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# BAPTISM INTO ONE BODY

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When the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission produced its Final Report in September 1981 after nearly 12 years of work, one noteworthy feature was the marked scarcity of references to baptism, together with the absence of a statement on it. Though ARCIC decided to concentrate on the subjects of the Eucharist, Ministry and Ordination, and Authority in the Church on the grounds that these were more controversial topics than baptism for Anglicans and Roman Catholics, that is not to say that the ecumenical movement as a whole has reached full agreement on the meaning and theology of baptism. However, ARCIC has provided a valuable guideline for future ecumenical discussion on baptism by noting that "sharing in the same Holy Spirit, whereby we become members of the same body of Christ and adopted children of the same Father, we are also bound to one another in a completely new relationship. *Koinonia* with one another is entailed by our *koinonia* with God in Christ. This is the mystery of the Church". In the light of ARCIC's comment on the one hand and of the unity covenant's failure on the other, this article will treat of baptism under five main headings: firstly, the way in which baptism has been seen and discussed in the ecumenical movement over the past 30 years; secondly, our baptismal incorporation into Christ; thirdly, baptism as our entrance into the People of God; fourthly, the relationship between baptism, faith and justification; and lastly the connection between our baptism and the Church's work. By this approach we shall be able to clarify the way in which baptism brings all Christians into a unity in Christ, brought about in faith and expressed in the service of the world.

## Baptism and the Ecumenical Movement

In the Windsor Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine, ARCIC writes that "by his word God calls us into a new relationship with himself as our Father and with one another as his children – a relationship inaugurated by baptism into Christ through the Holy Spirit"<sup>2</sup>. This insight into baptism as our shared response in faith to God's call to salvation (proclaimed in Christ the Word and accepted by our joining in Christ's Body) is one which has been developed both within the World Council of Churches and by the Roman Catholic Church at Vatican II, since a great impetus to the study of baptism was given by the new cohesion of the ecumenical movement over the 1950s and '60s. The aim and hope of this renewed examination of baptism was that it would lead the different Churches towards identifying with each other and so towards eventual reunification, since there was a high degree of acknowledgement of each other's baptism between the Churches and since baptism, as the sacrament of entrance into Christianity, could be thought of as the ecumenical sacrament *par excellence* in a world which had not (as it still has not) reached full agreement with regard to the eucharist.

However, a tension still exists between the different Churches' interpretations of the meaning of baptism; and this is made obvious with regard to eucharistic communion, which should be the highest point of the fulfilment of our baptismal *koinonia*. For example, we have on the one hand ARCIC's right and true assertion that "many bonds still unite us: we confess the same faith in the one true God; we

have received the same Spirit; we have been baptized with the same baptism; and we preach the same Christ"<sup>3</sup>; while, on the other hand, we have the trenchant, and equally true, comment of Professor Torrance (written in a paper preparatory to the Lund Faith and Order Conference of 1952) that "to refuse the eucharist to those baptized into Christ Jesus and incorporated into his resurrection body [i.e. the Church] amounts either to a denial of the transcendent reality of baptism or to attempted schism within the Body of Christ". In order to explore the dichotomy between the universal agreement that we are made members of the Church as Body of Christ by baptism and the schism which is so apparent in terms of whom the different Churches will admit to Communion, the WCC Faith and Order Commission has, since the 1950s, sponsored and produced a series of studies of the theology and practice of baptism within its member Churches. Two recent results of this have been the report "Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist", presented at Louvain in 1971, and the statement "One Baptism, One Eucharist and a Mutually Recognized Ministry", issued at Accra in 1974. These studies have shown that it is an oversimplification to see baptism as the shared sacrament of unity without taking into account how different Christian traditions regard it. For example, some Churches use "baptism" to mean the sacramental water-baptism only, while others use the word to refer to the entire making of a Christian, including the initial gift of faith. Again, while all Churches agree that baptism confers membership of the Church, certainly not all would say that it confers full membership.

