

## **Churches together underline huge significance of baptism**

By Susan Gately

Over fifty delegates representing sixteen Churches attended a recent study day on Baptism at the Emmaus Conference Centre in Swords, Dublin (19<sup>th</sup> November 2009)

Organised by the Irish Inter Church meeting, the day drew together bishops, priests, pastors and lay people from among others the Catholic, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran and Orthodox churches, as well as members of new Pentecostal churches, like the Cherubim and Seraphim Church and the Redeemed Christian Church of God.

In his keynote address, Bishop Richard Clarke from the Church of Ireland, warned of the danger of taking Baptism for granted. The huge agreement between many Christian churches which recognise each other's baptisms as 'valid', may prevent them from realising the "huge significance" of baptism.

From a Church of Ireland perspective, Bishop Clarke stressed that Baptism occurs prior to the membership of a particular church, hence there is never re-baptism when a person moves from one denomination to another and he called on the churches to recover the centrality of baptism.

"May we suggest that modes of preparation for baptism are something we might work on together?" he asked.

This suggestion was taken up in an open discussion later in the day when Cardinal Brady, the leader of the Catholic Church in Ireland, recalled the practise in the early centuries of the Church, when there was a three year catechumenate period. The Cardinal suggested that the seriousness with which they approached baptism should be revived and the preparation done jointly with other Churches.

Bishop Clarke pointed out that all vocations stemmed from Baptism and suggested that the "relative unity" on baptism should be used as a starting point for ecumenical dialogue.

The study day highlighted the two views of baptism – one as a moment of grace, which should therefore be given to infants, and which should be nurtured to grow throughout the child's life, the second as a declaration of faith, which should only come after a person has made a clear commitment to live as a Christian. This applies to adult baptism.

Bishop Clarke drew the distinction between baptismal validity and baptismal efficacy. "It is the Christian duty to seek for all Christians that their baptism be efficacious."

In his reply Archbishop of Dublin, Dr Diarmuid Martin reiterated the danger of taking baptism for granted. From a Catholic perspective, often the sacrament is seen merely as a social event, an enrolment, or a moment of catechesis for the parents.

"Where baptism was enrolment, then it became in a complex Irish culture almost sectarian: 'I was baptised Catholic or I was baptised Protestant'", said Archbishop Martin, who suggested that baptism could be a very important dimension in the process of overcoming sectarianism.

While progress is being made towards common recognition of each other's baptism, the archbishop said the practise of re-baptism was quite common today in some traditions.

“Baptism is an unrepeatable act,” he emphasised, and the churches should work towards structurally visible ways of witnessing to their common baptism, like a common baptism certificate.

At the study day, copies of such a common “Certificate of Baptism” were distributed to the delegates, with a list of the churches which have mutual recognition of baptism.

Archbishop Martin said that in the Catholic tradition, sacraments could 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,” he said.

In his talk, Professor Drew Gibson from the Presbyterian Church emphasised baptism as a public missionary witness to the Gospel. “We must be sure that our baptismal practise is actually saying what we want to say to the watching world.”

Fr Irenaeus du Plessis gave an overview of the understanding of baptism from the tradition of the Orthodox Church and Pastor Kunlé Daniel from the Redeemed Christian Church of God spoke about adult baptism.

A particularly interesting perspective came from Eoin Stephenson from the Religious Society of Friends. The Quakers do not have sacraments, seeing all things as being imbued with a divine presence.

“God is very real and strong and present but he can be quiet and difficult to discern,” said Mr Stephenson, who painted an image of Christ breathing over a city.

“His breath has changed the structure of the human heart and soul. It has made us children. This comes together deep in the human heart. The divine life comes in and is alive on the inside. Who is to say at what point that begins?” he asked.

“The Friends presume it is there all the time and we tune in. It may happen at baptism, it may happen later.”

In the afternoon three mothers and a young father shared their personal experiences of baptising their children, and work with a baptism team.

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