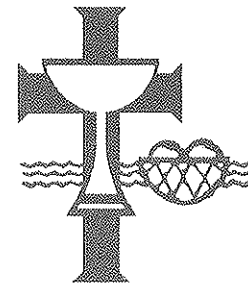


HOLY BAPTISM

A Liturgical and
Pastoral
Commentary



Associated Parishes
for Liturgy and Mission

The booklet is one in a series dealing with the work of the Parishes of the Episcopal Church.

Prepared by the laity and clergy of the Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission.

The Associated Parishes is a group of persons belonging to the Episcopal Church, the Anglican Church of Canada, and other Christian Churches, who are committed to the renewal of Christian life and worship. During the half-century of its existence, this group has especially concerned itself with providing an articulate expression of the principles of the Liturgical Movement in North America, as we have experienced and tested these within the life of our congregations.

Further information will be gladly supplied, and applications for membership will be received by the Coordinator of the Associated Parishes, P.O. Box 123003, Ft. Worth, TX. 76121-3003. Regular membership dues are \$25 per year (\$10 for students).

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INTRODUCTION

As soon as the newly baptized come forth from those sacred waters, all who are present embrace them, greet them, kiss them, rejoice with them, and congratulate them, because those who were heretofore slaves and captives have suddenly become free men and women and sons and daughters and have been invited to the royal table. For straightway after they come up from the waters, they are led to the awesome table heavy laden with countless favors, where they taste of the Master's body and blood, and become a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit. Since they have put on Christ himself, wherever they go they are like angels on earth, rivaling the brilliance of the rays of the sun.

John Chrysostom¹

The rite of Christian initiation has been handed down to us by countless generations of those who have baptized. Christ received from John the Baptist a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, transformed it and made it his own, united it with his death and resurrection, and enjoined it on his followers as a baptism for all peoples. This liturgy, in which God acts among us to adopt us as daughters and sons, is a fresh spring of new birth. Those baptized into Christ find what it means to put on Christ and to follow Christ. They find Christ in the gathering of the faithful, in the word, in the eucharist, in themselves, and in others. We who baptize also are renewed. Through this liturgy, as we bring new Christians into the church, we restore the life of the church. We refresh its worship. We find new sources of meaning in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. We are formed anew, as images of Christ, in our royal priesthood and in our service to the poor and needy.

In our discovery of the riches of baptism we walk in the steps of our fathers and mothers of old. Preachers of the patristic church found a wealth of meaning in the images and actions of this complex rite. The major themes of baptism are:

1. Participation in Christ's death and resurrection. Baptism is a full sharing in the life of Christ. If we are to rise with Christ from the dead, we must first die with Christ. Just as Christ died on the cross, we die in baptism. Just as Christ rose from the dead, we rise in baptism. We who drown in a watery grave are born again from the womb of the Church.
2. Conversion, pardoning, and cleansing. Confession of sin and conversion of heart lead to a cleansing bath for the new Christian. As surely as Pharaoh and his warriors drowned in the Red Sea, Satan and sin drown in the flowing waters of forgiveness, purity, healing, and liberation.
3. The gift of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit who hovers over all creation descended on Christ at his baptism and on the disciples at Pentecost. God anoints and seals all the baptized, unites us, and adopts us as sons and daughters in a new fullness of the Spirit. The Spirit is given in baptism as a guarantee of Christian hope, a spiritual enlightenment, and a power to overcome temptation.
4. Incorporation into the body of Christ. We are baptized into a community of faith, the people of God, the body of Christ. Because there is one baptism, one God and Father of us all, we follow Christ as one family. Our union with Christ and each other extends to every time and place and includes the communion of saints beyond the grave.
5. The sign of the kingdom. Through baptism we enter the reign of God, which has already begun to break into the world. We share in the eternal priesthood of Christ. We offer a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. We sit at the messianic banquet. All about us, the old gives way to the new and life is refreshed. We wait with joy for the life of the world to come.'

