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The Sacrament of Baptism and the Word¹

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IT MAY BE HELPFUL, at the beginning of a study on Christian baptism, to see how the evangelists speak of the baptism given by John, before the public manifestation of Jesus. Luke, for instance, writes: "The word of God came to John, son of Zachary, in the desert. And he went into all the region about the Jordan proclaiming [*kērussōn*²] a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (3:2-3). And Matthew says: "Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the desert of Judea, and saying, 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (3:1-2).

I am afraid that in being too concerned with the superiority of baptism in the Holy Spirit over John's baptism—which John himself did point out—we may overlook something important for the understanding of Christian baptism itself: that it is John's preaching, the message he proclaimed as God's herald, that made him a great prophet—the greatest indeed among prophets—and not his baptism. Baptism only had significance and importance inasmuch as it was an expression of faith in his message, an outward mark of adherence to the word he preached.

This message is summed up in Mark as follows: "And he preached saying: 'One mightier than I is coming after me, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and loose'" (1:6-7). John, the messenger who makes ready the way of the Lord and straightens his paths, points to the stronger who comes after him, who must grow greater and greater, while he grows less and less (John 3:30). And those who had received John's words (that is, welcomed the kingdom at hand, and believed in him that comes) expressed the sincerity of their repentance or conversion (*metanoia*) by submitting to John's baptism—a baptism in which they not only repented of their past but, still more, became attached to God and his ways, and expressed their desire to enter into the fulness of his design of salvation.

Bearing all this in mind, it seems we already have the essential aspects of Christian baptism. John's baptism is an expression of faith and conversion, and these are the work of God's Word, proclaimed by his messenger.

I. FAITH AND CONVERSION

When Jesus himself begins to preach, faith and repentance are again mentioned by the evangelists. Not baptism, of course, since baptism in the

1. A paper given at an Ecumenical Dialogue in Montreal on 4 January 1962. Two other contributions to this symposium have already been published in the *Journal*.

2. The word may also be translated "preaching." Mark uses the same term in speaking of John's ministry (1:4).

Spirit expresses adherence to the whole gospel, including, therefore, the essential event of Christ's death and resurrection.³ Mark says: "After John had been delivered up, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel'" (1:14f.). The essential acceptance of the glad tidings is made through faith and repentance. The role later played by baptism will, no doubt, be of prime importance, but baptism will not replace or even minimize the significance of faith and conversion.

(By the way, it may be interesting to note here that Mark and Matthew, when speaking both of John's preaching and of Jesus' inaugural proclamation of the gospel, use the Greek term *kērussō*, which means to announce, to publish, to make known in a loud voice. The term suggests that the message was brief, solemn, straightforward, and clear, and that it was intended to awaken the people and to produce an impact, as did the herald of old [*kēryx*], who went to the public places, at the cross-roads, or wherever people were gathered, and spoke out the words that would draw attention to an important piece of news. The herald did not teach; he announced a fact, or an event. This does not mean that the further developments in the kerygmatic discourses and the catechesis or instruction have little importance, but it does indicate the strength of both John's and Jesus' initial proclamation, which was a word powerful enough to bring about faith and conversion. We are no longer surprised to hear Paul speaking of the gospel as of "a power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes" [Rom. 1:16].)

Now, if we turn to the last chapter of Mark (16:15f.), we read: "And he said to them, 'Go in the whole world and preach the gospel [*kēruxate*] to every creature. He who believes and is baptized shall be saved, but he who does not believe shall be condemned.'" Now that Jesus has died and the Father has raised him from the dead, the world has received the glad tidings in their entirety and baptism in the Spirit is given. But let us note the exact phrasing of the text, especially the careful balance of the second sentence: "He who believes and is baptized shall be saved." First, one must believe in the glad tidings of salvation, then express his total adherence to the message by receiving baptism. Faith is mentioned in the first place, since it is the condition of a worthy and true baptism. Without it, baptism is a meaningless gesture, it produces nothing, it is an untruth. And as if to stress again that salvation is through faith, the negative formulation of the same statement does not even mention the baptismal rite: "He who does not believe shall be condemned."

Acts 2 tells of the impression produced by Peter's discourse on the day of Pentecost. Peter's concluding words are a summary of the gospel that the apostles will proclaim in the incisive and clear style of the herald: "There-

3. In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark the commission to baptize is fittingly placed at the very end of the story of the sayings and doings of the Master.

fore let all the house of Israel know most assuredly that God has made both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (2:36). What happens then is very enlightening for our understanding of baptism: "Now on hearing this they were pierced to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?' " (2:37).

The Word, "power of God unto salvation," has changed the hearts of those hearing it, and their question suggests that they are disposed to alter their whole way of life: "But Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' " (2:38).

The word "believe" does not appear this time; it was not actually required. The change undergone by people pierced to the heart and who repent for their sins is essentially linked to an act of faith. To believe is not a purely intellectual matter. By faith one adheres totally, accepts the truth with his whole being, renounces his past, welcomes the requirements of the gospel, and adopts the behaviour of those who have received the hope of salvation. By faith one is repentant, one is converted.

