

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF BAPTISM

Although the writers of the New Testament have more references to Baptism than to the Eucharist, they afford no evidence or information as to how baptism was performed, that is by submersion, immersion or affusion. On the day of Pentecost we are told three thousand people were baptized in Jerusalem by the Apostles (Acts 2:41). No river runs through the city of Jerusalem, and in May and early June the brook Kedron below the city is a mere trickle. The River Jordan is several miles away from Jerusalem. Baptism, therefore, could only have been in a pool. Recent commentators have pointed out that at the traditional place of our Lord's Baptism in the Jordan there is not sufficient depth for the submersion of an adult unless the person lies flat on the bed of the stream. The popular supposition that baptism in the primitive church was always by submersion cannot be sustained in the light of modern archaeology.

A distinction needs to be drawn between the term 'submersion' and 'immersion'. The former means the total submersion of the body under the water. The latter means the candidate stands in the water up to his loins and receives a pouring of water over the head and shoulders. Modern research tends increasingly to confirm the view that immersion was the normal practice in the primitive church in the case of adults. Some liturgical and biblical commentators have taken too literally the words of St. Paul: 'We were buried therefore with him baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life' (Rom. 6:4) as implying that just as the body was put in the grave at burial and will arise at the resurrection, so in baptism the body is submersed under the water in a new life in Christ. Those who have made this assumption of these words have failed to notice that in the Middle East in the first century A.D., and indeed earlier earth burial in a grave was not usual since the normal method was in a cave or tomb. The writers of the Old Testament frequently allude to this fact and the burial of our Lord and Lazarus in this manner needs no further comment. The catacombs at Rome and elsewhere show a similar method of burial. Before immurement the body was sometimes sprinkled with earth. If this analogy between burial and baptism was pressed to its logical conclusion it would mean that baptism would always have to be by affusion or sprinkling.

The earliest font now known to us is that which was uncovered in the 1930's at Dura-Europos in a house-church. This is dated about A.D. 230 and archaeologists are agreed that it is of insufficient length

or depth to permit the total submersion of an adult. After that date all the evidence shows that fonts were not usually of sufficient capacity to submerge an adult. Usually the candidate stood in the pool or font immersed up to the loins and then received an affusion of water over the head and shoulders. In some instances, as at the Lateran Baptistery, a spout of jet of water played into the font and the neophyte had his head directed under the jet.

It is also necessary to note that the earliest evidence does not support the idea that the candidate's 'Christian' name was given as he was baptised. The unfortunate popular error often extended to inanimate objects such as ships and boats, that baptism is a 'naming ceremony', only arose in the Middle Ages. In the earlier centuries the candidate had in fact been 'named' several weeks before the baptism during the catechumenal ceremonies and exorcisms.

The other fashionable error common amongst baptismal reformers today is that during the primitive era of Christianity baptism was always performed in the presence of the local congregation and therefore was public. This idea is completely erroneous. For the fact is that the candidates, both men and woman, were completely naked at the time of their baptism. As early as A.D. 150 Justin Martyr tells us that after their baptism the candidates were brought from the place of baptism to where the congregation was assembled for the Eucharist. (Apol. 1:65). The font at Dura-Europos is in a separate room from the main Eucharistic room. The writer of the Syrian *Didascalia* (about A.D. 230) says that the deaconesses assist the female candidates to undress as it is not fitting that they should be seen by men (Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, p. 146). St Cyril of Jerusalem in his celebrated catechetical lectures given at the end of the fourth century is very explicit that the candidates were as naked as Adam at the time of their baptism. *The Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus about A.D. 220 gives the same evidence about both men and women being naked. Indeed, women were told to take off all jewellery and adornments also.

The foregoing facts explain something which earlier generations of archaeologists did not understand, namely, that all the older fonts stood in a baptistery separated from the main church building. The well-known examples at the Lateran, Rome, Pisa, Florence and Cremona are all in Italy. But modern research has uncovered the remains of such separated baptisteries all round the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, including North Africa. Such baptisteries were only normally attached to a cathedral church, that is to the bishop's church, where the complete rite of Christian initiation took place and not merely water-baptism. Only as water-baptism came to be sundered from confirmation and first communion in the Latin West in the Middle Ages were fonts introduced into parish Churches.

