

IRISH INTER-CHURCH MEETING
Thursday 19 November 2009

BAPTISM and the ecumenical project in Ireland
Outline of the address by Bishop Richard Clarke (Church of Ireland)

Because there is a great deal that we can take for granted with regard to baptism, even in the context of the relationship between different Christian traditions, there is an attendant danger that we take baptism itself for granted.

We feel comfortable today with the reality that almost all the Christian traditions which practice infant baptism will recognise the baptism of other Christian traditions as being “valid” (to use that valuable if rather juridical term). Hence, the idea of “re-baptism” or even conditional re-baptism, should an individual choose to move from one tradition to another, is firmly eschewed. Our comfort with this may prevent us from thinking through what we thereby actually saying about the significance (and I would want to say the *huge* significance) of baptism for the Christian Church as a whole.

The European Ecumenical Assembly held in Sibiu in September 2007, which brought together all the main Christian traditions in Europe, urged churches in the different European countries to continue their study of baptism together and to seek further rapprochement around our understanding of baptism. The purpose of today is, I believe, to be a springboard (or, in a different metaphor, “a clearing of the decks”) for further committed and joint exploration into how different Christian traditions in Ireland may gather around the sacrament of baptism, and find a new space for furthering the ecumenical project as we recall an essential and existing one-ness we have in Jesus Christ. Yes, there are and will continue to be differences and even divergences on any road towards further unity and these we may not ignore or evade, but there is the central truth that baptism is already expressing - that of shared unity with Christ, cf Lumen Gentium :

Lumen Gentium 15. The Church knows that she is joined in many ways to the baptized who are honoured by the name of Christian, but who do not however profess the Catholic faith in its entirety or have not preserved unity or communion under the successor of Peter. For there are many who hold sacred scripture in honour as a rule of faith and of life, who have a sincere religious zeal, who lovingly believe in God the Father Almighty and in Christ, the Son of God and the Saviour, *who are sealed by baptism which unites them to Christ*, and who indeed recognize and receive other sacraments in their own Churches or ecclesiastical communities.

I am acutely aware that what I have to say may not seem to be of value to those traditions which are not sacramental in their practice, but which have always had a central role in the life of the Irish Council of Churches. I hope that they will feel however that there is a vital contribution which they should make to what is an open and mutually respectful conversation on baptism

Five strands or themes for our discussion –

1. Doctrinal understanding of baptism in the different traditions

I cannot claim to know in any detail the doctrine of baptism as defined by the different Christian traditions. I therefore begin with an Anglican understanding, and let us see in discussion where that takes us. Baptism is expressed in the Church of Ireland's traditional catechism in this way -

Baptism; wherein I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.

Later, in speaking of the inward spiritual grace of baptism, the catechism describes baptism as effecting a change whereby we become "*children of grace*"; we have entered into a relationship of grace, a covenant of grace with God in Christ.

It follows from all this that although baptism is always within the context of Christian community, the Body of Christ, it is also in another sense *prior* to membership of a particular Christian tradition within the wider Christian Church, however we are choosing to define the Church Universal. (If this were not the case, we would have to re-baptise when an individual moves from one Christian tradition to another.) WE need to understand more clearly how each of our traditions thinks doctrinally of baptism. We would, I believe, each be enriched.

2. Recovering the centrality of baptism.

Need to remind ourselves of how important baptism was in the early centuries of the Church. Obvious even from the great scale of the baptisteries we see in continental Europe, eg.

- the fourth century baptistery in Poitiers, reckoned to be the oldest Christian building extant in France.
- the huge baptistery in Florence where the most wonderful artwork is to be seen, even by the standards of Florence.
- the magnificent octagonal baptistery in Milan, now underneath the cathedral, where almost certainly St Ambrose baptised St Augustine.

All of them impressive large buildings reminding us of just how central baptism was to the life of the western Christian Church in the early centuries. Can we **together** work to restore baptism to the place it should have in the life of each of our traditions? Have we become casual about baptism, with no "discipline" of baptism in most of our traditions today? Baptism is not always taken seriously within our congregations, yet baptism is surely something which should require preparation, is of great seriousness and, for those of us who practise infant baptism, is placing a solemn trust of immense gravity on the parents and sponsors who bring a child for baptism.

May one think the unthinkable, and suggest that **modes of preparation for baptism** are something we might work on together?

3. Beginning all ecumenical discourse from the starting point of baptism

All other vocations stem from baptism – ie, baptism is the primary vocation. All other vocations, whether to the ordained ministry, to marriage, to religious life, or anything else, should have their origins and meaning in the primary call of Jesus Christ which is rooted in baptism. The recovery of such an understanding will not solve the problems and challenges of different understandings of ministries, lay and ordained, within the Church as a whole, but it places them in a very different context.

In view of what Christians still say *together* about Baptism, can we not use our unity on the matter of baptism, rather than our differences, as a starting point for *all* Christian conversation towards unity - make our baptism the starting point for ecumenical dialogue rather than our problems with one another? What might we all say about baptism? Cf. WCC document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, 1982 :

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. (Lima Document) Baptism (1) - Christian baptism is rooted in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, in his death and in his resurrection. It is incorporation into Christ, who is the crucified and risen Lord; it is entry into the New Covenant between God and God's people.

That is hardly trivial – the institutional difficulties must surely be secondary to the enormity of a shared incorporation into Christ, and into the covenant between God and God's people. Perhaps even ecclesiology and missiology should only be done in the context of the meaning of baptism for all the baptised?

4. A new concentration on the “fruits” of baptism – the working out of baptism in the life of the Church

WE associate with St Augustine a distinction between sacramental validity and efficacy (Donatist schism). From his theological starting point, he found he had to accept that what might be *valid* might not necessarily be regarded as *efficacious*. In other words, you might have received a valid sacrament without it necessarily doing you any good! If we turn Augustine on his head (tempting at times!) may we not see that making what we accept as valid *also efficacious* is part of the Christian vocation? That it is our duty to seek for all Christians that their baptism may, with our encouragement, also be deeply efficacious? The Lima document saw that baptism brings with it an ecumenical imperative also :

BEM. Lima - Baptism (10) : As they grow in the Christian life of faith, baptized believers demonstrate that humanity can be re-generated and liberated. They have a common responsibility, here and now, to bear witness together to the Gospel of Christ, the Liberator of all human beings. The context of this common witness is the Church and the world. Within a fellowship of witness and service, Christians discover the full significance of the one baptism as the gift of God to all God's people.

What is being said here is that it is within a context of fellowship / *koinonia* and shared service to the world that we can each discover and appropriate the full significance of our baptism.

5. Spirituality and baptism

Baptism is not only about unity in Christ. It contains in all our traditions an emphasis on repentance and on newness of life through and in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. How do the different traditions understand such central themes in the spirituality of individuals and of the church communities? Again, there

is huge gain to be made in learning from each other, and so finding a new spiritual enrichment in the lives of each of our Christian traditions.

Pursuing all of these five strands will not of itself effect the unity of Christ's Church on earth. What I do believe is that in baptism, we have a rich lode for Christian understanding that we have not properly followed in the ecumenical venture. Baptism in recent times has not been a place for vituperation or polemic between most of the different Christian traditions. It is the place where we already have a unity in Jesus Christ. Our gathering together around baptism can only bring good to each of us, and can only further the task of unity entrusted to us by Christ.