



Inter-Church Meeting BAPTISM AND THE ECUMENICAL PROJECT IN IRELAND

Speaking notes of
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The very first sentence of Bishop Clarke's reflection is central to our overall reflection today. "There is a great deal that we can take for granted with regard to baptism...; there is an attendant danger that we take baptism for granted".

I suppose that this taking for granted is certainly complicated by the cultural situation, especially in the Republic of Ireland. Baptism was taken for granted. All Christians were expected to be baptised and this presumption continued even when the quality of faith and the relationship with the Church life became weaker. Baptism was and is still "taken for granted" rather representing a real sense of Christian commitment and belonging to the Church.

Baptism has become for many just a social event, at best an enrolment service into the Christian community, or a moment of catechesis for parents rather than a moment of the realisation of real regeneration and the initiation into new life.

Where baptism was enrolment, then it became in a complex Irish culture almost sectarian: "I was baptised Catholic or I was baptised Protestant". In such a context it was difficult to look at the sense of the real unity which links all Christians with the Church and with others through our common baptism. We were divided and at times sectarian and we tended to be cautious and suspicious of each other's baptism. For a long time the general canonical presupposition was that the baptism of others was to be evaluated with caution if not suspicion. Re-baptising was very common; even the term "conditional re-baptism" which was supposed to show some possibility of the mutual recognition of baptism, may really have been just a more politically correct affirmation of the fundamentally dubitative tradition.

Christian communions in many parts of the world, not least in Ireland, live in the shadow of long divisions and of socio-political conflicts that still have to be overcome. The Peace process in Ireland was assisted by Christian leaders. The process of healing and reconciling memories has still a journey to travel and the exploration of the significance of our common baptism is an important dimension to such a healing process and the process of overcoming sectarianism.

Progress in this sense is being made. Bishop Clarke has mentioned some of the various agreed documents of Christian Churches of the Roman Catholic, Reformed, Protestant and Orthodox Churches on the nature of baptism. I would draw attention to a study on the *Ecclesiological and ecumenical implications of a common baptism* contained in Eighth Report of the Joint Working Group (JWG) between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches (Geneva-Rome 2005). The current Joint Working Group, of which I am Catholic Co-Moderator with Metropolitan Nifon of the Rumanian Orthodox Church, is carrying out a study of reception of ecumenical documents within Churches and paying special attention to the reception of documents on common baptism. From the initial anecdotal information gathered, it is clear that the practice of re-baptising is still quite common today in some traditions. Baptism is an unrepeatable act. Not only should any impression of re-baptism be avoided but the Churches should work towards both educational but also structurally visible ways of witnessing to our common baptism. A good simple example might be some form of common format among Churches for baptismal certificates.

Moving from the official dialogue between Churches back to the practice and the popular religious culture of our Churches in Ireland, I believe that in the Roman Catholic tradition there is a great diversity regarding the popular understanding of baptism. Different understandings, often marked by generational differences, come into consideration and still play a role in people's understanding of the sacrament. When I was born, because my mother was sick, there was what was then considered an inordinate delay in having me baptised: there was a delay of one week. Today there is no such rush, but one still hears anecdotes of grandmothers faced with delay in baptising their grandchild occasionally doing a quick private baptism in the kitchen just in case anything might happen to the newborn in the meantime. The sense of original sin and possible exclusion from eternal life is still strongly present in some of the older generation. For many of that generation the water of baptism symbolised above all the cleansing effect of baptism on the sinful soul.

For many younger people, the ceremony of baptism is the occasion in which the birth of the new child is celebrated socially, with an appropriate religious blessing. Paradoxically, even the most secularised of Irish still have a deep-seated liking for blessings. At times pre-baptismal catechesis is seen as an occasion for evangelization or pre-evangelisation of parents and of reaching out to parents who have drifted from active Church life, reminding them of their responsibilities for the child's future as a Christian and as a good citizen. Rather than baptism being an act of the believing Christian community, baptism is seen as an opportunity for the catechesis of those on the margins of such a community.

I draw attention to these aspects of current culture in many of our Churches, because the more the popular understanding of baptism drifts from its theological roots and becomes more a cultural event, then the more baptism will be taken for granted or emptied of its true content and so the search for real common understanding will recede. In the Catholic tradition sacraments can only be understood and celebrated within a living

and believing Christian community. With growing secularisation in society there is a real danger that debates about sacraments will be determined within the framework of secular society rather than in a theological context. Here the Churches could work together in establishing a common pre-baptismal catechesis, sharing in the process of the catechumenate, and in fixing clearer norms regarding the minimum faith environment required for admission of a child to baptism.