The differences of outlook on baptism among the Churches led the 1957 Faith and Order Conference at New Haven to observe that "the effort to use the rite of baptism as a simple approval to the unity of the Church turned out to be one of those apparent shortcuts which lead into a blind alley". However, the prospect is not in fact so gloomy. If the rite of baptism is used in this way, then the result obtained at the New Haven Conference will indeed come to pass; but, if we proceed instead from the *fact* of baptism as making us members of the Body of Christ, the Church, as making us members of the People of God which is God's Kingdom on earth, then the Churches can be drawn closer together through reaching a much greater degree of agreement on baptism. As long ago as 1439, the Council of Florence (seeking to promote Christian unity) taught that "the first place of all the sacraments is held by holy baptism, which is the gateway to the spiritual life; by it we are made members of Christ and the body of the Church"<sup>4</sup>; and the same point was remade at Vatican II, when the Roman Catholic Church spoke of its links with members of other Churches – "honoured with the name of Christian" in virtue of their baptism – and was firm to insist that all Christians "are consecrated by baptism, through which they are united with Christ"<sup>5</sup>; "they are properly regarded as brothers in the Lord by the sons of the Catholic Church"<sup>6</sup>. It is in this light that we should go on to consider how we are all made members of Christ through our baptism.

## Baptism as incorporation into Christ

This model of baptism has been clearly described by Paul (cf. Rom. 6, 4-5; Eph. 2, 6). Following him, it became almost a commonplace of much patristic theology<sup>7</sup> and has rather more recently been stated by both Aquinas and Hooker. Hooker is at pains to stress that our being made members of the Body of Christ is the purpose of the divine

institution of baptism<sup>8</sup>, while Aquinas takes a more analytical approach in writing that “baptism opens the gates of the kingdom of heaven to the baptized insofar as it incorporates him into the passion of Christ and applies its power to man”<sup>9</sup>. Vatican II has drawn out the implications of this idea in teaching that “through baptism we are formed into the likeness of Christ . . . in this sacred rite, a union with Christ’s death and resurrection is both symbolized and brought about”<sup>10</sup>. That is to say, in baptism we come to share in the threefold glory of Christ, as priest, as prophet and as king, by being made one body in him through the participation in the work of our redemption which our baptism both proclaims and effects. Our baptism is, as it were, complementary to Christ’s own baptism: for, just as then the voice of the Father spoke out over the Son, on whom the Holy Spirit came, so now we receive our baptismal adoption as sons in the name of the Father (whose name is spoken over us), of the Son (in whose redemptive self-offering we come to share) and of the Holy Spirit (who is bestowed upon us). Moreover, just as the baptism of Jesus showed his consecration as the Christ, his taking the sins of the many on himself and his identification with us, so the baptism of ourselves, the many, shows our consecration as members of his ecclesial Body, our acceptance of the redemption which he has wrought for us, and our consequent identification with him.

So, when the Church baptizes people in fulfilment of the gospel command that it should do (cf. Matt. 28, 19), it is Christ himself who baptizes, as the giver of the command, through human ministers – since baptism is a result of God’s initiative and not man’s. Our baptismal sharing in Christ’s life can therefore be described as having our lives subsumed into Christ’s and consequently remade by being made eternal; since baptism takes us up into the Church as Body of Christ, our passage through baptism is our passage from death in Adam to life in Christ, from the sinful life of the old man to the graced life of the new. In the early Christian centuries catechumens were taught that their going down into the baptismal water represented and effected their going down into the tomb with Christ, and that their coming up from it, newly baptized, signified and brought about their new life in the risen Lord. Our baptismal union with Christ is thus a real sharing in the history of our salvation: Christ’s death to sin once is our death to sin as well, and his life lived to God is also our Christian life (in this world and in the world to come) moving towards completion in the fulfilment of God’s Reign at the Last Day. In our shared incorporation into Christ, into which we are brought through the font of baptism, we are also gathered into the Church, the People of God: “since”, as Cyprian writes, “the baptismal rebirth only takes place with the one Bride of Christ, who is able spiritually to bring to birth the sons of God”<sup>11</sup>. To look at the implications of this, we will need to move on from the baptismal model of our membership in Christ to that of our belonging within the fellowship of believers.

### **Baptism as incorporation into the People of God**

Much scholastic and neoscholastic theology has concentrated a great deal on baptism’s effects for the individual at the expense of its effects for the whole community of believers; for example, Aquinas’s question in the *Summa Theologica* on the effects of baptism (3a, 69) is very strongly concerned with its effects on the soul of the baptized person. Yet, as Vatican II stresses, we are not called to salvation

