

Infant baptism: An endangered species¹

Join me, for a few moments, in a fantasy. It is 1978, and the Jesuit priest Francis Buckley has announced an astounding archeological find. On the road leading from Jerusalem to Gaza, workers at a dig have discovered the original text of the *Acts of the Apostles*. The manuscript is mostly identical with the Greek text upon which our translations today are based. But there is one difference, one striking variation. As Francis Buckley reports, part of the eighth chapter of Acts reads:

Philip saw the Ethiopian eunuch, sitting in his chariot, reading the prophet Isaiah. Philip began to speak with him and, starting with that scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, *Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized? Nothing*, said Philip, *except paragraphs 7, 20, 21, 34 and 36 of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.*²

Our ancient Ethiopian eunuch likely would have met this response had he visited a Catholic rectory anytime after 1972—the year the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) was first published. A new *Rite of Baptism for Children* had been published three years earlier, one of the first Catholic sacramental rituals to be revised after Vatican Council II. But it was the RCIA that caught the attention of the Catholic Church—and, in many ways, set the agenda for the postconciliar Church. The restoration of the order of catechumens; understanding initiation as a process taking place within the parish community; a renewed emphasis on the paschal character of baptism: these were among the reasons Benedictine sacramental theologian (currently professor emeritus at Yale Divinity School) Aidan Kavanagh considered the RCIA “the most explosive pastoral document to be issued since the council.” One could comment at length on the RCIA’s virtues and predicted positive impact upon the Church. Suffice it to say: however slowly or with whatever difficulties the RCIA was introduced, the baptism of adults would never be the same.

Nor would the baptism of infants. For among the RCIA's many contributions, perhaps the most significant was that it took the Church seriously. And because it took the Church seriously, it demanded the Church take baptism seriously. And thus began in the Catholic Church a small revolution in the way of thinking about—and the reasons for administering—baptism to infants. Many Catholic parents continued to ask their pastors to baptize their newborn, often without giving it a second thought. But those who found themselves introducing themselves to their pastor because they had seen neither him nor their church for some time, were likely to find that their request elicited probing questions rather than a reassuring smile. Within a few years after its publication in 1972, aided by an unprecedented quantity of articles, commentaries, and pastoral aids, the RCIA had clearly made its mark, and its message was clear: it is time to take the Church seriously. And taking the Church seriously meant taking baptism seriously.

In the immediate postconciliar years—the late 1960's and on into the 70's—taking baptism seriously meant, for many, casting a less than favorable eye towards baptizing infants. Apparently no Catholic author denied the *validity* of infant baptism, and few were interested in the complex arguments of Joachim Jeremias and Kurt Aland as to whether infant baptism was or was not practiced in the earliest days of the Church. The issue now was whether the Church should baptize its infants *now*. Writing in 1968, only three years after the Second Vatican Council, the Belgium laywoman Christiane Brusselmans, whose areas of expertise included children's catechesis and liturgies, thought parents presented their infants for baptism for two main reasons.³ She thought, first, that many parents wanted their children baptized so as to formally identify them—identify them, notably, not with a Church but, rather, as a member of society or as one of their family. Brusselmans thought the desire to provide spiritual or secular

security a second major reason many parents wanted their children baptized. Baptism provided spiritual security by removing original sin, and offered a kind of “secular security by appointing godparents who would care for the child in case of a family disaster. Her conclusion: “The real meaning of the baptism that the Church gives has only a slight connection with what people are requesting.”

Some, while not enthusiastic about the often taken-for-granted request for, and administration of, the sacrament considered infant baptism as the typical mischievous “kid brother”: sometimes disdained, occasionally ignored, frequently merely tolerated. But others, frustrated by what they considered indiscriminate baptism—baptizing infants more due to sentimental custom rather than Christian commitment; or baptizing to limbo-proof the child in the event of an unexpected death—took a harsher stand. As Aidan Kavanagh remarked, “[T]he enemy against which we must strike is not baptism of infants, but indiscriminate baptism of anyone done for sentimental reasons to support a crumbling *status quo* that is robbing the church of calcium in its bones and the gospel it proclaims of the lean hardness it must have to remain credible. Being a Christian does not mean living passively on divine welfare.⁴

