



**Churches
in Ireland**
Connecting
in Christ

**Irish Inter Church
Meeting**

Baptism

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IRISH INTER-CHURCH MEETING
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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.



Inter-Church Meeting BAPTISM AND THE ECUMENICAL PROJECT IN IRELAND

Speaking notes of
Most Rev. Diarmuid Martin
Archbishop of Dublin and Primate of Ireland

Emmaus Conference Centre, 19th November 2009

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-baptism 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.

BAPTISM and the ecumenical project in Ireland

Seeing Baptism from the Outside - A response to the address by Bishop Richard Clark by Prof. Drew Gibson (Union Theological College, Belfast)

I would like to thank Bishop Clark for his address and offer a response that picks up seven phrases from his address but a response that contains just one single idea. Instead of thinking about baptism from the inside, let's reflect on how baptism is seen from the point of view of those outside the church. In other words, let's consider baptism from a missional perspective. To put that idea in context, Bishop Clark talks of *baptism as defined by the different Christian traditions*. As a Presbyterian from the Evangelical stream of that church this forces me to face a problem. Here is how baptism is defined by one of the key documents of the Reformed tradition, the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church; but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in the newness of life. Which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in His Church until the end of the world. (WCF 28.1)

In the Irish context, this definition sets the Reformed tradition somewhat at odds with itself. Historically we have been strongly influenced by antiCatholicism and by revivalism. This means that the above definition, which comes frighteningly close to baptismal regeneration is very uncomfortable for many. Wanting to hold on to the Westminster confession of Faith, evangelical Presbyterians find themselves forced to affirm statements that have an iconic place in our tradition even when they look awfully like what many want to reject. Putting it bluntly, in practice we do not have a coherent definition of baptism. This, in turn, gives us real problems with Bishop Clark's laudable aspiration: *May one think the unthinkable, and suggest that modes of preparation for baptism are something we might work on together?*

It's a great idea but if the Evangelical wing of the Reformed churches hasn't its baptismal theology sorted out it is unlikely that any joint preparation can be considered. But, let's think another unthinkable, maybe agreement on the theology of baptism isn't actually of primary importance; let's think for a minute about baptism as a public witness to the Gospel, a witness that the community can see and to which it might respond. Why don't we be really radical and just park for a while our different baptismal theologies and practices that reflect different understandings of the relationship between the church and the surrounding community. Let's think missionally, how does our baptismal practice look to the community outside the church?

Bishop Clark's statement concerning the great historic baptistries was strongly missional. *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*. Just as the baptistries were big public statements, so baptism itself also should be conceived missionally. It is a public statement of faith, the faith of the Church and the faith of particular individuals within the church. We must make sure that our baptismal practice is actually saying what we want to say to the watching world. I fear that what we are saying by our practice is not what the world outside is actually hearing. Did those great baptistries speak of the glory of God or of the suffering servant

or of the life giving Holy Spirit or did they speak of the generosity of a human benefactor or the pride of a human political or ecclesiastical ruler? How did the community see them? What does our baptismal practice say to the watching world?

Bishop Clark says: Perhaps even ecclesiology and missiology should only be done in the context of the meaning of baptism for all the baptised?

I believe that mission is a good context for looking at anything so I might reorder the words here to say, 'Perhaps even ecclesiology and the meaning of baptism for all the baptised should only be done in the context of mission.' (I know the grammar's a bit off but you know what I mean. If baptism is a public statement of faith then how it is perceived by the watching world is at least as important as how it is perceived ecclesologically and ecumenically. We can make the same shift in centre of gravity, perhaps more subtly, in the following sentence to bring the missional component to the centre.

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

I believe it is beyond doubt that fellowship and ecumenism only really flourish in the context of a church that is actively committed to the *Missio Dei*, and conceiving baptism as a public statement of faith has much more 'koinonial' and ecumenical potential than seeing it as an intraecclesial affair. The full significance of our baptism is realised in mission as we join with God himself in going to his world with prophetic and gracious love. If Christians are moving in the same missional direction as the Holy Spirit himself, then there is almost an inevitability about growth in fellowship.

What does the watching world think as it looks in at our endless deliberations over intraecclesial affairs? What would the world think if it saw a set of communities which differ on many things but are committed to bringing to the world the Gospel of which baptism speaks. Which is more attractive... and more authentic?

Two more of Bishop Clark's ideas are strongly missional. The first is:

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.

While I would not be at ease with some of the theology implicit in this sentence, Baptism is indeed the marker of God's primary call to all human beings. God calls all people, everywhere to himself. In this sense it is inclusive, in the way that calling to marriage or ordination are not. It speaks of the reaching out of God to all ages, races, classes, ethnic groups etc, etc. Under this primary call all other vocations take their secondary place. See the missional thrust?

But, as Bishop Clark points out, baptism also speaks of a Gospel that is exclusive.

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.

Baptism's nature as public declaration speaks clearly of the offer of new life that God holds out in Christ Jesus. It speaks of dying to sin and rising to new life and of the 'washing of regeneration'. It is an invitation to those who have not experienced these to come and join us who have experienced them, therefore our baptismal practice ought also to be a joyful invitation to come, not to come to any single ecclesially defined community but to come to the One in whom alone new life is to be found. Does the watching world see in our baptismal practice a mumbo jumbo of meaningless words or does it see a social event, an excuse for a party or maybe it sees a well fenced Masonic ritual to which only the inner circle are invited?

In conclusion, like it or not, baptismal theology and practice will continue to divide the church but that need not worry us unduly. Of much more concern is what the world sees as it observes our baptismal practice and listens to our theological debates. A church in which the public witness of baptism speaks with clarity to a needy, hurting world would surely be on the right track in its theology and practice. A church where this witness is truly lived out in self giving mission will have a far more hopeful future as a united body than we might dare to dream. Just as Reformed Evangelicals in Ireland don't lose too much sleep about consistency in their theology of baptism, perhaps we should give ourselves to ensuring that in our baptising the world sees the Gospel embodied and in our speaking of baptism the world hears the Gospel proclaimed.