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**BAPTISM BY IMMERSION**  
**METHODS OF BAPTISM**

- (a) Immersion: From the available evidence and from the remains of the early fonts which survive, it seems clear that in spite of the symbolism of drowning (dying with Christ), baptism in the first four centuries or so were normally by immersion, rather than submersion. In other words, the candidate stood or knelt in the water up to his waist, and water was then poured over him. The power of the symbol derived not from being submerged or pushed under the water, but rather from going down into the water and rising up out of it. Early representations of Baptism of our Lord, or of saints, (for example the mosaics at Ravenna or the gold altar front at San Ambrogio in Milan) do not represent fonts as being deeper than waist height.
- (b) Infusion (affusion) came into being when the infant, rather than adult, baptism became the norm in mediaeval Christendom. Although mediaeval fonts, especially the earlier ones, are normally large enough to immerse an infant, if not submerge him, few fonts are large enough to allow of the immersion of adult candidates. And did the climate have anything to do with it? In Milan in the Ambrosian rite baptism is by immersion to this day.
- (c) Submersion: churches and sects which broke away at the time of the Reformation, such as Baptists and the Brethren returned to the more literal and primitive forms, and this literalism demanded submersion, rather than affusion or immersion.
- (d) Sprinkling: by the 18<sup>th</sup> century it is clear from the size of the fonts, many of which are no bigger than the holy water stoups of the churches of Italy, and from literary references, that the sprinkling of a few drops of water was considered sufficient. This is a tradition continued by the supply of so-called “portable fonts”, which range in size from a salad-bowl to a complete miniature mediaeval font in plaster of paris with a bowl no bigger than an ashtray.
- (e) Nonetheless, provision for baptism by immersion has always been part of Anglican practice, and by the tradition each diocese has one church with a baptismal font where immersion is possible – a classic example being in the (now disused) Church of St Mary of Lambeth.

Behind the desire to practise baptism by immersion – usually a request made by adult candidates in search of a powerful experience – lies the recovery of baptism as a dying and rising with Christ. “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death?” (Romans 6 v.3) Dying and rising, the putting off of the old life and being clothed with the new, is the heart of the baptismal action.

The baptismal waters have more to do with the regeneration of life (Genesis 1 v.3) and the washing away of the stain of sin. The water which the agent of drowning and death is also the water over which is the Holy Spirit hovers to bring a new creation to birth. The waters of the womb are parted, the candidate goes through them to a new birth, through them as the children of Israel went through the Red Sea: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;” (Isaiah 43 vv. 1-2).

More attention has been paid in recent years to the symbolism of death and resurrection, than to the symbolism of passing through the waters to a new life; and little thought has been given to the putting off of the old and being clothed with the new: stripping off of the old, dirty clothes, and being clothed with the new white robe – putting on Christ.

Although there may be a natural desire to return to the pre-fall paradisaical state of “naked but not ashamed” (Genesis 2 v25), today’s enthusiasm for public baptism contrasts sharply with the self contained baptistries in early churches, and the division into male and female candidates – and indeed, male and (almost certainly) female deacons who accompany them down into the water.

Anointed with the sign of the cross, the symbol of victory, before their baptism, as an athlete prepares for the struggle by making his muscles supple, the candidate is sealed by the Bishop with the perfumed oil Chrism as he leaves the water as a sign of his incorporation into the royal priesthood of Christ. Judging by the bath oils which are available today for both men and women, there should be little objection raised to restoring the use of the baptismal oils.

But however powerful the symbols of anointing and clothing may be, they are clearly secondary to the primary symbolism of water, where the waters are not an inert mass so much as a wall, a barrier, a gateway, to be passed through, a womb from whose darkness new life emerges, a well-spring which promises a new creation.

### **MINISTERING THE SACRAMENT**

The chief minister of baptism is the Bishop, and there is a requirement (Canon B24 2) that the Bishop be informed in the case of every adult baptism. In the case of adults it is clearly implied that baptism and confirmation are not to be separated, and although the Bishop may delegate parts of the service to others eg. The signing of the cross, the giving of light, and even the water baptism yet he presides over the whole rite.