The meaning of baptism is revealed by the rite itself, The preparations, the occasions on which we baptize, the space we use, the people who function in various ways, the bishop at the center, the baptismal liturgy, the water, the chrism, the prayers, the eucharist, first communion—all these speak of what we mean by baptism, christening, Christian initiation.

Throughout this commentary, there are references to three basic texts:

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| BCP | <i>The Book of Common Prayer</i> of the Episcopal Church (USA) (1979); |
| BAS | <i>The Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada (1985)</i> ; |
| BOS | <i>The Book of Occasional Services</i> of the Episcopal Church (USA).
Page citations are from the 1994 edition. |

PREPARATION FOR BAPTISM

Because baptism deals with the most serious issues of life and death, the church since the earliest times has assumed that candidates will undergo a period of preparation. BCP and BAS specify two different age groups of baptismal candidates, (1) adults and older children and (2) infants and younger children. Because only the mature can reject evil and turn to Christ, adults and older children are the “normative” candidates, but the family of believers also encompasses younger children and infants as full members.’ For each group preparation takes a different form:

1. Adults and older children

After many centuries, it is once again common for people to reach maturity without having been baptized. In order to deal with this pastoral situation, the church has restored from ancient times the catechumenate. BOS describes and outlines this “period of training and instruction in Christian understandings about God, human relationships, and the meaning of life, which culminates in the reception of the

Sacraments of Christian Initiation” (BOS 114). The duration of the catechumenate varies but normally includes at least the entire Lenten season, with baptism at the Easter Vigil. The intensity of the formation period may also vary, according to individual needs. Sponsors accompany their catechumens through the entire process.

2. Infants and younger children

BCP and BAS require that parents and godparents “be instructed in meaning of Baptism, in their duties to help the new Christians grow in the knowledge and love of God, and in their responsibilities as members of his Church” (BCP 298, BAS 150). BOS now has a process entitled “The Preparation of Parents and Godparents for the Baptism of Infants and Young Children” (BOS 159-162). It is divided into stages, paralleling the catechumenate.

As the day of baptism approaches, it is an ancient custom for the mature candidates, the sponsors and godparents, and other Christians to prepare by fasting and prayer. BOS provides a form for a vigil on Saturday evening when the bishop is to baptize on the following morning (BOS 131). When baptism is to take place at the Easter Vigil, the candidates and sponsors should be encouraged to fast at least on Holy Saturday and until they receive communion. On Holy Saturday they and their families may bake the bread for the baptismal eucharist.

OCCASIONS FOR BAPTISM

Both BCP and BAS assume that Christian initiation will take place within the eucharist “as the chief service on a Sunday or other feast” (BCP 298, BAS 150). Four feasts are “especially appropriate” (BCP 312, BAS 147): the Easter Vigil, the Day of Pentecost, All Saints’ Day or the Sunday after All Saints’ Day, and

the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord (the First Sunday after the Epiphany). Each occasion reinforces the theology of Christian initiation. As the queen of feasts in the Christian year, “the night when Christ broke the bonds of death and hell,” the paschal mystery in which all the faithful participate, the Easter Vigil holds first place as an occasion for baptism. Of the other occasions, the Day of Pentecost emphasizes the gift of the Spirit, All Saints’ stresses our incorporation in the communion of saints, and the Baptism of our Lord recalls Christ’s own baptism. Another occasion strongly recommended is “when a bishop is present.” The best occasion is the visit of the bishop on one of the four feasts, especially the Easter Vigil. BAS addresses the occasional pastoral need for celebrating baptism during the five months from Pentecost to All Saints’ Day by stating “the Transfiguration of the Lord and Holy Cross Day or the Sundays after them are suitable days” (BAS 163).

SPACE FOR BAPTISM

Every place of worship should have three main focal points, the pulpit (Word), the altar (Eucharist) and the font (Baptism). The font for baptism should occupy its own distinct place, either within the main hall of worship (in clear view of the people) or in a baptistry, a separate room or building in which the people can gather. It is desirable that the font be of a size and design sufficient for immersion of candidates, and that the water be supplied by a fountain of some sort if possible (“living water”), and surrounded by space for visibility and to allow the congregation to gather.