Thus the candidates in the earlier centuries undressed assisted by the deacons and deaconesses. There were sometimes vestibules or ante-rooms attached to the baptistery for the disrobing. The font had columns around it and curtains could be drawn between these. Only the officiating bishop or priest and the sponsors witnessed the baptism. The candidate stood naked in the font with the water up to his loins and then received a three-fold affusion over the head and shoulders in the Name the Trinity. The Candidates were then led across to the cathedral in their newly assumed white robes where the bishop gave them the anointing with the chrism and the imposition of the hand for the 'Seal' of the Spirit, known variously as *consignatio*, *confirmatio* and chrismation. Then followed the Eucharist and first communion.

No doubt the increasing tendency of infant initiation after the fourth century made the use of these baptisteries less necessary; but increasing evidence shows that even in the Middle Ages infants in arms were completely naked at their baptism and they received a three-fold partial immersion and not merely an affusion of water.

Finally, we draw attention to the implications of the Greek term, *Baptisma* to which a much greater study needs to be given. All lexicographers seem to be agreed that this term is used only in connexion with Christian Initiation and the Baptism of John (see G. Kittel, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*) It does not therefore appear in the LXX or in Pagan Greek literature. There is a vast entry under this term in the new Oxford *Patristic Greek Lexicon*. Certainly, some of the Fathers understand the word to include the whole rite of initiation. Thus Origen (d. 253) wrote: 'In the Acts of the Apostles through the laying on of apostolic hands the Holy Spirit was given in *baptisma*' (*De Princ.* I. iii. 2). The Nicene Creed as composed in the fourth century speaks of 'one *baptisma* for the remission of sins'. It may reasonably be claimed that the Creed implies the whole rite of *baptisma* since at that time it was not the custom in any part of Christendom to give infants in arms a partial initiation with water and then delay the completion of that initiation until years of discretion. Such a dichotomy only arose in the Latin West in the later Middle Ages. It can claim no authority from the New Testament, the early baptismal rites or from the Fathers of the Church. It has been widely but wrongly assumed that the custom of giving infants in arms water-baptism with confirmation in one rite is something peculiar to the Eastern Orthodox Church. Recent full research, particularly the work of Canon J. D. C. Fisher in his *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval West* (1965), shows that this custom prevailed just as much in the Latin West in the earlier centuries as in the Greek East. Fisher has examined in great detail the causes of the disintegration of the primitive rite of *baptisma* and the false dichotomy that arose in

the Latin West in the Middle Ages whereby there was an increasing period of time between water-baptism and its completion in confirmation. It is true to state that during the earlier centuries throughout the whole of Christendom infants in arms received complete baptismal initiation during the course of a rite primarily addressed to adults. In the early centuries there was no such thing as an 'infant' baptismal rite consisting exclusively of water-baptism. The primitive rite consisted of water-baptism in the Name of the Trinity, imposition of the hand with the invocatory prayer for the Holy Spirit, anointing on the brow with the chrism, followed by first Communion. The writer of this article had given English translations of most of the relevant documents and texts in his *Water and the Spirit* (1967). The consideration of these matters is highly relevant for the place of Baptism and Christian Initiation in oecumenical discussions since too much of our teaching and practice in these matters in Roman Catholic, Anglican and Protestant circles alike has been governed by considerations that arose in the later Middle Ages. The explanation of St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*, 3a lxii, I. that baptism is the Sacrament of infancy and Confirmation is the Sacrament of 'growing up', is an *ex post facto* explanation for which neither Holy Scripture nor the Fathers hold any warrant. The integrity that has been maintained in the Eastern Orthodox rite whereby baptism and confirmation are always treated as an integrity is closer to the pattern of the primitive rite of *baptisma* than Roman Catholic, Anglican or Protestant teaching today.

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