

The Question of Baptism

An article written in 1980 for the newsletter of the Association of Interchurch Families by one of its co-founders, the Jesuit priest Fr John Coventry, and updated in 1984. Even though much has changed over the past 35 years, the issues raised by Fr John are as fresh today for some couples as they were in 1980

The Shape of the Question

Some parents will quite properly decide that in their case the children are going to be brought up entirely in one Church, and without the experience of the other. Even so, they may wish for some recognition of the other Church when it comes to the baptism of their child - a child of both parents. But the question of baptism is only seriously a question for those two-church parents who want to make the attempt to bring their children up somehow within and at home in both their Churches. It is a difficult attempt and they won't be able to see clearly at the outset how it is going to work out. It is obvious to them that, though they mean to be fully united in love, they are two different people going to two different Churches: and the child can't be that. But they want to pass on to their child as fully as possible the Christian unity they are able to develop between themselves. They want this to be the basic Christian experience of their children, embracing and relativising differences that will eventually have to be assimilated. Hence they will want the baptism to bless and be an expression of this endeavour.

It could be argued (it sometimes is) in an ideal or merely theoretical way that baptism and first communion are inextricably linked as elements of Christian initiation; and hence the parents ought first to decide about the child's first communion and then determine the baptism accordingly. But interchurch life isn't like that. It is a whole series of decisions which come out of the developing relationship of man and wife. These decisions cannot be known in advance or planned from the outset by some blueprint which would not allow marriage to be marriage or leave these two people to develop in interaction with each other. Just as an engaged couple should not be pressurised at that point into deciding what they are going to do about the baptism of their children, so when they come to the point of baptism they need to keep their options open, i.e. to be free to develop their own relationship and to hope for developing relationship between their Churches.

It may be well to recall here that the churches tend to look at the interchurch couple from their 'separatist' point of view as not fitting in, while the couple very properly look at the Churches from their own concrete interchurch point of view as a problem for them. After all, it is the Churches which are at fault in being separated, not the couple in being married. Their overriding concern must be for the unity and fullness of their marriage and family life. They have the difficult and challenging task of creating a united Christian home in and through the division of their Churches.

The question of baptism is not evenly balanced. It is part of Roman Catholic conviction, part of what it means to be a Roman Catholic, to have a sense of obligation to bring up one's children as Roman Catholics. Other Christians would be convinced that they should bring up their children as believing Christians but would not normally have the same sense of obligation about 'denomination'. This imbalance does not stem from a different view of marriage but from a different view of the Church. And marriage of itself cannot dispel it. It just has to be faced, reckoned with, and worked out by each couple in their own way. It is part of the shape of the question of baptism.

Faced with this sort of difficulty, some couples very understandably want to have their children baptised simply 'into Christ' or 'as Christians' so as to overcome and transcend the separation of the Churches and their different convictions, and to avoid any form of choice between them. However, this option rests on an incomplete view of baptism. Baptism is not simply the establishing of a relation between an individual (or family) and the Risen Lord, in his heavenly or glorified state. For many centuries Christian thought regarded the Risen Lord, his Body the Church, and his eucharistic Body, as one mystery, and did not make

or allow the distinction we are inclined to make. We are baptised into the Risen Lord *by* being incorporated in his Body the Church on earth. Baptism involves the believing community which visibly embodies the Lord's gift of himself. And the believing community is both united and divided at the same time. That it is united suggests that one should not be forced to choose between Churches; that it is divided suggests that one has to. Both aspects are inescapably involved when the question of baptism arises. Hence the adequate formula would appear to be: baptism of the child into the Church of Christ as it exists in the two Churches of the parents. This is the formula which found most favour in the AIF questionnaire of October 1978. It adequately represents the actual situation of the parents; they are not Christians in any vague or ill-defined sense, still less in any reductionist sense, but committed members of two specific Churches. And it represents what they want to give to their children.

A few years ago the Ecumenical Commission made a carefully planned effort to get the Roman Catholic bishops to authorise publicly a fairly liberal set of procedures for the baptism of the children of interchurch parents, in a paper which spelled out the theological considerations and the various accepted forms of celebration. The concrete results of this effort were very slender, as some bishops had reservations about the principles involved and their implementation. But the exercise made many people more aware of issues they had not previously faced, and perhaps opened the way here and there to more sympathetic consideration of requests from interchurch families.