Among the criticisms of infant baptism Kavanagh offered was that it was still, unfortunately in his view, the normal way by which one becomes a Christian. Acknowledging its validity and its constant practice in Church history, he thought the sacramental initiation of infants an “abnormality”: a “benign abnormality” when practiced prudently or when pastorally necessary (in anticipation of an infant’s death, for example, or when requested by parents committed to the Christian upbringing of their child); a “malign abnormality,” however, when administered because of, in his words, “pastoral malfeasance, theological obsession, or the decline of faith among Christian parents into some degree of merely social conformity.⁵

At least one theologian went further. Writing under a pseudonym, he called for the complete elimination of infant baptism, maintaining that a demanding, all-adult catechumenate was the only solution to the Church's number one problem—the failure “to produce Christians on a scale anywhere near the number of Catholics.”⁶ His extreme position is seen perhaps most clearly in his “allowing” the baptism of an infant in danger of death only as a “practical compromise”—only, in his words, “to make it easier to move the Church in the direction of baptism at 21” (*Baptism at 21* being the title of his 1973 book).⁷

If I were talking with you in the 1970's, my talk would almost have to be titled, as it is advertised, “Infant Baptism: an endangered species.” But today, some thirty-four years into the postconciliar *Rite of Baptism for Children*⁸ (RBC), infant baptism is a practice that remains alive, if it does not always enjoy robust health. And I might add, today, some thirty years after the promulgation of the RCIA, I wonder what kind of church we would have—both quality and quantity-wise—had the anonymous author of *Baptism at 21* had his way. A recent study reported that fifty percent of those going through the RCIA fall away from the Church within one year of receiving the sacraments of initiation.⁹

Both infant baptism and the baptism of adults are here to stay, even though neither form of baptism—either in its preparation or in its celebration—guarantees perfectly committed, intensely devoted Catholic Christians. But, my focus here is on the baptism of infants, and so, as I move into the second part of my remarks, let me change my title from *Infant Baptism: an endangered species*, to *Infant Baptism: still a buried treasure?*

Today, as for the past fifteen centuries, most Catholics are baptized as infants. That being the case, I would like to reflect on some “forgotten truths” contained in the postconciliar rite of infant baptism. These are truths which often are overlooked in baptismal catechesis and

practice. I offer my remarks from the perspective of: (1) I am a Roman Catholic priest; (2) one who appreciates and supports, but who is still not bubblingly enthusiastic about the process or the results of the RCIA; (3) one who acknowledges that infant baptism is the way most Roman Catholics are brought into the Church; and (4) most important, one who believes that the sacrament of infant baptism offers us a unique perspective regarding sacraments and God's relationship with humankind. I offer five points.

1. We baptize infants, not out of our fear of what might happen to them if we do not, but out of our hope of whom we want them to be.

As recently as twenty years ago, one Catholic theologian thought there was still “very little doubt that most ordinary Catholic lay people [believe] the central reason for [infant baptism] is to free the infant from the constraints of original sin.”¹⁰ Our catechesis today emphasizes that there is more—much more—to baptism than the remission of original sin. Yet, in the minds of some parents the relationship between baptism and original sin retains its fearful power. This fearful power is shown clearly in a chart I use when I teach the course on baptism to our first year seminarians. It is a copy of the layout of a Catholic parish cemetery. The graves, with the names of the deceased faithful, are arranged in neat rows. And then there is something peculiar: something that catches the twenty- or thirty-something seminarians by surprise; something that elicits a knowing nod and a sympathetic smile from the older generation. Outside the boundary of the cemetery—immediately adjacent to it, but clearly outside the fence—is a space reserved for “unbaptized babies.” This picture is worth a thousand words, for this diagram explains the concept of limbo quite clearly: those babies who died without baptism, i.e., with original sin still on their souls, were not really part of the Church. They were sort of “near” the

Church, as their placement just outside the cemetery fence indicates. But they did not really belong with—they were not really in the same place (both in this good earth and hereafter) as their deceased parents, relatives, and fellow parishioners. I dare say that every Catholic educated before Vatican Council II was taught that an unbaptized child would spend eternity in that state known as “limbo.” The child would not suffer physical pain, as Saint Augustine held, but, as was the common opinion from the Scholastic period onward, the child, while enjoying complete natural bliss, would be forever deprived of the beatific vision.

Most theologians today regard limbo as a once-popular but now inert theological opinion, but some parishioners are uncomfortable with this approach. For example, ministers and catechists may come across the occasional article which alleges limbo to be a matter of Church doctrine and divine revelation,¹¹ while parents and godparents (who usually care somewhat less about the nuances of theological discourse) want to know *why* they should not worry when their infant daughter dies unbaptized. And what often complicates the discussion for pastors and parents alike is how to relate this “inert theological opinion” with the *defined teachings* of the Church on original sin and the necessity of baptism for salvation.