An aumbry or secure chest for the oil of chrism may be placed near the font or in some other prominent place. The oil should be kept in a different aumbry from the reserved sacrament.

BISHOP AS CELEBRANT

The bishop, as the symbol of the Church's unity, is the normative celebrant of every baptism and eucharist in the diocese. Even when the bishop is not physically present, the priest who presides stands as the main sign of the bishop among the people. But the actual presence of the bishop as celebrant of baptism is an event of great importance. The bishop "is expected" to preside over the entire liturgical action, preach, bless the water [and chrism], seal, and preside at the eucharist. Administration of the water is normally done by a priest or deacon.

OTHERS WHO FUNCTION

In the absence of a bishop, a priest performs all the bishop's functions, except (in BCP) for the optional blessing of chrism in the course of the baptismal liturgy. (BAS provides for blessing of Chrism at a special diocesan service.)

The bishop (or priest) may delegate the baptism in water to an assisting priest or to a deacon. In addition, a deacon performs all the liturgical functions normal to the diaconate.

A deacon may preside only when no bishop or priest is available, and then only on one of the four "especially appropriate" occasions. In the Episcopal Church, the deacon must be specially authorized by the bishop to preside, in which case, a deacon "omits the prayer over the candidates, page 308, and the formula and action which follow."

Among others who function, the sponsors (commonly called godparents if the candidate is an infant or younger child) play a special role. "It is fitting that parents be included among the [godparents/sponsors] of their children" (BCP 298, BAS 150) Sponsors present their candidates, and godparents also make the

promises and take the vows in the name of their candidates. Both BCP and BAS suggest that sponsors act as readers, and they may also lead the prayers for the candidates (BCP 305, BAS 155). The newly baptized may present the bread and wine, unless they are incapable of doing so, in which case the sponsors may present them.

ENTRANCE RITE AND LITURGY OF THE WORD

The purpose of the entrance rite (in BAS, The Gathering of the Community) is to gather the people. It is suitable that the candidates and their sponsors join the procession and take seats at the front of the church, or near the font.

At the Easter Vigil the entrance rite takes a special form in which the paschal candle is lit and the Exsultet is sung.

On other occasions the opening acclamation of the eucharist is expanded by a further dialogue taken from Ephesians 4:4-6 (music in the Episcopal Hymnal at S-71 through S-74). [BCP permits insertion of the Gloria in excelsis at this point.] The entrance rite concludes with the salutation and collect.

In the liturgy of the word the readings are normally those of the Sunday or feast on which the baptism occurs. (BCP and BAS also provide readings for other occasions; BCP provides a collect as well.) As usual, lay persons, especially sponsors, act as readers and cantors. Only baptized persons should perform these functions. A deacon when present proclaims the gospel. The sermon is normally preached after the gospel. It is based on the readings of the day and meanings of baptism. Since baptism is the supreme sacrament of absolution and includes the profession of faith in the Baptismal Covenant, the Nicene Creed and the Confession of Sin are omitted in this liturgy.

PRESENTATION AND EXAMINATION OF THE CANDIDATES

The presentation and examination best takes place in full view of the congregation. In many churches the most suitable place will be the entrance to the chancel. The paschal candle should always be present at the font and lighted. In Easter Season (or at any other time) when the candle is located elsewhere, it is a helpful symbol that the deacon carry the lighted paschal candle at the head of the procession to and from the font.

Candidates able to answer for themselves (adults and older children) are presented individually to the bishop (or priest) by their sponsors. Infants and younger children are presented by their parents and other sponsors, who must promise to raise the child “in the Christian faith and life.”

Where there are several candidates, it may be helpful to have one candidate (and sponsors) stand and be presented, then move to one side (or be reseated) for the next presentation, and so forth. Once all have been presented, the bishop (or priest) examines the candidates, or their parents and godparents, in a series of six questions. The candidates renounce evil three times and commit to Christ three times. *An* ancient custom at this point was for the candidates to face to the west when renouncing Satan and turn to the east when affirming Christ. One adaptation of this custom for our age is to have the presentation and examination take place at the main entrance to the room, where the candidates and sponsors may turn away from the People for the first three questions (the renunciations) and turn back toward them for the last three questions (the act of adherence). For this action to be effective, the People must stand and turn toward the entrance.