merely as unbonded individuals. Rather, by our vocation to holiness, we are formed into a people which inherits the freedom and glory of the children of God; and it is through baptism that we enter into membership of the people of God’s Kingdom. This communitarian function of baptism is well commented on by Hooker, who writes: “for as we are not naturally men without birth, so neither are we Christian men in the eye of the Church of God but by . . . that baptism which both declareth and maketh us Christians. In which respect we justly hold it to be the door of our actual entrance into God’s house”<sup>12</sup>, since baptism unifies us by bringing us into the house not made with hands which is the People of God. Therefore, as Vatican II has made clear, ‘the chosen People of God is one: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4, 5)’, so that its members “have the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection. They possess in common one salvation, one hope, and one undivided charity”<sup>13</sup>. These gifts, in which all Christians (as pilgrims on the way to the fullness of life in heaven) share, are thus given in virtue of our membership in the Christian people, which in turn is conferred in and by the fact of baptism. As the Louvain Faith and Order report “Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist” puts it, “our common baptism is thus a basic bond of unity by which we are called as one people to confess and serve one Lord in each place and in all the world”: because baptism unites us under God as a royal priesthood, a holy people, giving thanks and praise for our redemption (cf. 1 Pet. 2, 4-10), and one way in which that thanksgiving is to be shown to God is by our bearing witness before the world to the baptismal *symbolum fidei*, which has been handed down to us through all the Christian generations.

It is in this shared heritage of faith that we are formed through baptism into a priestly people, dedicated to the service of God after the example of Christ; and so our baptismal priesthood is itself a participation in the High Priesthood of Christ, though full agreement has not yet been reached among the Churches on the relationship between the baptismal priesthood of all the faithful and the ministerial priesthood of ordination. For example, Luther (in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*) has argued that all, in virtue of their baptism, have the power to exercise ministerial priesthood, which he identifies with the ministry of preaching and sees as being given by delegation from the rest of the congregation. Vatican II, following the Catholic Reformers and the Council of Trent, has maintained that a distinct sacramental ‘character’, or ineffaceable seal of the Spirit, is given in ordination – so that ministerial priests both share in the baptismal priesthood through their own baptism and receive the particular gift and grace of ordination to enable them to carry out their ministry fruitfully. Yet, as Vatican II has also noted, the ministerial and baptismal priesthoods stand in a distinct theological relationship to each other<sup>14</sup>; and a short but masterly explanation of this interrelationship has been given by ARCIC in its *Elucidation on Ministry and Ordination*, where the authors stress that both Christian priesthoods must always be seen as having the one High Priesthood of Christ as their source. Not only is each of them, in the way appropriate to itself, entirely dependent on Christ’s priesthood, but the ministerial priesthood, which has “a particular sacramental relationship with Christ as High Priest” should be seen within the framework of the entire Church’s ministry to the world and of the sanctification of all Christian people. If we emphasize the dependence of all Christian priesthood (in whichever form) on Christ,

the hope is increased for future ecumenical agreement on the relationship of the two priesthoods in the one People of God, since it is in baptism that all Christians are granted the ability to live according to their particular standing and function within the whole company of believers.

Because of the solemn nature of this incorporation into the baptismal priesthood, the local Church will, on behalf of all Christians throughout the world, need to be satisfied as to the candidates' suitability to receive the sacrament. In the case of adults, the sincerity (and absence of any ulterior motive) on the part of the candidates will need to be taken into account, as will the genuineness of their intention to lead Christian lives afterwards and the level of their Christian knowledge, which will need to be adequate save in exceptional circumstances (e.g. danger of death; cf. Aquinas, S.T. 3a, 68, 3). In the case of infants, the basic criteria will be the Christian background of the candidates' families and the local Church's capacity to help provide an environment of faith in which the children will grow up. However, the local Church, as representing the universal Church, will also need to be careful not to be too harsh in particular cases, since it has an obligation to baptize as and when such conditions as we have just seen are fulfilled: because (since baptism is conferred in and through the Church) the Church will – one may presume – be held accountable by God if it neglects or delays without due reason the baptism which, as the expression of faith, is so intimately bound up with our justification<sup>15</sup>. Because Vatican II, in stating that “all those justified by faith through baptism are incorporated into Christ”<sup>16</sup>, has remarked on the connection between our faith, our entrance into the People of God, and our justification, it is important to see how these three stand with regard to each other.