Those charged with easing parental concerns *and* presenting Church teaching faithfully have recourse to two Vatican documents published since the Council.¹² Their teaching is summarized in the recently published *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

As regards *children who have died without Baptism*, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus’ tenderness toward children which caused him to say: “Let the children come to me, do not hinder them,” allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism. All the more urgent is the Church’s call not to prevent little children coming to Christ through the gift of holy Baptism.¹³

To maintain that limbo has no place in the theology or practice of infant baptism is to deny neither the doctrine nor the reality of original sin. Even a casual rubbing of shoulders with those around us furnishes us abundant proof that original sin is alive and well. As Mark Searle once said, “the doctrine of original sin is one of the most obvious truths of the Christian faith.”¹⁴ Nor does eliminating limbo as the “state” where unbaptized infants spend eternity dilute the teaching that baptism is necessary for salvation. *Baptism is necessary for salvation because grace is necessary for salvation.* For it is *grace* that allows us to be born again at the font. It is grace that sustains children, adolescents, and us adults on that continuing conversion we call life.

Baptism is, for us, the *ordinary* means by which the *extraordinary* gift of grace is conferred and celebrated. And I trust it is clear that in this context “ordinary” does not mean “simple” or “routine.” And it is God’s grace—never *limited by* or *bound to* the sacraments—that we need: for we cannot and do not purchase by our merits the redemption purchased for us by the inestimable cost of the cross. God’s gift of grace is necessary for our salvation, and for infants baptism is the ordinary means through which this extraordinary gift is effected, sacramentalized, and celebrated.

“But,” the concerned parent will ask: “*What about my baby who died before she could be baptized?*” As we minister to worried parents, we do so humbly knowing that we have yet to master the mind of the Lord or be appointed his counselor. But we may remind parents that, if Psalm 139 is to be believed, their child has enjoyed a relationship with God from the beginning of its existence. And so that sacramental encounter at the font is not the first time God and child are introduced to one another. Let us remember, too, that their child comes from their marriage—*itself*, a sign and cause of God’s grace—and that their desire for their child’s baptism certainly renders them instruments—*ministers*—of God’s grace to their child. Finally, we may

suggest that the embracing grasp of God’s mercy and love is seen more often and more convincingly in salvation history than is even the partial exclusion of those of whom Jesus remarked, “Let the little children come to me . . . for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs” (Mk 10,14).

Our discussion here emphasizes that the primary motive for baptizing our infants should not be our fear of what might be denied them should they die unbaptized but, rather, our hope of whom through baptism they will become. Through baptism the sons and daughters of our flesh become sons and daughters of God and are brought into new life in Christ and his Church. We baptize our children because we hope that as the grace of their baptism unfolds, they will mature as adult sons and daughters of God, ever-learning how to walk according to the Spirit.

Baptism overcomes the power of original sin. The connection between infant baptism and original sin, however, is not theological speculation as to how God can receive an unbaptized infant. It is, rather, the challenge of how the Christian community can receive the infant in such a way so that he will learn *from the beginning* the community’s ways and means of overcoming the effects of original sin that linger stubbornly in the lives of all. Baptism is the pledge and promise that infants are delivered from original sin—not by slow trickles of water, but by the flood of grace which rushes forth as they are transformed and brought into the family of God and the Church. Infant baptism does not mean the child is “home free” because limbo is no longer a possibility. It means the child is brought into a home—into a Christian environment—in which the Word of God is proclaimed from the beginning. Children *learn how* to be part of the family by *being* part of the family. Infant baptism proclaims how an infant is to live and be formed. If there is a limbo that needs to be addressed in our baptismal catechesis, it

is not a hypothetical limbo between earth and heaven but, rather, the spiritual limbo that still exists in quite tangible form in far too many homes today.

2. In the celebration of their child's baptism, parents speak not for their infant but for themselves.

Questions and answers play as important a part in the postconciliar celebration of infant baptism as they did in the preconciliar rite. *Who* answers the questions posed, and *for whom* the answers are given, however, are markedly different.