The people respond by affirming their support of the candidates “in their life in Christ.” The involvement of the people here and elsewhere emphasizes the public nature of baptism as entrance into a household or family, the communion of saints.

BAPTISMAL COVENANT (BCP)

At this point in BCP, the people are asked to join the candidates in renewing their own baptismal covenant in the Apostles’ Creed. The creed is followed by five more questions, addressed to all the people, about whether they will live out their commitment to Christ through fellowship in the church, proclamation of the gospel, and service to all persons.

PRAYERS FOR THE CANDIDATES

The rite continues with the prayers for the candidates, a litany sung or said by a deacon, sponsor, or other person. At this point the liturgy begins to move towards its climax. “If the Presentation of the Candidates does not take place at the font, then before or during the petitions (BCP 305, BAS 155) the ministers, candidates, and sponsors go to the font for the Thanksgiving over the Water” (BCP 312, BAS 163). They move in a formal or loose procession during the litany or during the singing of an appropriate psalm (especially Psalm 42 with its imagery of thirst for God) or a hymn or anthem. In most liturgical spaces the singing of the litany amply covers this movement and allows the people to watch or join the procession without having to carry a book. The music for the response “Lord, hear our prayer” (Episcopal Hymnal S-75) is easy to remember. The bishop—or in BAS, the person who led the litany—concludes with a brief prayer; the bishop (or priest) then proceeds to bless the water.

THANKSGIVING OVER THE WATER

The water rite is the central sacramental act of baptism. It has all the popular qualities of great public celebrations. It appeals to the senses of sight and sound, it is messy and often vulgar, it is prone to the unexpected and accidental, it is sometimes humorous. Both

books require that the people “have a clear view of the action.” Architecture permitting, the bishop (or priest) “should face the people across the font” (BCP 313, BAS 163), and the sponsors should stand off to one or both sides. Unless the font already contains running water, the first thing to do is to fill it with clean water or add more water to it, with enough splash to be seen and heard.

Baptism is to be by immersion or by pouring water. There should be sufficient water to pour, which is not possible with a dainty silver bowl in the bottom of the font. The font itself is the best water container, but if a container is to be placed inside the font, it should be specially fashioned to duplicate the size and form of the font itself, perhaps protruding slightly above the rim of the font to allow grasping for removal. Water should fill the font or liner to *2/3* or more of its capacity.

While some fonts are large enough to permit the immersion of infants, another arrangement, such as a baptismal pool or large tub of some sort, will be needed to allow the immersion of adults or older children. If immersion is impossible, water should be poured over the candidate, and not merely sprinkled onto the hair.

The symbolism of water is incredibly complex. From the waters of birth to the waters of bathing and drinking to the waters of death, throughout our lives we are constantly reminded of the power of water and the danger of drought. In the prayer of thanksgiving (BAS actually offers two versions of this prayer), the bishop (or priest) recalls the chief biblical images of water—the waters of creation, the passage of the Hebrew people through the Red Sea, the baptism of Christ in the Jordan—and gives thanks for our death and resurrection with Christ and our rebirth by the Holy Spirit in the water of baptism. The prayer closes with an invocation of the Spirit, during which (in BCP) the bishop (or priest) touches the water.

After this prayer, BCP (only) provides a form for consecration of chrism when the bishop is present. The bishop places a hand on the vessel of oil and sings or says a prayer which associates the oil of chrism with our sharing in the royal priesthood of Christ. BAS requires that chrism be consecrated only at the Service of Blessing of Oils (BAS 618). Maundy Thursday is suggested as an excellent date, but even more important than the date is that it be done on an occasion with maximum attendance by clergy and laity, as this is an action of the whole diocesan church. (Such an alternative is also an option according to BOS 234-236.)

