

LUTHER'S 'TAUFBÜCHLEIN'

Part I

In a previous article in this Journal, entitled *Luther and the Canon of the Mass*,¹ it was argued that the Wittenberg Reformer's treatment of this ancient Eucharistic Prayer was not due to a conservative nature, nor the work of a pruning-knife; on the contrary it was argued that Luther's Reformed Canon, as found in the *Formula Missae* and, in final form, in the *Deutsche Messe*, represented a careful construction giving expression to the doctrine of Justification by Faith.

However, the question which naturally arises from this discussion is whether or not a similar theological concern may be found in Luther's other Liturgical reforms. It is our present purpose to consider this question in relation to Luther's reform of the Baptismal Liturgy, as represented by the *Taufbüchlein* of 1523 and of 1526. Concerning the *Taufbüchlein*, E. Theodore Bachmann commented that 'when Luther came to revising congregational worship in 1523, he took over with only minor modifications the customary Roman order of baptism then being used at Wittenberg. In 1526, however, he revised this order by abbreviating it drastically; yet he added nothing new.'² Bachmann's comment concerning Luther's use of the existing Roman Liturgy is correct; indeed, Luther had little option in the matter, having no patristic texts to guide him, and he was certainly no radical innovator. Nevertheless, a careful investigation of Luther's two baptismal orders will reveal that the remainder of Bachmann's comment needs very considerable qualification.

The Medieval Roman Baptismal Liturgy

The Baptismal Liturgy known to Martin Luther, an example of which is represented by that found in the *Magdeburg Agenda* of 1497, was the final product of several centuries of growth and development, fossilization and decay of an earlier Roman Baptismal Liturgy.

The earliest evidence of the Roman Baptismal Liturgy is furnished by the description given by Justin Martyr and the *Apostolic Tradition* attributed to Hippolytus; this evidence may be supplemented by Tertullian's Homilies on Baptism, and may be compared with those of St. Ambrose of Milan.³ Though by no means all agreeing in every detail, they provide us with a comprehensive picture of the Baptismal Liturgy in the early centuries.

Baptism was preceded by a lengthy catechumenate which might last up to three years, during which time the candidates underwent special instruction in the Christian faith. Baptism itself was normally administered at Easter and Pentecost, when the candidates were examined, heard the Gospel and received the creed. During this time they were exorcised daily. It was presupposed that most of the candidates would be adults.

The Baptismal Liturgy itself began on the Saturday preceding Easter or Pentecost. The candidates were exorcised of unclean spirits and the Devil, and were anointed. After the vigil was finished they were brought to water which had been blessed. After being anointed with the oil of exorcism they renounced Satan and were baptized in water three times in conjunction with a three-fold act of faith in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They were anointed again by the Presbyters and then brought to the Bishop. He stretched out his hand over them and prayed over them, anointed them with oil, laying hands on them and signing them with the cross on the forehead. After he had given them the kiss of Peace, the Eucharist followed. We may note that the rite consisted of water baptism for the remission of sins, the giving of the Spirit and the admittance to the Eucharist, and was presided over by the Bishop.

However, from the time of Gregory the Great various factors both theological and pastoral had been at work causing the conflation and fragmentation of the earlier pattern.⁴

With the expansion of Christianity and mass-conversion, the time of preparation and instruction was drastically reduced, and, when adult baptism gave way entirely to infant baptism, only a token instruction with exorcism and signing with the cross remained at the beginning of the rite. With the acceptance of Augustinian theology, baptism was regarded as necessary for salvation, and was to take place within six days of birth. The rite was therefore administered at any time. Again, with the gradual change in Eucharistic doctrine which regarded the consecrated elements with awe, infants were allowed communion in wine only, and finally were prohibited from the Eucharist. The latter then ceased to be part of the Baptismal Liturgy. A third factor was that in the West the laying on of hands or sealing came to be reserved for the Bishop. Although Christianity spread, the number of Bishops did not keep pace in proportion, with the result that Bishops were few, and were unable to be at the now frequent administration of the rite. This latter part of the Liturgy, called Confirmation, was detached and delayed until the child was older. Baptism was regarded as necessary for salvation, but the same could not be argued for Confirmation. Thus this peculiar episcopal rite came to be explained as the giving of grace and the strengthening or 'confirming' of baptism.

The resulting Baptismal Liturgy, known to Luther and the other Reformers, may be divided into three parts:

- (i) The preliminaries to baptism. The males and females were to be set on the right or left of the priest respectively – a survival of a time when the adults were separated because they would be immersed completely naked. The infants were exorcised and signed with the cross, given salt with an exorcism of the Devil. Different prayers were provided for males and females. These ceremonies together with the Gospel reading, the 'Effeta', Lord's Prayer, Hail Mary and the Creed recited by the Priest were all that remained of the catechuminate.
- (ii) The Blessing of the Water. If the water in the font was not already blessed, then a blessing with oil together with the Litany of Saints followed.
- (iii) The Baptism. The godparents renounced Satan, assented to the creed, and after the infant had been anointed with oil it was baptized in the three-fold name. The Liturgy concluded with the Priest giving the infant a white band – a survival of the white garments once given in baptism – and a taper as a symbol of illumination.

It was this Liturgy that Luther spoke highly of in his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 1520:⁵

Blessed be God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to the riches of his mercy has preserved in his church this sacrament at least, untouched and untainted by the ordinances of men, and has made it free to all nations and classes of mankind and has not permitted it to be oppressed by the filthy and godless monsters of greed and superstition.

It certainly formed the basis of the first *Taufbüchlein*, Luther admitting in an Epilogue that he had not wished to make great alterations, both for the sake of tender consciences and to escape the charge of instituting a new baptism. Nevertheless, Luther's order was not merely a work of translation. In the same Epilogue, Luther states that the Liturgy is in need of improvement 'because it has had careless authors who did not realize sufficiently the glory of baptism'. It would be logical to conclude from this, then, that in any alterations Luther would be concerned with showing forth 'the glory of baptism'.

NOTES

1. *Liturgical Review*, Vol. III, No. 1, May 1973, pp. 34-45.
2. Luther's Works (American Edition), edited by J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann. Vol. 35, p. 25. For the texts of the *Taufbüchlein* see A. L. Richter, *Die*

Evangelischen Kirchenordnungen (Weimar, 1846), and E. Sehling, *Die Evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI Jahrhunderts*, Vol. I (Leipzig, 1902). English translation in Luther's Works, Vol. 53, and J. D. C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation: The Reformation Period* (1970).

3. For the relevant texts see E. C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy* (1960, 1970). For obvious reasons, only a short summary can be given here.
4. The detailed evidence will be found in J. D. C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval West* (1965).
5. This and other works referred to are contained in Luther's Works edited by J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann.

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(to be concluded)