In the preconciliar rite the priest asked the infant a series of questions. As the infant obviously could not speak for himself, godparents answered on his behalf. In today's rite it is not the infants but the parents who are questioned. And, in what is one of the most significant changes in the rite, the parents do not answer for the infant: they speak for themselves. In this way the postconciliar RBC emphasizes the essential role given these "first teachers of their children in the ways of faith" (no. 70). Furthermore, it insists that the grace and effects of the sacramental celebration must continue in the home-life and upbringing of the child. As the introduction to the rite says: "To fulfill the true meaning of the sacrament, children must later be formed in the faith . . . so that they may ultimately accept for themselves the faith in which they have been baptized" (RBC no. 3). As one commentator remarked:

What infant baptism . . . presupposes is not faith on the part of the infant recipient but faith on the part of the Christian community. The solemn commitment made when an infant is baptized does not bind the infant to faith; it binds the community to demonstrate a faith so alive and dynamic that the child baptized may eventually find fulfillment in it.¹⁵

The point is clear: children may grow their father's brown hair or be favored with their mother's blue eyes with no effort at all, but the same does not hold when speaking about these

children's *Christian* identity. "Christians are made, not born," as Tertullian once said—and as the RCIA so often insists. But Tertullian's adage applies to those baptized as infants as much as to those brought to the faith as adults. "Christian identity is precisely *not* inherited from Christian parents," as Mark Searle once said.¹⁶ And as we know, Christian identity is—it *must be*—nourished and nurtured each day of the child's life.

Another way infant baptism testifies to the *parent's* commitment to their faith is seen by the relocation of a familiar phrase of the preconciliar rite. According to the older rubrics, infants were to be baptized *quam primum (as soon as possible)*. Now this was a wise directive in centuries past when infant mortality was high and mention of limbo was frequent. The postconciliar rite retains the phrase *quam primum*, but places it in an entirely different context. Now it is not the *infant* who is to be brought to the font as soon as possible, but the *parents* who are to present themselves to the pastor *quam primum*—even before the child is born—so that preparation for their child's baptism might begin.¹⁷

Finally, while much has been said about the family as the domestic church, perhaps we should emphasize more the *ministerial role of parents within the home*. Much of that ministry, of course, is the faith formation and education called for by the RBC, and in this way parents are ministers of Christian education. But another ministry to which Christian parents are called, and one often overlooked, is the leading of the prayer or "liturgy" of family life. The prayer of the domestic church certainly finds regular expression at meals and upon awakening and retiring, but these are only some of the opportunities of presiding at prayer of which parents may avail themselves. One resource helpful in this regard is the *Book of Blessings*,¹⁸ which suggests many blessings oriented specifically towards family life. Encouraging frequent use of such resources

will continue to suggest that a sacrament is not something that happens only in church and that, in the domestic church, the parents are the primary ministers.

3. Infant baptism is the norm-al, ordinary, and proper way by which believing families sacramentally initiate their children into new life in Christ and his Church.

A few years after the RCIA was introduced, Aidan Kavanagh suggested that the adult ordo set forth “the definitive statement of what the Roman Catholic Church’s *norm of baptism* is henceforth to be.”¹⁹ Kavanagh’s thesis has certainly strengthened our understanding of the significance and value of the adult ordo. But while his thesis speaks truth, I do not believe it speaks the whole truth. Moreover, the implication derived from the thesis that infant baptism should be considered at best a “benign abnormality”²⁰ is, I think, quite misleading.

That the RCIA is the pastoral, theological, and liturgical “norm” for the Christian initiation of *adults and adolescents* is clear, and that many of the ideals and principles it espouses are applicable to the baptism of infants is evident. But even the RCIA does not exhaust baptismal theology or practice.

One difficulty in our approach to infant baptism is our tendency to compare it with standards which are foreign to it. We may use theological models which do not serve infant baptism as well as they serve the adult ordo. For example, the theological model of baptism as participation in the death and resurrection of Christ guides the ethos and the lengthy process of the RCIA, and there is no question that, from evangelization to mystagogy, this model serves the adult ordo well. But the model seems less forceful and clear when applied to the baptism of infants. Exactly what it means to participate in Christ’s death and resurrection proves to be as enigmatic as it is arduous for many adults, and to speak of an infant’s or child’s participation in

that death and resurrection in a way that is at once theologically and pastorally compelling is perhaps asking too much of model, pastors, and parents.

We do not need one theology (or rite) of baptism that is applicable to all Christians in all circumstances, and it is difficult to see how any *one* baptismal ordo or rite could establish “the definitive statement of the Church’s norm of baptism.” We do better when we develop baptismal theologies and rituals that respect the unique nature of individuals in their own initiatory circumstances, and which speak effectively and credibly in those circumstances. Again, infant baptism need not be considered the mischievous kid brother of the adult rite.