Before considering alternative patterns of shared baptism, it may be as well for us to stand back and look at things in perspective. There may not be an ideal form of shared baptism, even if some forms are found more satisfactory than others. What matters is the degree to which different forms fulfil the needs of specific and different parents. It does not make any difference to an infant how he is baptised: what matters to him is how he is brought up. The needs of the parents at this point, however, are very serious. When the baptism has been conducted solely by the Church of one partner, to the total exclusion of the other, the distress of the latter can be very deep: he may feel he has lost his child, that the other Church has taken the child away from him; the distress and resentment may linger on and sour, or at any rate weaken, the couple's effort and hope to construct a united Christian life together. At the other end of the scale, a happily shared baptism (as many letters attest) can be an occasion of immense joy to both, a life-long memory, exceeding in its depth anything that can normally be experienced in a one-church family, and enormously encouraging the parents in their united Christian life. The interchurch couple need to know that their child is accepted by both their Churches; they need to experience that they themselves are accepted by both their Churches; they need to receive the blessing and encouragement of both their Churches on what they are trying to do in their marriage and in their family. However, if they do run into obstacles and are disappointed about what they would like to achieve for a baptism, it may help them to reflect that the form of ceremony is not of importance to the child, and that the child's future, like their own, is still firmly in their hands.

Forms of Celebration

To avoid complexities of language I propose for the purpose of this section to use 'Catholic' for 'Roman Catholic' and to let 'Anglican' stand for all other Churches to which AIF members normally belong.

Nowadays there is usually no difficulty in arranging for baptism in a Catholic church with full participation of both the vicar and members of both families. Many couples have found the new Catholic rite of baptism very helpful, because it lends itself to varied participation. The Catholic priest will presumably give the initial welcome and do the baptising and anointing. But other parts of the ceremony can be variously shared, so that, even if the central act is done by the priest, everyone experiences the ceremony as belonging to both Churches: there are readings, responsorial psalms, a homily, bidding prayers, a short invocation of the saints (e.g. names of parents, godparents and the child), blessing of the water,

renunciation of sin and profession of faith; and after the baptism and anointing with chrism, the white garment, the lighted candle, the Our Father, the final blessing for father, mother and all present.

It seems a good idea if everyone says together the actual formula of baptising to show that it is the Church who baptises. In one or two cases both Anglican and Catholic priests have poured the water and said the words simultaneously.

Many couples have devised variations on this service of their own, perhaps inserting or substituting favourite prayers from Anglican ritual and prayers for unity.

The question of alternating between baptisms in the Catholic and Anglican churches is bound to arise with successive children. But it may prove difficult to secure the Catholic priest's participation in an Anglican service, on the ground that this would look like official approval of the child's being baptised into the Church of England. He may not want to come, even if he respects the responsible decision of the parents and (of course) acknowledges that it is a true baptism incorporating the child into Christ. Or he may be willing to be present, but not to take part. But there have certainly been a number of cases where a Catholic priest has taken part - sometimes not the parish priest, but another priest with his connivance! Attempts to get the Catholic bishop's overt approval for the child's baptism into the Anglican Church have not been successful.

There have been cases where the Anglican vicar has allowed baptism by a Catholic priest in his church; but he may well be unwilling for this to happen a second time, fairly considering that some form of reciprocity is called for. I know of no cases where there has been baptism by the vicar in the Catholic church. But one couple has written that several priests would have been willing for an Anglican priest relative to baptise their child in his church, if they had not first asked the bishop and been refused.

Permission has now been given in quite a number of cases for baptism in the home. (The first one was very hard won from a reluctant and generally conservative Catholic bishop by a patiently persistent couple, who were prepared to wait until the child could point up the discussion by crawling and spreading biscuit crumbs over the episcopal carpet. It is said that when their second child appeared he capitulated at once.) Baptism in the home seems the most desirable solution to many couples: however participatory the ceremony, the Church of either parent leans the ceremony in one direction rather than the other; the home is not simply neutral, it is the 'domestic church' of the couple's Christian life and the place of their unity. Baptism in the home, however, is not to be thought of as a private affair: it can involve not only the wider families of the child but also local friends from different Churches and other interchurch couples; it can represent the ecumenical community which seeks constantly to make more visible the God-given unity of the Churches.