It is important, therefore, in any diocese that the administration of baptism shall not be so fragmented by different styles of baptism that candidates can say “I belong to Apollos”, or “I belong to Cephas” there must be a recognisable unity between the rites. While the person of the Bishop may be sufficient to guarantee the underlying unity expressed in a variety of different modes, the problem becomes more acute when different styles are practised in any one Church: it is not uncommon for an adult in the enthusiasm of a newly-awakened faith to ask if he can be baptised properly now, by which he means immersion – or submersion.

If, therefore, it is desired to make provision for baptism by immersion or submersion, then it is important that it the same baptismal font which is used for baptism of infants. It is equally important that this is which is the font, is a permanent and visible feature of the Church, witnessing to that important and domicinal sacrament and not being covered over when not in use. As baptism is an initiation, no person can be baptised a second time: but with the possibility of baptism being administered in a diversity of ways, it is all the more important to make it clear that the baptism is uniting – something all Christians have in common with different modes of baptism exercised within one Church, the sacrament could easily become divisive.

**There must be therefore one font, not several, in or at which all baptisms can be celebrated.**

## THE NATURE AND POSITIONING OF THE FONT

The font must be functionally useful: it must hold sufficient water, and the water must be so placed that the minister who is officiating can reach it. It must be sufficient in depth and space for adult and infant candidates to be baptised in it or by it as is suitable for a place where the individual affirms his faith in God and consciously starts to share God's life, the font needs to be set in a space scaled to the individual. This is in contrast to the altar which is the place where we who are many are made of one in Christ. The font's place in relation to the altar, in relation to the entrance or narthex of the Church, and in relation to the place where the Gospel is proclaimed, is of great importance: the font contains the waters we pass through as we move from death to life: they are not the end of the journey, but the gateway which leads from the old life to the new. The size, shape and positioning of the font needs to express this.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. It is important that the Bishop gives teaching on the uniting nature of the sacrament of baptism.
2. There should be only one font at which baptisms are administered in any one Church.
3. Although submersion has attractions to the literally minded, immersion, passing through the waters, seems the more ancient practice.
4. A "bird-bath" font is unlikely to be adequate either in terms of the amount of water it contains, or what it speaks of when not in use.
5. There is no sense of having a font of one kind in one place, and then not using it but administering baptism from a temporary one elsewhere.
6. Rather than a tank set into the floor, where a minister might have considerable difficulty in baptising an infant, and where it is – difficult even if it is safe – to leave the font uncovered and so allow it to speak of the sacrament of baptism, it might be better to consider a rectangular font approximately 4 x 3 x 2 into, or through which, it would be possible to step and beside which it would be possible to kneel or stand in order to immerse an infant. Examples exist of such fonts where a broad cross-shape is cut out of a solid block of marble and provided with one or two steps. Such a font could be entered and left with reasonable dignity, and would enable adults to kneel in it (as the Saxon kings are depicted for their baptism) while considerable quantities of water are poured over them. This may not answer the need for submersion, but it would provide a dignified and unified form of administering baptism from a baptismal font whose size, shape and positioning would make its function quite clear.

Postscript:

"By baptism, Christians are immersed in the liberating death of Christ where their sins are buried, where the 'old Adam' is crucified with Christ, and where the power of sin is broken. Thus those baptised are no longer slaves to sin, but free. Fully identified with the Christ, they are buried with him and are raised here and now to a new life in the power of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, confident that they will also ultimately be one with him in a resurrection like his". (From the Lima Statement of Baptism.)

12<sup>th</sup> June, 1987

## HOUSE OF BISHOPS' RESOLUTION

- (a) To consult with the CCC and Chancellors to ensure that wherever there is to be a font which provides for baptism by immersion or submersion, it should also be readily usable for baptism by affusion.
- (b) To encourage bishops at baptisms and confirmations to make the most of the symbolism, especially ensuring a plentiful use of water and the close inter-relationship of vows and the threefold baptism; and to encourage clergy to follow such practice in their baptisms.
- (c)
  - (i) To ask the Liturgical Commission to consider again the renewal of baptismal vows, and perhaps to prepare a more significant and dramatic rite than that provided in the ASB.
  - (ii) The Commission might also consider some rite for the restoration of the lapsed.
  - (iii) Meanwhile it may be appropriate not to encourage or countenance some unofficial practices which appear to be a renewal of baptism.
- (d) To remind the clergy and lay people that the earliest Christian practice was baptism by immersion, rather than by submersion, which appears to be the preferred option today.

21<sup>st</sup> October 1987