If “norm” is to be part of the vocabulary of initiation theology, it would be wise to remember that each Synoptic Gospel depicts Jesus setting a child among his disciples as he spoke of the kingdom,²¹ a gesture which surely indicates that children hold a blessed, even privileged, place in his eyes and arms. The Anglican Daniel Stevick stated the implication well: “It is more than a debater’s point to suggest that we have it on good authority that there is something normative in the life of the kingdom about a child.”²² In a similar vein, the Catholic liturgist Nathan Mitchell contends that baptized children are “a significant dimension of the church’s sacramental structure,”²³ and the late Jesuit priest Karl Rahner remarked that Jesus “holds up the child to us as the prototype of those for whom the kingdom of heaven is”²⁴ It would seem that as regards baptism and our life in Christ, *children are not the only ones who must learn and adults are not the only ones who can teach*. Here, Mark Searle offers us a challenge: “Perhaps infant initiation ought to be seen less as a problem to be grappled with than as an opportunity to be grasped.”²⁵

4. Every child brought to the font is a child adopted by God, family, and Church.

As I indicated above, the model of baptism as participation in the death and resurrection of the Lord may not be the most effective or appropriate model upon which to draw for understanding and appreciating the sacrament of infant baptism. If this is true, it is true not because of the inadequacy of rite or model but because of the mystery of baptism itself: a mystery which can not be captured or expressed completely by any one theological model or ritual celebration.

The *General Introduction* of the Catholic Church's rites of initiation describe the effects of baptism in several ways. Through baptism "we are freed from the power of darkness and joined to Christ's death, burial, and resurrection"; this first sacrament "incorporates us into Christ and forms us into God's people"; for baptism is "the door to life and to the kingdom of God," through which we are "incorporated into the Church and are built up together in the Spirit into a house where God lives."²⁶

But perhaps the power of baptism is described nowhere better than by Saint Paul. Introducing the hymn that concludes Romans 8, he asks: "If God is for us, who is against us?" (v. 31). And such is his confidence in God's saving action that, after cataloging the powers that will not prevail over the believer, Paul concludes: "Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 39).

But what is it, exactly, that God has done? What is the grace offered those baptized into Christ Jesus? And how does one express the consequences of this grace in the lives of "God's beloved, who are called to be saints" (1,7)?

To describe the effects of God's love in Christ Jesus and the new relationship God establishes with the believer through that love, Paul had earlier in Romans 8 requisitioned the concept of *adoption*. The Greek word for adoption, *huiiothesia* (lit. "the making or placing of a

son”) occurs only five times in the New Testament (exclusively in the Pauline corpus²⁷), but these scant instances belie its significance. For, in the words of various exegetes, adoption brings us to “the very centre of the Christian message,”²⁸ and a “more vivid way of describing [one’s] new status ‘in Christ’ could hardly be conceived.”²⁹

To mention adoption today sometimes invites pity or chagrin (or, occasionally, feeble attempts at humor). But for Paul adoption was a word of wonder, and the Christian’s adoption by God was true reason to be grateful. For adoption spoke of God’s boundless grace, of the conquest of freedom over slavery, of promised inheritance, and of confident expectation. Through adoption, *because of adoption*, the Christian received the gift given all baptized in Christ Jesus—the gift of the Spirit, through whom God may be addressed as *Abba*, Father:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

(Romans 8,14-17; NRSV)

I suggest there are several advantages in approaching infant baptism through a “theology of adoption.” Not the least of these is that adoption as we know and practice it today ordinarily deals with infants or young children, and that for many parents and children the concept relates more directly and immediately to their actual human experience than do other theological models or motifs.

That adoption is a human act and experience with which many today are familiar does not alter or replace the theological significance of the Christian’s adoption by God, but reinforces and clarifies it. I indicate here five similarities between the human experience of adoption and

Paul's thoughts on the Christian's adoption by God. I first state a common characteristic of the human experience of adoption, and then offer a brief theological parallel.

