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Baptism

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– *an opportunity to preach*

Martin Whelan

A priest colleague once commented that ‘all they want us for now are rites of passage and to say nice things about granny at the funeral’. The comment was made with a mix of fatalism and gallows humour. The naïve might ask; what’s wrong with that? It depends on your perspective. It’s a sorry state of affairs both from a theological or sociological perspective. From a sociological perspective we might lament that we used to be important. Like the former celebrity who is reduced to giving after-dinner speeches to audiences where half remember who he was and the other half wonder who he is; the priest might lament, ‘I used to be somebody’. From a theological perspective it is a sorry state of affairs in that surely our mission is more than naming ceremonies, dedications and commemorations. Of course it’s more. As priests we are meant to be humane ministers but we cannot be satisfied with a role that is little different from a humanist minister. We have a mandate to make disciples of the nations. But how do we minister authentically to those who only want us for rites of passage and to say nice things about granny.

There are many challenges facing an authentic celebration of the sacrament of baptism. There are issues concerning enrolment in Catholic primary schools but that is not the concern of this article. The concern here is the experience of ministering to parents who have requested baptism for their child and there is little family engagement in the life of the church. In these situations the priest may see himself and the sacrament as little more than sorry extras to what is essentially a family gathering and naming ceremony. In the 1950 classic film, *Sunset Boulevard* the retired, and forgotten, actress Norma Desmond walks onto a production set and is recognised by one of the older technicians. The technician says ‘You’re Norma Desmond. You used to be in silent pictures. You used to be big.’ ‘I am big’, retorts Norma, ‘it’s the pictures that got small.’ The scene is one of many where Norma’s delusion

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of grandeur paves the way for her descent into madness. There is little point in saying, 'We are big. It's the world that small.' It is all too easy and all too tempting to be spiritually snobbish about the surrounding culture. We can't behave like the spoilt teenager and cry, 'Nobody understands me.' It's our job to make ourselves and our message understood. There are times when we really do wonder what it is that has brought a couple to request baptism for their child. Regardless of the reasons for coming to the sacrament of baptism, the moment when parents present their child for a public ceremony is precious to them. This is a sacred moment in the life of their family. It provides a golden opportunity to speak about the mystery of our faith to people who are most attentive to life as a miracle. It is also important to note that for some couples the baptism is also a kind of ceremony of recognition. This is especially important when the couple are not married or if there is a tenuous relationship between the parents. Even though the parents may not be explicitly aware of it, baptism in these circumstances is used as an occasion for grandparents to recognise their grandchild and for the child to be publicly acknowledged as a member of both families. Some might say that this is not the concern of baptism. I would argue that it is and that this is one of the many reasons why baptism is an opportunity to talk to people about the gospel and for this message to be heard.

PRIESTHOODS

Ministering the sacrament of baptism under circumstances where the faith element is perceived to be weak forces every priest to reflect seriously on the nature of all the sacraments and our particular mission at this point in time. We must acknowledge that there is only one priest, Jesus Christ. He is the one who is really ministering to people both implicitly and explicitly. Our priesthood is a mere participation in Christ's priesthood and our priesthood is only one of many priesthoods. There is the priesthood of the mother, the father, the godparent and everybody else who will be a channel of grace in the life of the child. Our priesthood is to acknowledge all these other priesthoods and bring them together in a public church ceremony. We may be representing Christ as head of the Church but the arms of Christ holding the baby are the family. It is through them Christ will carry out his practical work of salvation whether they know it or not.

It is in this context that I want to reflect on baptism as an opportunity to preach the gospel. The first point of departure is to accept the reality and complexity of the world around us. Yes, there are people who only want us for rites of passage but there are others who want more and there are others still who want neither.

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The point is that the couple or single parent who is presenting their child for baptism is doing so because they want to. The reasons for their choice may not be clear or theologically correct but the parents are still choosing to be part of something in our Church. I have never come across a situation where I am facing passive aggressive parents who see themselves as being forced 'to go through with this'. Regardless of their reasons for being in the church for the baptism, there is an opportunity to preach the gospel. When will you ever see these people again? Never, you might reply. Exactly; make this moment count. Make them feel welcome.