II. BAPTISM AS PART OF THE GLAD TIDINGS

In our effort to show the intimate relation between the Word and the sacrament of baptism, it would be an oversimplification to see this relation in one direction only—first, the Word as something definite, static, and giving faith; then, faith expressed in the rite of baptism. Actually we are quite certain that the sacramental experience of the first Christian generations did itself exercise a certain influence on the very contents of the gospel. We know that the accounts of the evangelists were not meant to be "Lives of Jesus"; there is, in the choice of events and words, in the very structure of the writings, an intention, a systematization, which is dependent not only on the preaching of the apostles but also on the life of the early Church in general, as well as on its sacramental practice. The Gospel according to John, in particular, seems to have a sacramental background. Chapters 2–4, for instance—describing the first sign accomplished by Jesus (water changed into wine) and referring to the "hour" of Jesus; speaking of the sign of the temple, with its reference to the resurrection; reporting the words with Nicodemus, the last testimony of the Baptist, and the meeting with the Samaritan woman—are centred on the theme of baptism. The arrangement of events and sayings, and the light shed upon them, are not those of the historian but of one who has pondered and reflected on these elements of the message, of one who has lived the Christian experience among the brethren and has discovered the all-important place of faith and baptism in the Spirit.

As we see, baptism is not a reality to be separated from the Word itself. It is, so to speak, part of the glad tidings. The gospel is not primarily a book; it is a Word, a preaching, a testimony; it is a living reality in the Church. We agree that the miracles accompanying the first proclamation of the gospel by Jesus are part of the glad tidings, although they are signs and events.

God's benevolence and mercy are revealed in these outward signs, which themselves reveal an inner action of Jesus, producing faith and a changing of the heart. Similarly, the sacrament of baptism is a sign of God's mercy producing our salvation; we do not see its relation to the Word merely in the fact that it accomplishes the Word, but also in the fact that, in the apostolic age, baptism itself conditioned to a certain extent the very contents of the glad tidings.

In Paul's letters, for example, we see how the doctrine of our unity with the risen Christ is inspired by the practice of the rite itself. The rite of immersion refers directly to the death and resurrection of Christ and our own entrance into the paschal mystery: "You were buried together with him in baptism and in him rose again through faith in the working of God who raised him from the dead" (Col. 2:12). In Romans 6, where this theme is also developed, it is introduced by a moral exhortation. Surely, Christians cannot sin who are dead to sin. Here we see the same relation of baptism with *metanoia*-conversion as in the accounts of John's baptism, but understood, this time, in the light of the death-resurrection: "All we who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death, in order that, just as Christ has arisen from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also may walk in newness of life" (6:3-4).

Faith and conversion have, as before, been brought about by the preaching of the gospel, which is the power of God; but now we have a deeper insight into the gospel itself, thanks to the rite of baptism by immersion, which has suggested to Paul that we are plunged into the water of baptism as in the death of Christ (which is a death to sin), and that we emerge with Christ to a new life. "Thus do you consider yourselves also as dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:11).⁴

III. THE CHRISTIAN CATECHUMENATE

At the end of the second century the making of a Christian had become something far more complicated. There had been persecutions, which had made it impossible to preach freely, to attract crowds, and to produce the impact that a great message proclaimed by a herald was almost certain to

4. One wonders how this death to sin could be so complete when it seems to have been the practice, at least in the first years after the departure of Jesus, to baptize quite soon after the gospel had been announced. Cf. the baptism of the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10), of the minister of Queen Candace of Ethiopia (Acts 8:26ff.), and of the three thousand on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41). It seems that the lengthier catechesis, the initiation into a fuller understanding of the gospel, was post-baptismal. Yet if, c. A.D. 57-58, Paul can write so firmly to the Romans on the effect of baptism as a death to sin, the strength of the gospel in its substance, even though it was presented rapidly, must have been in fact something quite extraordinary. In the rather extreme examples just cited, the gospel was preached to Jews or to "God-fearing" men (in the technical sense of the phrase *phoboumenoī ton theon*), that is, those who sympathized with Judaism without submitting to circumcision. The good news, therefore, was a message addressed to people prepared to hear it, and it even came as an answer to the hope of men of goodwill. It is possible that the initial preaching of the gospel to pagans in preparation for baptism was more elaborate and required more time, but Acts gives the impression that the rite of baptism was in all cases closely connected with an initial proclamation which called for complementary developments.

produce. Moreover, Christianity had moved out more and more into the pagan world; one could not rely on prospective converts' knowledge of Scripture and on their acceptance of Christ as an answer to their hope, and one could not expect the average convert from paganism to accept rapidly and easily the Christian way of life, which in many cases demanded a complete change in behaviour.

It was thought that a period of three years was now necessary to make possible the transition; the catechumenate was a time of instruction in the faith of the gospel, but it was also a time of moral preparation, of "supervised" practice of Christian ethics.⁵ After such a preparation the candidates to baptism could more truly die to sin, be baptized in Christ, and "walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which they were called" (Eph. 4:1).