Chrism is pure oil (BOS specifies olive oil only, BAS allows other plant oil where circumstances require) to which a small amount of oil of balsam or other fragrant oil has been added, either before the liturgy or just before the consecratory prayer. It should be kept in an ampulla or other vessel, preferably large and of clear glass, so that the people can see the color of the oil.

Because of the festal nature of baptism, it is desirable whenever possible to sing the prayers for the candidates, the thanksgiving over the water, [and the consecration of chrism]. The Episcopal Church provides the ministerial chant in the back of the Altar Book and the people’s responses in the Hymnal at S-75.

BAPTISMAL COVENANT (BAS)

At this point in BAS, the people are asked to join the candidates in renewing their own baptismal covenant in the Apostles’ Creed. The creed is followed by five more questions, addressed to all the people, about whether they will live out their commitment to Christ through fellowship in the church, proclamation of the gospel, and service to all persons.

THE BAPTISM

One by one the candidates come forward or are carried to the font. Each candidate is presented by name, then enters, leans over, or is held over the water. If the candidate enters the water, the priest or deacon who baptizes may stand at the edge of the font or also enter the water. The baptizer then completely immerses the candidate three times while repeating the candidate's name and saying the baptismal formula, "I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Immersion of an infant is similar. If the candidate leans over the water, or an infant is held for pouring, the baptizer should pour a copious amount of water three times over the candidate's head and as much of the body as possible. It is important that water be used generously, to allow its full symbolism to be expressed.

Sponsors have an important role to play: prepare the candidates to dress, or undress, for a wet dunking; assist the candidates in and out of the font; help the newly baptized to dry off and dress in dry clothing or christening garments, the white robes of salvation. The parish should provide towels for drying and a room for changing.

BAS prescribes a fixed order from the water baptism to the offertory. BCP provides a less detailed order, and permits the sealing [with chrism] to be done either before or after the prayer for the gifts of the Spirit.

The prayer for the gifts of the Spirit takes place in full sight of the congregation. Where this requires a movement from the font to the front of the church, users of BCP should exercise the option to seal before that prayer. Otherwise, the movement would separate the sealing from the water baptism by the time and action of the procession and prayer, and also by removing it from the baptismal space around the font.

The sealing action, also known as consignation or chrismation, is done by the celebrant. BCP specifies that the celebrant lays a hand on each person's head for the sealing. The celebrant marks the sign of the cross on the forehead (using chrism if desired). The action is accompanied (in BAS) by the words, "I sign you with the cross, and mark you as Christ's own for ever." BCP specifies use of the person's name and the words, "*N.*, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever."

Neither BCP nor BAS requires chrism, but it is desirable to use it. Used in ancient times for the anointing of prophets, priests, and kings, oil of chrism is a biblical sign of royal priesthood and life in the Spirit, and its rich smell should envelop the newly baptized. It is best to have the oil in a bowl or flask, then pour the oil over the candidate or into the hand for application.

Led by the bishop (or priest), the procession may return to the front of the church. The return procession may be accompanied by a suitable psalm (especially Psalm 23, with its images of water, passage through death, anointing with oil, and table with full cup) or a hymn or anthem. In some places the bishop (or priest) sprinkles the congregation with water from the font during the procession.

At this point (in BAS, or as an option in BCP) the bishop (or priest), in full sight of the congregation, prays for the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit, using a version of the prayer formerly used at confirmation.

A lighted candle is then given to each of the newly baptized (or to a godparent). BCP suggests each be lighted from the Paschal Candle. BAS makes provisions for "one of the ministers" to give the candle with these words, "Receive the light of Christ, to show that you have passed from darkness to light." As minister of the Paschal Candle, it is fitting for a deacon to do this. If there are more than one candidate, the words "Receive the light of Christ"

may be repeated as each candle is presented, concluding, after all have received their candles, with the words “to show that you have passed from darkness to light”, signaling the congregation to respond “Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (BAS 160). In many places it has become customary to relight this candle in the home on each anniversary of the baptism. (BCP makes the giving of the candle optional.)