LANGUAGE

It is important to be sensitive to the language of the ceremony and people's perception of it. After studying theology I am in the habit of saying 'baptism'. However, where I work 'christening' is the word of choice. Do I tell them they're wrong? No, in fact I should use whatever words they are most familiar with. It may not be what is used by the liturgists but I've developed a certain fondness for the word christening. It invokes the notion of making a little Christ out of this baby. This word, when reflected upon, can open our minds to the profound nature of this sacrament when people only see it as a naming ceremony. All baptisms provide a profound opportunity to preach whether by homily or simple commentary throughout the ceremony. In these circumstances I find it helpful to start with the fact that this is a naming ceremony. There are unplanned and accidental pregnancies but there are no unplanned or accidental names. Some names may raise eyebrows but all names have been carefully thought and talked about. Whether it's the name of a grandparent or a soccer player, the name is always precious to the parents. They have chosen it because it means something to them. I think the choosing of a name is the most sacred thing a human being can do for another human being. For all eternity this child will be known by this name. Parents, regardless of their level of faith, really respond to the acknowledgement of this. Sometimes the significance of naming has not dawned on the parents. When this is pointed out and appreciation given to them on behalf of the child for the gift of a name together with the gift of life I find that it really draws the parents into the celebration.

A GOOD NAME

Building on the recognition of the parents' choice of name it is helpful to talk about making the name a good name. Parents want their child's name to be a good name. I am not talking about a good name because it sounds trendy or traditional. I mean a good name in the sense that when people hear this name spoken in eight years'

time they will say; 'What a lovely child!' And in eighty years' time when people hear this name spoken they will say; 'What a wonderful person.' The point to make here is that the child cannot make this name a good name on his own. It will depend on the values and example the parents set for their child. They have given their child life. They have given their child a name. They must also give their child values. The values of the parents are fundamental to the christening process. This child will not be magically made into a good person through this ceremony. Rather this ceremony, this sacrament is part of an on-going process whereby the child is made in the image of Jesus. It is nice to point out that the child is the image of his parents. The point of the sacrament and the parents' education of their child is that he will also have the image of Jesus. The choice of readings and prayers of the faithful are essential in articulating this image and these values. The sacrament of baptism is once-off in the sense that it cannot be repeated but it is not a once-off if we think about how being made in the image of Jesus is a lifelong process. Our whole life is baptism. We are plunged into the waters of experience and God remakes us in the image of his Son. Baptism as a sacrament is a momentary expression of this lifelong miracle.

IMAGE OF CHRIST

When I consider what it is that remakes me in the image of Jesus Christ I must admit that this is God's action spread over countless experiences. The corners have been knocked off me and the new man emerges over time. Where then does baptism fit into this process? Is baptism really relevant to this process? I work from the theological standpoint that God does not need baptism to save people. If we truly believe that God is all powerful then we can assume that God's action is not confined to certain rituals. However, this does not provide grounds for the dismissal of the necessity of baptism. Baptism is necessary for those of us who are called into communion with God with the context of a Christian culture. Baptism is a language that gives expression to our deepest spiritual reality. We speak to God and are spoken to by God in this sacrament. I think that most people who have grown up in a Christian context are sensitive to this reality even though they may not be explicitly aware of it. Fashions and even languages change from generation to generation but certain key rituals do not change. It is these key rituals that connect us to the divine. It would be very disingenuous to exclude people from the sacramental life of the church simply because they are not as tuned into the faith as we would like them to be. No one has a window into the soul of another person. Whereas the priest may

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think that the family are more concerned with the dinner after the baptism, there may well be a mother or father for whom this is one of the most important days in their life. I see baptism as opening up our hearts and minds to God's action. It is a point of reference for understanding the destined path God lays before us. I think it is an incredibly diminished notion of sacrament if we consider baptism as somehow causing our salvation. God saves us but the way in which God saves us depends on the circumstances of our lives. Although the theological terminology *ex opere operato* is technically correct it can also be very dangerous. *Ex opera operato (Christi)*, by the work of the work (of Christ), implies that the validity of the sacrament is effected by the work of Christ and not dependent on the disposition of the minister. Although we accept that all sacraments are the work of Christ, we cannot underestimate the effect a minister has on drawing people into or putting them off the mystery of the liturgy. Clearly liturgy is not a performance, but people have an appreciation for a priest who is putting his heart into what he is doing. It is not good enough to simply carry out the ritual as described in the text. This does not mean that we treat the ritual as plastic, to be bent and twisted to our fancy. But the ritual is greatly enhanced with a simple explanation at each of its significant moments. The most effective enhancements are not words or commentary but the attitude and disposition of the minister. Therefore, we need to have an appreciation for *ex opere operantis* (by the work of the worker). It is helpful to ponder what kind of life this child will have. There is no need to mention this but the fact the minister ponders the presence of God in this child makes the priest sensitive to the sacredness of the liturgy. If the priest is genuinely sensitive to the sacredness of the liturgy he will draw the parents and family into the sacrament.