In the Catholic tradition baptism is a sacrament, namely “an act of Christ and of the Church through the Spirit” (Directory on Ecumenism, 1993, n.129). The celebration of a sacrament in a community is a sign of the reality of its unity in faith, worship and community life. Baptism constitutes a sacramental bond of unity. “All Christians who receive the one Baptism into Christ’s one body have also received a radical calling to communion with all the baptized” (JWG, p.69). This is the basis, even despite difference, for the call to common witness in society. This can be witness concerning the good of society, but also about our common understanding of religious realities and a reclaiming in public life of Christian festivals, especially Easter and Pentecost which have a deep baptismal significance. The significance of our common baptism should be a keynote in the setting out of the identity and mission statement of all our ecumenical endeavours and structures.

In the Catholic tradition the recognition of common baptism does not on its own constitute a sufficient basis for Eucharistic communion, since that would require full ecumenical communion in faith and life. The exceptions which are recognised in Catholic practice regarding the reception of communion by members of others Churches in special circumstances requires clearly recognition of common baptism. Similarly it is recognition of common baptism which is at the basis of some of the formal invitations extended to other Christian Churches to participate in major ecclesial events such as Synods of Bishops and more significant international ecclesial assemblies. It is important that local ecumenical cooperation not be reduced to social contact but that reflection on the theological implications of our common baptism but an important dimension of all ecumenical collaboration, including on prayer, on the word of God and worship.

Baptism is an act of Christ and of the Church through the spirit. It is an act of purification and of regeneration. Through baptism the child becomes an adopted child of God. Baptism is an act of purification in that we entrust each new life new into the hands of God who is more powerful than the dark powers of evil. Baptism redefines the understanding of the nature of life and of parenting.

You will find a longer quote in my text of the homily of Pope Benedict on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord earlier this year which is an interesting catechesis for parents and a reflection on the how our understanding of Baptism can challenge society’s vision of parenting:

“In baptism we restore to God what came from him. The child is not the property of the parents but is entrusted to their responsibility by the Creator, freely and in a way that is ever new, in order that

they may help him or her to be a free child of God. Only if the parents develop this awareness will they succeed in finding the proper balance between the claim that their children are at their disposal, as though they were a private possession, shaping them on the basis of their own ideas and desires, and the libertarian approach that is expressed in letting them grow in full autonomy, satisfying their every desire and aspiration, deeming this the right way to cultivate their personality. If, with this sacrament, the newly-baptized becomes an adoptive child of God, the object of God's infinite love that safeguards him and protects him from the dark forces of the evil one, it is necessary to teach the child to recognize God as Father and to be able to relate to him with a filial attitude. And therefore, when in accordance with the Christian tradition children are baptized and introduced into the light of God and of his teachings, no violence is done to them. Rather, they are given the riches of divine life in which is rooted the true freedom that belongs to the children of God a freedom that must be educated and modelled as the years pass to render it capable of responsible personal decisions".

John's Baptism pointed the way towards the meaning of Baptism, even though it was very different from the sacrament that Jesus was to institute. At the moment of the Baptism of Jesus a voice comes from Heaven and the Holy Spirit descends upon him (cf. Mk 1: 10); the heavenly Father proclaims him as his beloved Son and publicly attests to his universal saving mission. The mission of Jesus will however only be fully accomplished with his death on the Cross and his Resurrection. In Baptism the redeeming Blood of Christ is poured out on us and purifies and saves us, regaining for us the dignity and joy of being able to call ourselves truly "children" of God. In the Catholic tradition Baptism is the door to and is linked with the other sacraments.

Baptism also has a Trinitarian dimension. Today there are new challenges regarding the rejection of the traditional scriptural and creedal Trinitarian formulae of Baptism and there are attempts to use alternative formulae, which have no roots in tradition. Baptismal formulae are not ours to be adapted in terms of the culture of the day.

Baptism is of profound importance in the life and the constitution of the Church. The goal for the search for full communion is realized when all the Churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church in its fullness. The mutual recognition of baptism implies recognition in some way recognition of the apostolicity of each other's baptism and thus opens the path for further recognition of the presence of apostolicity in each of our Churches and drives us to express together that common apostolicity and full unity.