1. Adoption, the act by which one is made the child of another, is an act of extraordinary initiative and love. (*God chooses us before we choose God, and God's adopting us points to the utter benevolence of the gift of grace. "Christians are made, not born," and it is through adoption that we are made God's sons and daughters and are given a status among others and a relationship with God to which we have no natural right or claim.*)

2. Adoption delivers a child *from* an unfortunate or tragic situation and *into* an advantageous or favorable situation. (*Adoption delivers Christians from a spirit of slavery to the law of sin and death, and effects for us the freedom to walk according to the Spirit. Adoption delivers us from the darkness of original sin and into the graced environment of Christ and Church.*)

3. Adopted children are identified and affiliated with—they are incorporated into—their new family. (*"Baptism incorporates us into Christ and forms us into God's people. This first sacrament . . . brings us to the dignity of adopted children, . . . Hence we are called and are indeed the children of God."*³⁰)

4. The objective fact and act of the adoption is ordinarily irrevocable, but the adopted child's freedom of will remains intact. (*The baptized Christian is marked forever as a child of God. This extraordinary gift encourages, but does not demand or force, an appropriate, graceful response.*)

5. While adopted children may always have known the fact of their adoption, they grow only gradually into the understanding and appreciation of what their adoption has meant—and continues to mean—to them. (*This growth in understanding and appreciation leads hopefully to*

*commitment—and is what we mean by “conversion.” The disparity and tension between the gift offered now and the future responsibilities entailed by that gift is reflected in Romans 8: Christians are adopted by God, yet they still await the full benefits of their adoption, the redemption of their bodies [Rom 8,23].)*³¹

Among the aspects of baptism a theology of adoption addresses, then, are the following: the action of God and the Christian community in the initiating and effecting of the baptism, the immediate and enduring effects of the sacrament, the desired fulfillment of the meaning of the sacrament, and the freedom and responsibility of those baptized to realize the full benefits of their baptism. And, again, approaching the sacrament through the lens of adoption—an act that is deliberate and extraordinary—supports our preaching that infant baptism is not an automatic decision, a “Christian reflex,” but is, rather, a deliberate choice made by parents to adopt the child of their flesh into the Body of their faith.

5. *Infant Baptism challenges us to remember that God’s Word is first in the lives of all Christians.*

Postconciliar theology has endeavored mightily to move beyond understanding infant baptism as something “done” to the infant. To return to words already cited, infant baptism “does not bind the infant to faith [but] binds the community to demonstrate a faith so alive and dynamic that the child baptized may eventually find fulfillment in it.”³² As we encourage the adult Church to accept her responsibilities in the baptizing of her infants, however, we do well to remember that on the first level infant baptism *is* something “done *to* and *for* the infant.” Infants “do nothing” as they are baptized: they make no promises and profess no faith, and only in the most literal sense do they even accept that which is done on their behalf.

Rather than being a theological problem or embarrassment, the fact that the infant “does nothing” quietly proclaims the unique significance of infant baptism—and a fundamental truth of *all* our sacraments. Infant baptism is indeed “an opportunity to be grasped.” For the very nature and circumstances of infant baptism point unmistakably to that which alone makes possible and gives meaning to *any* sacramental celebration: that God takes the initiative in dealing with us, and that it is God’s offering of grace that precedes, sustains, and perseveres beyond each and every response on our part.

This consideration of God’s initiative does not exhaust the theology or celebration of the sacraments but gives due consideration—*first* consideration—to the source and end of theology, sacraments, and liturgy: God’s *initiative*, God’s *graciousness*, *God’s* action and grace. *Infant* baptism, the first sacrament for most Christians, signals the first truth about *all* our sacraments, a truth we so often and easily leave behind at the font as we enter the church to celebrate our adult liturgies or as we go about the business of our adult lives. Infant baptism reminds us that “in the beginning there was God,” that this God knew us in the womb, and that even adults who come to the faith come because God’s word has called them.

As infants are brought to the font, so too are adults brought to the faith. Or, better, *the faith is brought to them* long before they recognize their need for it or are willing to accept the demands it will make upon their lives. Notwithstanding the commendable postconciliar emphasis on baptism as a “sacrament of *faith*” (and the splendid reinforcement given this emphasis by the RCIA), we must keep sight of the fact that faith, before all else, is *gift*. Conversion is the turning around of one’s life and the profession of one’s faith. But it is also standing still and remaining quiet long enough so that we may realize where we already are and where we already belong *because we have already been claimed*. For those baptized as infants,

the grace of their continuing conversion as adults is their constant return to the grace first offered them in baptism, the grace to know *who* they are and *to whom* they belong.

We should feel no sacramental embarrassment or discomfort, then, when considering the “passivity” of our infants at their baptism—nor should we stuff adult words into their mouths as did the preconciliar rite. As the Church baptizes her infants, it is we adults who should be reduced to silence! It is the strong and the wise, the committed and the mature, the experienced and the competent, who should feel the loss for words. For in infant baptism—as in the initiation of our adults, the forgiving of our sins, or the anointing of our sick—it is *God’s* word and grace which effects, transforms, reconciles, and comforts. In infant baptism we “do” sacramentally *to* and *for* the infant what God has done and continues to do for us throughout all the ages and stages of what Nathan Mitchell calls our “once and future childhood”: we offer grace *as gift*.