### **Baptism, Faith and Justification**

One of the reasons behind the differences of approach to baptism in different Churches is the legacy of the Reformation debate on justification. If we are to get behind the residual misunderstandings on this between the Churches, we need to go back to Paul, who in Gal. 3, 26-27 draws out the relationship between faith and baptism by writing that “in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ”. Once the hearer has received the gospel and given his assent to it in faith, he must demonstrate that assent by being baptized. The gift of the Holy Spirit is thus a baptismal gift: though this gift is associated with “hearing with faith” in Gal. 3, 2, and its promise is received “through faith” in Gal. 3, 14, the gift itself is indissolubly connected with baptism in 1 Cor. 12, 13 – where the one Spirit is not only given to all but brings about the baptism of all into one Body. Thus Paul sees the grace of justification as taking root in us through faith shown in baptism. In Rom. 8, 30 this justifying grace is seen as our vocation to salvation, and in Rom. 3, 28 and 5, 1 faith is seen as the *sine qua non* if we are to receive the grace of justification fruitfully, but in 1 Cor. 6, 11 justification is so closely identified with baptism – as the expression of faith – as to be inseparable from baptism itself. Paul sums up his teaching by his insistence, in Tit. 3, 5-8, that justification is given through the mercy of God shown, in the gift of the Spirit, through the institution of baptism “so that we might be justified by his grace” (Tit. 3, 7). In fine, Paul is teaching that justification is essentially by grace – freely given on God's part and undeserved on ours – which moves us to respond to the gospel by faith, which in turn

moves us to seek baptism and so enter the Church; thereafter the grace of our vocation and baptism and the faith of our response will show themselves through the pattern of our Christian living and service, if we remain true to our vocation (cf. Eph. 4, 1-3).

This explanation of the relationship between faith, baptism and justification was later set forth by Basil, whose words on it are worth recalling. Basil strongly points out that “faith and baptism are two kindred and inseparable ways of salvation: faith is perfected by baptism; baptism is established by faith . . . Confession leads the way and brings us to salvation; baptism follows, setting the seal on our account”<sup>17</sup>. Our faith has to be shown and ratified in our baptism if we are to be justified through belonging to Christ, since baptism is the sacrament which celebrates the faith by which we, following the grace of God, make our response to the gospel of redemption.

However, the difficulty arises here for some Christians (and particularly for those of Churches which will accept as baptismal candidates only “such as are of riper years and able to answer for themselves”) of how this justifying affirmation of baptismal faith can be made by infants. Here we have to recall both the antiquity of infant baptism and, especially, the ecclesial dimension of the avowal of baptismal faith. In the first century A.D. it is quite conceivable, but not certain, that children would have been baptized with their parents when entire families were received into the Church; and, at least since the early third century, infant baptism has been practised in most Christian groups<sup>18</sup>. More importantly, the personal profession of faith at baptism is always made in the context of the Church's faith. In the case of adult baptism, this affirmation of faith is the act of the individual made from within the faith of all believers; in the case of infant baptism, the local Church makes the affirmation on behalf of the child, whom it undertakes to nurture in personal faith – though the child himself must later bear out the baptismal faith-affirmation by Christian living if his baptism is to bear fruit.

Among all the baptized, therefore, there is a grace-inspired and justifying unity in faith and sacrament. But, as Vatican II's *Decree on Ecumenism* (art. 22) puts it, “baptism, of itself, is only a beginning . . . for it is wholly directed towards the acquiring of fullness of life in Christ. Baptism is thus orientated towards a complete profession of faith”. One way in which we must at once profess and express our faith is by our work to serve the world. If our faith in Christ does not lead us to do the works of Christ (cf. Jas. 2, 17, 26) then our faith is, as the scholastics used to say, ‘unformed’ – that is, not infused by love in the way that baptismal faith must be if it is to be salvific for us (cf. Gal. 5, 6; Aquinas, S.T. 3a, 68, 4). We will only be able to open ourselves to God in any meaningful sense if our faith is founded on love (cf. Eph. 3, 17, 19); and so we will only be able to bear witness to God before the world if our conduct towards all people reflects Christ's love for us. Hence the last aspect of baptism which we shall look at is the connection between it and our ministry as Christians.

### **Baptism and Christian Service**

Vatican II, in its *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity* (art. 13), has laid on all Christians the charge that “wherever God opens a door of speech for proclaiming the mystery of Christ, there should be announced, with confidence and