Whichever of the above forms of ceremony is used, many two-church couples are very keen that the child's baptism should be recorded in the parish registers of both Churches. It may at first seem puzzling that such importance should be attached to an apparently bureaucratic or canonical act; and it is not clear that, simply by recording the fact of the child's baptism, either Church is canonically regarding the child as a member. But such double registration comes over to the parents as an acceptance and welcome of the child by both Churches and as giving him some kind of dual membership. This is how they regard the child themselves: they are members of different Churches, he is a child of both.

One couple had their first child baptised in their local Catholic church. When the second arrived, they decided to have him baptised in the Anglican church which they frequently attended together, but wrote to the Catholic bishop asking him to give his approval of this and to allow the child to be registered as also a member of the Catholic Church. A long and polite correspondence ensued, but to no avail, so the child was baptised as planned. Then they took the baptised baby along to the parish priest, and asked him to receive the child into the Catholic Church. This threw the diocesan curia into some confusion, as it was hard to see how such a request could possibly be refused, and yet there is no known method of

implementing it. Eventually a special and somewhat cumbersome service was devised by the chancellor for the reception of the child, based on the new *Rite of Reception of Baptised Christians into Full Communion with the Catholic Church*, issued by Rome for the reception of adults. Another couple found a simpler method: the local Catholic priest was quite happy to receive the child by the method of “completing the ceremonies” used when a child in danger of death has been baptised by a simple pouring with the trinitarian formula.

A little humour may not be out of place even when the issues are deeply serious. Beyond all the triumphs and disappointments it remains true that what matters to the child is, not how he is baptised, but how he is brought up. And many couples have been aware that, even when they are disappointed, they have done their bit to increase awareness of their situation and of their spiritual needs, and in that way to help towards making things easier for others. Much has developed in the last ten years, hardly dreamt of before. Some of the things described above have happened in Northern Ireland. It must be an encouragement to many involved in a sometimes lonely tension to realise that over these years the Churches have not managed to change the couples: rather have the couples done much to change the characteristic attitudes of the Churches.

John Coventry S.J.

Experience since 1980 – an update by Ruth Reardon

In reprinting this article it may be useful to add a note on recent experience. Baptism is a subject on which AIF is constantly being asked for information, and experience on shared baptism is growing all the time.

It is important to realise that church authorities are not expecting interchurch parents to provide them with a new theology of baptism, nor are they usually impressed with a list of precedents. What is much more helpful is to get across in human terms the *personal and pastoral needs of this particular couple* as they come to celebrate the baptism of their child. There is no need to press any particular *understanding* of a joint celebration of baptism, which may not be shared by the church authority concerned. There is no need to use terminology which will automatically bring a negative reaction.

Clearly local circumstances differ very greatly, from parish to parish and from diocese to diocese. What is possible in one place is not possible in another.

From the Roman Catholic point of view, we have not found any serious objection to associating an Anglican or Free Church minister (often taking quite a prominent part) in a baptism ceremony performed by a Catholic priest in a Catholic church. Probably the majority of shared baptisms have taken place in this way, and for many couples the baptism has been a very happy experience. Often members of both congregations have joined in the celebration, and have come a little closer together because of it.

There have been a few officially approved cases of the simultaneous pouring of water and saying the words of baptism (one such was recorded in *The Tablet*, 8 January 1983) but there have been a number of objections to this on the grounds that to have two ministers of the sacrament makes the baptism invalid. What is clear from tradition is that it is invalid for *one* minister to say the words of baptism while *another* minister pours the water.

For parents who wish the child's baptism to be registered in both churches it has usually been easiest to ask the Catholic priest to perform the baptism in the Anglican church. Some Catholic priests have done this on their own responsibility, but a number of bishops have also given permission for it. Other bishops have refused.

There have been a few cases of a Catholic priest taking part in a baptism performed by an Anglican priest in an Anglican church. There have now been one or two cases of a Catholic bishop expressing his acceptance of an Anglican baptism. What is not clear on these occasions is how far the Roman Catholic Church intends to take responsibility for the child, but there have in fact been cases now where children baptised in an Anglican church have been admitted to Catholic First Communion because they have been brought up within the life of the Catholic parish.

Baptism in the home has not become a common practice, but we know of one recent case in which it was allowed on the grounds that one set of grandparents had never set foot in a Catholic church.

In very many cases persistence has won through. There continue of course to be other couples who have struggled hard to express their commitment in a joint celebration of baptism, but who in their local circumstances have had to be content with much less “duality” than they had hoped for. But few who have passed on their experience to us are bitter or unduly discouraged. The last paragraph of Fr Coventry's original article still stands.

Ruth Reardon