When all have been sealed, and the bishop (or priest) has prayed for the sevenfold gifts, [and the candles have been presented,] the people welcome the newly baptized “into the household of God” and may even applaud and cheer.

At this point the newly baptized are taken to appropriate areas to be dried and dressed and return for the peace. While waiting for their return, appropriate action might include *asperges* (sprinkling the congregation with water from the font) and singing of hymns. Psalm 32 may be sung (or Psalm 23, if not used earlier in the rite).

Confirmation, reception, and reaffirmation may follow. In many places there is still a tendency to elevate these rites to an importance at least equal, and sometimes superior, to baptism. When they must take place with baptism, care must be taken that they not overshadow the great sacrament of new life. The way we celebrate baptism should always hold it up before the church as the one sufficient rite of Christian initiation.

The kiss of peace follows. The kiss at this point is mainly for the newly baptized and should be given to them first, especially by the bishop (or priest) and then the sponsors. Then all should exchange the peace.

Following the peace, BCP provides for the Prayers of the People, although this is a departure from the customary order. It is recommended that the Prayers of the People always be used. The

liturgy offers no other occasion for the people to offer prayers for the church and the world, and this is the first opportunity for the newly baptized to exercise their royal priesthood in Christ through intercession. When necessary, however, a brief form of the prayers may be used. In addition or as an alternative, intercessions may be included in Eucharistic Prayer D (BCP 375) or Eucharistic Prayer 6 (BAS 210).

FIRST COMMUNION

The newly baptized complete their entry into the church by participating in the eucharist and receiving communion for the first time. At the offertory, or preparation of the gifts, they (or their sponsors) come forward to the altar and present the oblations of bread and wine. In some places, the newly baptized remain standing near the altar during the eucharistic prayer. “In full sight of the people, they should receive their first communion from the chief celebrant and deacon immediately after the liturgical ministers and before the rest of the people.”⁴

The communion of infants may require pastoral preparation. Most infants are able to eat a particle of soft bread in the mouth and will readily take wine from a small spoon or suck wine from the finger of the deacon, other ministers of the chalice, or mother or father. If necessary, communion may be given in the form of wine alone. Reception of communion should thereafter be as much a part of the child’s life as other eating. Children often are able to drink from the cup, with a little help, soon after being weaned.

CHRISTIAN LIFE AFTER BAPTISM⁵

The newly baptized should continue to grow in the Christian family and to learn its ways

For the mature persons who have been through the catechumenate, the period after baptism, anciently called *mystagogia* (initiation into mysteries), extends through the fifty days of Easter. Less strictly defined than the catechumenate, the period involves integration into the life and worship of the church, in which instructors and sponsors continue to help the new Christian reflect on the experience of initiation. Preachers, especially the bishop, should take the opportunity to address the newly baptized, and the rest of the people, on the meaning of the sacraments. Prayer groups and other support groups should draw them into their midst

Similarly, but much more gradually and over a longer period, infants and younger children need to be taught that the family of the church is the larger household of God which includes their natural family. They should continue to join in the eucharist and to eat and drink the sacrament, learning when old enough to reflect upon baptism and their experience of eucharist, and learning through imitation that good manners towards God and their brothers and sisters in Christ is the first step towards mature reverence and faith.

NOTES

1. From a catechetical address delivered at Antioch during Lent c. 390. Stavronikita Series, No, 2, in E.C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, SPCK, London, 1970, p. 41.
2. The five major themes of baptism are adapted from *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1982, pp. 2-3. See also the four categories of "the inward and spiritual grace in Baptism," Catechism, BCP, p. 858.
3. The International Anglican Liturgical Consultation on Children and Communion, held in Boston on July 29-31, 1985, recommended "that since baptism is the sacramental sign of full incorporation into the church, all baptized persons be admitted to communion." See "The Boston Statement" in *Children at the Table*, Church Publishing, New York, 1994.
4. This was also a recommendation of the 1985 In International Anglican Liturgical Consultation on Children and Communion. See note 3, above.
5. Canadian Anglicans may refer to *Making Disciples* by J. W. B. Hill (Hoskin Books, 1991) for rites based on BAS.

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