constancy, the living God, and he whom he has sent for the salvation of all, Jesus Christ", and has also pointed out that we are all called to share in the Church's saving mission to the rest of the world by the fact of our Christian initiation<sup>19</sup>. For, just as Christ came to be a servant (cf. Matt. 20, 28; Mk. 10, 45; Phil. 2, 7), so the life of the baptized person must be marked by service. As ARCIC has put it, "to proclaim reconciliation in Christ and to manifest his reconciling love belong to the continuing mission of the Church"<sup>20</sup>. This double duty of the Christian shows itself in three interlinked ways, namely life in Christ's service, life in the Church's service, and life in the service of the world. By coming to share, through baptism, in the death and resurrection which Christ experienced in order to save us from sin and self – "that we might live no longer for ourselves but for him"<sup>21</sup> – we are taken away from the lordship of sin and brought under the lordship of Christ, related to each other in and under Christ the Head (cf. Rom. 12, 4-5, 1 Cor. 12, 27; Eph. 4, 4; Col. 3, 15 *passim*). Thus every Christian is called to a life of service, the mode of which will vary according to his particular place in the Church, for the upbuilding of the whole ecclesial Body (cf. Eph. 4, 2). But, since one of the Church's tasks is to extend the Reign of God in the world of men (cf. Matt. 28, 19a, 20), the baptized person must seek to promote that Reign as one of its citizens by bearing witness to it and by working for the world's sanctification.

One difficulty which we all have, however, is that the value of our Christian service will necessarily be diminished by our personal sins. Even though our baptism is the passage from the old life to the new, the proneness-to-sin of postlapsarian human nature (even as graced by baptism) will daily creep up on us; and our sins will weaken our life in Christ's service by besmirching the likeness of Christ into which we were formed in baptism, our life in the Church's service by causing the rest of the Body to suffer with us (cf. 1 Cor. 12, 26a), and our life in the world's service by causing us to be known to fail to live up to the message which we preach. Yet we can take heart, both from Aquinas's teaching that "baptism, through the grace which it confers, not only takes away past sins but also serves to hinder the commission of future sins" (S.T. 3a, 68, 3), and from the forgiveness of God (expressed in some Churches by the sacrament of reconciliation). So the life of the Christian in this world will have to be characterized by a continual re-acceptance of the law of Christ, contrition for sin, and renewed affirmation of baptismal faith as expressed in the promises of the baptismal ceremony. For baptism is one of the ways in which the Church enters into the *anamnesis* of Christ, which both makes the work of our redemption present to us and impels us to unfold that work to others through our living-out of the gospel in the Spirit's grace and according to the mind of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 2, 16). Although 'in this present life, the new status of the baptized Christian as a son of God, a member of Christ's covenant people . . . remains in tension with life "in the flesh"', yet, at the same time, the baptized person is "'in Christ", already possessing the Spirit of Christ as the inner principle of the resurrection life"<sup>22</sup>; and it is in that Spirit that we, being baptized, are called to bring others into the Church, the people of God in this age and the next, by moving them to seek and receive the baptism which is an actuality-filled sign and promise of the Kingdom's fullness at the end of time.

## Conclusion

Despite the differences of outlook on baptism and of

approach to it across the ecumenical movement as a whole, it is to be hoped that, if we bear in mind the two models and the other contexts in which we have discussed baptism, will be able to appreciate our baptismal unity in Christ in such a way as to use it as a means of proceeding to a more effective expression of our unity as the People of God. As to whether such expression will take the form of a new awareness of our unity in faith, with a much higher degree of ecumenical co-operation than is often the case at present, or else of an organic reunification of the Church, that remains to be seen: which of us knows what the third Christian millennium will bring?

## NOTES:

1. ARCIC, *Introduction to the Final Report*, 5.
2. ARCIC, *Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine*, 2.
3. ARCIC, *Introduction to the Final Report*, 1.
4. Florence, *Decree for the Armenians*.
5. Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium, hereafter L.G.)*, 15.
6. Vatican II, *Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio, hereafter U.R.)*, 3.
7. Cf., for example, Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat. Myst.*, 2, 4; Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. Cat.*, 35; Ambrose, *De Sacr.*, 2, 23.
8. Cf. Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 5, 60, 2.
9. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 3a, 69, 7.
10. L.G., 7.
11. Cyprian, *Ep.* 84, 6.
12. Hooker, *loc. cit.*
13. L.G., 32.
14. Cf. L.G., 10.
15. Cf. Hooker, *op. cit.*, 5, 60, 6.
16. U.R., 3.
17. Basil of Caesarea, *De Spir. Sanct.*, 28.
18. Hippolytus gives instructions concerning infant baptism (*Ap. Trad.*, 21). Cf. also Cyprian, *Ep.* 64. Tertullian was aware of infant baptism but against it (cf. *De Bapt.*, 18).
19. Cf. L.G., 33.
20. ARCIC, *Statement on Ministry and Ordination*, 12.
21. RC Order of Mass, Eucharistic Prayer 4; cf. 2 Cor. 5, 15.
22. WCC Commission on Faith and Order, *Report on the Meaning of Baptism, in One Lord, One Baptism*, ed. O. Tomkins (London, SCM, 1960), p. 64.