Parents certainly understand the significance of naming. They understand the significance of passing on values and setting example. It is challenging to explain the most important aspect of baptism; the fact that the child is being brought into the mystery of Jesus Christ. I find it helpful to compare the natural image of the child with obtaining the image of Jesus. As the child grows people will look for the parents' image. Sometimes it will be obvious and other times it won't. Baptism, and the life that follows baptism, is about taking on the image of Jesus. Just as people comment that the child is the image of his mother or the image of his father, it is our hope that people will see the image of Jesus in him. People respond to this comparison. It is important to talk a little about what is the image of Jesus. I usually mention the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit and leave it at that.

SYMBOLS

Following the baptism itself, the ritual of the baptismal robe and candle are effective. I usually invite the godmother to wrap the child with the robe and refer to it as a symbol of faith (as is detailed in the ritual) but I also refer to the robe as a symbol of the family's love and support for the child. I recommend that the godfather be given the job of the baptismal candle. I am always taken aback at how seriously godparents take their role regardless of their level of faith. Although the ritual simply mentions the lighting of the baptismal candle from the Paschal Candle, I like to talk about the Paschal Candle being a symbol of Jesus who is our light and our warmth and that we are passing this light on to the child who is himself a little light come into the world. I talk a bit about this child lighting up the lives of the parents and the whole family but that this light needs care and protection. Again, I think people respond to the comparison and it helps them engage with the sacrament. The whole ceremony itself should not take more than half an hour. Of course it depends on the parish as to whether the ceremony can take place within the context of Mass or on its own. I find the ritual so meaningful that I prefer to have it on its own. Also I love being able to celebrate the sacrament with one child for baptism. This is not possible in all parishes. But when it is it gives the priest a chance to refer to everybody involved by name which makes the whole experience personal.

SIMPLICITY

Simplicity needs to be at the heart of any commentary. This is in keeping with the nature of the liturgy for baptism. The Roman Rite, our Rite, is all about simplicity. The historian of liturgy, Edmund Bishop commented that 'the genius of the native Roman Rite is marked by simplicity, practicality, a great sobriety and self-control, gravity and dignity'.¹ Our commentary and ministry within the liturgy need to be in harmony with this spirit of simplicity. There is a story about a group of Irish pilgrims to the Holy Land who had made their way to the River Jordan for a renewal of their baptismal promises. As they paddled at the water's edge, an orthodox priest came out of nowhere, cut right through them and waded out into the river up to his chest and plunged into the water leaving his *kalimavkion* or priest's hat floating on top. He then popped up again, picked up his *kalimavkion* and waded back to the bank with water flowing from his beard and cassock. In comparison with the Irish pilgrims the orthodox priest really had a sense of plunging

1 Edmund Bishop, "The Genius of the Roman Rite", *Liturgica Historica: Papers on the Liturgy and Religious Life of the Western Church* (Oxford, UK: The Clarendon Press, 1918), 12.

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into the debts for a renewal of his baptism. The chaplain in the Irish group, who were all amazed at the spectacle, commented that sometimes Roman simplicity just doesn't cut it. However, I think we live in a culture that demands simplicity. The ritual of baptism in the Roman Rite does not have the mystical aesthetic of Eastern Christianity but I think its simplicity makes it conducive to our culture. Although commentary in the liturgy is effective, there is an art to providing commentary that does not clutter the ceremony. There are elements in the ritual which some might wish to soften, for example references to original sin, the rejection of Satan and the traditional profession of faith. Whereas these elements can indeed be softened but not removed with formulae in modern language I'd rather stick to the official text as translated from the Roman Ritual. Some of the simpler formulae available can be a little pretentious in that they may assume that people are not capable of understanding the original.

'Go out and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:19).' This is not an imperial command to force all people into a particular pattern of faith or lifestyle. If we truly believe that it is Christ is the highpriest behind all the sacraments then this commission is an invitation to assist Christ in his work. In the request for baptism we are asked by parents to have a significant part in the life of their child. Even if this is the only time we will ever engage with the family we have been invited into the sanctuary of their private lives. There is no greater lectern from which to preach the Gospel.

The future Church. I have no idea how the Church in Ireland will be twenty years from now. But if given a choice between the certain, powerful and controlling Church in which I was ordained and the wounded, humbled and, I believe, more honest Church of today, I would have no difficulty in making my choice.

— WILLIE WALSH, *No Crusader* (Dublin: Columba Press) p. 131.