Our response to and cooperation with this grace, our “unwrapping the gift” offered us, certainly must be invited and promoted in our prayers and liturgies. But the nature and circumstances of infant baptism challenge the adult church to remember that God does not wait until we are ready and willing to hear God’s word before speaking that word to us (as God’s sending of The Word clearly indicates). While *we* are dependent upon that word, God’s free offering is not conditioned by our ability to respond. For even as adults turn to God in their times of need, they really turn themselves so that they might see him whom the prodigal son saw when he “came to himself”—his father already at the door, patiently awaiting his return, patiently awaiting his child to return to the grace he has offered him with a father’s love from the beginning. I refer again to Father Karl Rahner:

What happens in the baptism of a child? Simply, what is always happening for our salvation is here more clearly revealed: God anticipates our need, His mercy enfolds us before we call upon it. He has already visited us so that we may knock on His door, He

has already found us so that we may seek Him. So God already acts within this child in order that, once he has become aware of his own spiritual being, and aware of love, God may already be there as the heaven which arches over this dawn of a new life.³³

I conclude with a final comment—my response to the suggestion that baptism be celebrated only when children are old enough to retain some memory of their baptism. I agree that such a memory might contribute worthily to their lives in the years to come. But the growing knowledge and awareness that one has been adopted loses no significance because one has no memory of the actual act of adoption. While there is much to recommend the suggestion that Christians would benefit from being able to remember their baptism (as they benefit from “seeing” that memory time and again through the Church’s annual initiation of her catechumens at Easter), of great benefit also is the adult seeing the baptism of an infant and reflecting—with gratitude and humility—that on some day now long past, others whom *she* did not yet know initiated her because of how important she was to *them*. Moreover, there is much that could be said regarding *Christian identity* about the importance of the child learning to appreciate what has been done on her behalf. As Hans Urs von Balthasar has remarked: we teach our children to say “thank you” not because future gifts might not be forthcoming, but because otherwise our children might not learn to recognize them as gifts.³⁴

What might be of greater import is that we raise our children in such a way that they have no memory of *not* being baptized: that their education, formation, and their life within the family has been such that their baptism “has always been with them.” A sudden explosion of grace radically changed the nature of Paul’s approach to life and the Christian Church. But God’s grace also builds upon nature quietly, calmly, and without fanfare. That is no less impressive—and remains for the Church just as challenging—and reassuring—a prospect.

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ENDNOTES

¹ This conference is adapted from my *Return to Grace* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press—A Pueblo Book, 1996) and my “Infant Baptism Reclaimed: forgotten truths about infant baptism, *Living Light* (Spring 1995) 36-46.

² Adapted from Francis J. Buckley, “The Right to the Sacraments of Initiation,” *Origins* (9 Nov. 1978) 329-336 at 329.

³ Christiane Brusselmans, “Christian Parents and Infant Baptism,” trans. Francis Christian, *Louvain Studies* 2 (1968) 29-48 at 29-30.

⁴ Aidan Kavanagh, “Adult Initiation: Process and Ritual,” *Liturgy* 22 (January 1977) 5-10 at 9.

⁵ Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: the rite of Christian initiation*, New York: Pueblo, 1978, 109-110. See also his “Process and Ritual” 8: “That the church has always baptized infants is, I think, unassailable. I also think that infant baptism in itself is theologically legitimate. But that infant baptism should be taken as the pastoral norm for how one becomes a Christian is not in my opinion historically unassailable, and even less is it theologically legitimate or pastorally prudent in the cultural context we find ourselves in today. . . . What I am criticizing here is not infant baptism as such, but its having become in our minds the normal way by which one becomes a Christian.”

⁶ David Greye Perrey (pseud.), “Let’s Stop Baptizing Babies,” *U. S. Catholic* (Feb. 1972) 14-15 at 14.

⁷ David Greye Perrey (pseud.), *Baptism at 21* (New York: Vantage, 1973) 100.

⁸ “Rite of Baptism for Children,” *The Rites of the Catholic Church, Vol I* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press—A Pueblo Book, 1990) 359-466.

⁹ Reported in *The Catholic Wanderer*, August 15, 2002, p. 3. The “Conference for Catechists and Religious Educators” was sponsored by the Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio.

