponder God's invitation to a personal relationship and reflect on their baptismal call. In addition, being mindful of the missionary dimension of the Eucharist is critical to understanding that evangelization begins with the proclamation of the *kerygma*, but it does not end there; true evangelization has to be transformative and missionary. Baptism and Eucharist are not the only sacraments of initiation to offer us new light on evangelization; the sacrament of Confirmation also presents the possibility of such newness. The next column in this series will present a different way to practice the celebration of Confirmation, a particular practice that is ever ancient, that has almost been lost at times, but that yet offers fresh possibilities for the New Evangelization.



NOTES

1 Mark Searle, "Infant Baptism Reconsidered" in *Alternative Futures for Worship, vol. 2: Baptism and Confirmation*, ed. Mark Searle (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press), 47–49.

2 Searle, "Infant Baptism Reconsidered," 49.



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