There was also a period of immediate preparation for baptism, some three years after the entrance of the candidate into the catechumenate. Candidates registered as *competentes* or *electi* (in Rome); in the late fourth century, this happened at the beginning of the Lenten season. The preparation was, first, of a moral kind, and consisted of outward forms of penance (fasts mainly) that would enable the candidate to acquire a true spirit of penance (conversion). It was also a time of doctrinal training, the forty days being a period of intensified instruction. Of this plan the Roman liturgy still bears traces in the careful choice of Scripture readings for the eucharistic celebrations of Lent. Finally, the preparation included elements of a sacramental nature, such as laying on of hands and exorcisms.

But the great change in the preparation for baptism brought about by the institution of the catechumenate did not alter in any way the understanding of baptism as a sacrament of faith and conversion. And precisely because such was the nature of baptism, one saw no reason to hold on to the catechumenate as an institution, when, by the beginning of the sixth century, Roman society was no longer predominantly pagan, and the atmosphere had become more Christian. To maintain the catechumenate would have been largely formalism. Adult baptisms, it is true, had become less frequent, and the majority of baptisms were baptisms of children. But had the need for an authentic faith and a profound conversion of adult candidates made it necessary to maintain this institution, surely the Church would not have been content with salvaging mere ritual traces of the catechumenate.

IV. THE SPIRIT AND THE BRETHREN

Baptism, though an expression of one's personal faith, remains an act of God,⁶ transforming man into an adopted son, into a member of Christ's body, the Church. Now this action of the Spirit in baptism establishes a relationship, not only between a man and the person of Christ, but also with all

5. The presence of sponsors must have been particularly helpful in this respect.

6. Our insistence on faith and conversion was aimed at presenting the rite of baptism as a truly personal act, something experienced with full awareness of its meaning. But faith itself is only made possible through God's inspiration; it is an answer to God's calling. The Spirit of God is ever active in every action of the Christian.

the members of Christ. Baptism truly marks the entrance into a community of believers, which takes on the responsibility of the new member. This had to be, when baptism was given very soon after the announcing of the gospel message; the neophyte had to live his Christian experience, deepen his understanding of the glad tidings, in the midst of an actual living Christian community. His faith and hope were sustained by the faith and hope of the brethren, his manner of living encouraged by their charity. Faith and conversion at the time of baptism logically called for preseverance in this new way of life. And preserverance was, to a large extent, dependent on environment, on the quality of the atmosphere created by the fervour of the local church.

When the catechumenate was instituted, the community was expected to play a role even before baptism was given. The brethren having, during this three-year period, taken to heart their responsibility, the candidate discovered in a most concrete manner what entering the Church by baptism meant. Did not the life of the brethren become part of the glad tidings themselves? It appeared much more than an incentive to true Christian behaviour; it was in direct continuation with the marvels wrought by God in the history of salvation and, by encouraging a spirit of admiration and thanksgiving, it led to deeper faith and deeper conversion.

The candidate knew, moreover, that the aid and comfort of the Church did not end with his baptism, but that this solidarity would only be intensified as he entered more deeply into the meaning of the gospel. He also knew that he himself had contracted obligations towards the members, and towards all those who prepared for baptism. He was responsible for others, his behaviour had repercussions on all, and it would serve either to elevate the community or to grieve it. The exchange of gifts, he understood, became an essential feature of baptism in the Spirit, because the Word of God, to which one's full adherence was expressed in baptism, left no rest; it became most demanding, as one understood "what manner of love the Father had bestowed upon us" (1 John 3:1).

V. BAPTISM OF CHILDREN

It seems that the practice of baptizing children cannot be easily reconciled with a conception of baptism as a sacrament of faith and conversion. If baptism is an expression of faith—therefore implying an awareness of the action of the Holy Spirit—what meaning does it have when given to a child?

We must remember that, although faith is something personal, it exists in people who together form a community of brethren. The faith of every individual Christian includes in its essential contents an aspect of communion, the community of life in Christ. This faith of the community has a power of its own that can answer for others not yet capable of making a personal act of faith. It offers, moreover, the guarantee that one not yet instructed and experienced in the faith will be introduced gradually to the realities of the gospel and will be initiated into the behaviour appropriate to Christians.

Furthermore, the parents, who are the natural educators of the child, can take the decision of baptism in its name. To say that this is opposed to the freedom of the act of faith is no more soundly grounded than to say that being forced to be born in a particular country, of a particular family with a particular social standing, is against human liberty. Faith is God-given, and there are signs which foreshadow it. The faith of the parents is one of them. When the child has grown and is able to make a personal act of faith, this will indeed be a free act.

We are sometimes bewildered, in reading the Acts of the Apostles, to see that entire households were baptized when apparently the head of the family alone had received the glad tidings. Here not only children but adults were baptized without (it seems) being asked to give their approval. To discuss all this would go beyond the purpose and limits of this paper. Let me simply point out that giving baptism to a child is not a denial of the intimate link between faith, conversion, and the rite of baptism. The presence of the Church, and more particularly of the parents, who bring the testimony of their own faith, already underlines this relation. But the growing in faith, the walking in the ways of the Lord, should appear later; then only will the reality of baptism be lived completely, as something personal, in all awareness and in all freedom.