¹⁰ Edward Braxton, “Adult Initiation and Infant Baptism” in *Becoming a Catholic Christian*, ed. William J. Reedy (New York: Sadlier, 1979) 305-315 at 304.

¹¹ For example, Basil Cole, “Is Limbo Still in Limbo?” *Homiletic & Pastoral Review* Mar. 1985: 56-64. Cole attempts to show that “the theory of limbo is so consistent with accepted Catholic teaching on the state of infants dying without benefit of baptism, that it is certain, not a mere theological opinion or a mere product of scholastic reasoning, extraneous to sacred scripture and sacred tradition but a theological term intrinsic to revelation itself” (58).

¹² “On Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology,” Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1979. “Instruction on Infant Baptism,” Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1980.

¹³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (English Trans. for the U.S. © 1994, United States Catholic Conference,

Inc.; ET revised 1997) par. 1261; emphasis in original.

¹⁴ Mark Searle, *Christening: the making of Christians* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1980) 53.

¹⁵ Brian Haggerty, "Adult Initiation and Infant Baptism," *New Catholic World* 222 (1979) 157-160 at 159.

¹⁶ Mark Searle, "Infant Baptism Reconsidered" in Mark Searle (ed.), *Alternative Futures for Worship 2: Baptism and Confirmation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1987) 47; emphasis in original.

¹⁷ See RBC 8.2.

¹⁸ English translation of *De Benedictionibus* © 1987, ICEL; additional blessings for use in the U.S. © 1988, USCC.

¹⁹ Aidan Kavanagh, "The New Roman Rites of Adult Initiation" *Studia Liturgica* 10 (1974) 35-47 at 35. Kavanagh thoroughly discusses the adult ordo as the "norm of baptism" in *The Shape of Baptism: the rite of Christian initiation* (New York: Pueblo, 1978) 102-125.

²⁰ Kavanagh, *Shape of Baptism*, 109-110. See also his "Christian Initiation for Those Baptized as Infants," *Living Light* 13 (1976): 387-398.

²¹ Mt 19,13-15; Mk 10,13-16; Lk 18,15-17. See also Mt 18,1-5; Mk 9,33-37; Lk 9,46-48 and 10,21-24.

²² Daniel B. Stevick, "Christian Initiation: Post-Reformation to the Present Era" in Murphy Center for Liturgical Research (ed.) *Made, Not Born: new perspectives on Christian initiation and the catechumenate* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1976) 99-117 at 106.

²³ Nathan Mitchell, "The Once and Future Child: towards a theology of childhood," *Living Light* 12 (1975) 422-436 at 433.

²⁴ Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood" in *Theological Investigations 8: further theology of the spiritual life 2*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Herder, 1971) 33-50 at 41.

²⁵ Searle, "Infant Baptism Reconsidered" 50.

²⁶ Quotations taken from "Christian Initiation, General Introduction," *The Rites of the Catholic Church, Vol I* (New York: Pueblo, 1990) nos. 1-4.

²⁷ Rom 8,15,23; 9,4; Gal 4,5; Eph 1,5.

²⁸ M. Bernoulli, s.v. "Adoption," *Vocabulary of the Bible*, ed. J.-J. von Allmen, trans. ed. Hilda M. Wilson (London: Lutterworth, 1958).

²⁹ L. H. Marshall, *The Challenge of New Testament Ethics* (New York: MacMillan, 1947) 259.

³⁰ "Christian Initiation, General Introduction" 2; see also the explicit mention of *adoption* in nos. 1 and 5. Regarding the infant's incorporation into the Christian family, see RBC 41 ("The Christian community

welcomes you with great joy. In its name I claim you for Christ our Savior . . .”) and 68 (“[These children] are now called children of God, for so indeed they are”).

³¹ The tension between *gift now* and *responsibilities forthcoming* is central to the Church’s own understanding of infant baptism; for example, RBC 3: “To fulfill the true meaning of the sacrament, children must later be formed in the faith in which they have been baptized. The foundation of this formation will be the sacrament itself that they have already received. Christian formation, which is their due, seeks to lead them gradually to learn God’s plan in Christ, so that they may ultimately accept for themselves the faith in which they have been baptized.”).

³² Haggerty, “Adult Initiation and Infant Baptism” 159.

³³ Karl Rahner, *Holy Baptism*, trans. Dorothy White (Denville, NJ: Dimension, 1970) 7.

³⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like this Child*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991) 49.