

Dying and Rising As We Grow Up: Lifelong Baptismal Formation

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In honor of David Truemper, who taught me the Lutheran Confessions, I want to begin with a quotation from the Large Catechism. Luther writes:

Thus we see what a great and excellent thing baptism is, which snatches us from the jaws of the devil and makes God our own, overcomes and takes away sin and daily strengthens the new man, always remains until we pass from this present misery to eternal glory. Therefore let everybody regard his baptism as the daily garment which he is to wear all the time. Every day he should be found in faith and amid its fruits, every day he should be suppressing the old man and growing up in the new.

Lutheran Confessions IV:83-4 (Tappert 446)

How do we help each other to see ourselves daily clothing ourselves in the garment of baptism? What will help us to claim the baptismal gift of God through faith, to return constantly to the promise in our baptism? And within the framework of that gracious promise, how can we find support in the ups and downs, the fits and starts that characterize our faith journey? How can we come to hear the voice of God in our baptism calling us in the present to deeper commitment and continual conversion?

It's often hard for Lutherans to talk about growth in faith without experiencing Works Righteousness Anxiety. But when Luther himself talks about the lifelong reality of baptism, he uses double language. Our dying and rising is eschatologically complete; it has happened sacramentally, in God's promise of what will happen at the Last Day. Yet our dying in order to rise is also progressive: we slay our sin more and more as long as we live (*Luther's Works* 35:33). "Indeed, we need continually to be baptized more and more, until we fulfill the sign perfectly at the Last Day." (*LW* 36:69)

This vision of Christian life as progressive baptism may help us get at the question of how the sacrament of baptism forms human conversion and commitment. This question becomes especially acute when we baptize babies. The practice of baptism was certainly originally developed in the early church as a rite implying adult conversion, repentance, and commitment in response to the Gospel. This is true even if, as may well be the case, people of all ages were baptized from the first, whenever the head of a household converted. Even so, the language of biblical theology about baptism and of the earliest baptismal rites does imply an adult subject who is renouncing evil and affirming belief, on whom God is acting to effect a radical conversion of life. This doesn't mean, of course, that adult baptism involving conversion settles the matter for life. Everyone should grow in faith after baptism, whether that growth is steady and gradual or whether it

takes more the form of repeated re-conversion or radical realignment. So for those baptized as converting adults as well as for those baptized in infancy or early childhood, there remains the question of how post-baptismal growth in faith and new and deeper forms of commitment relate to baptism.

Infant baptism, though, is often particularly in danger of being seen as irrelevant to the struggles of the postbaptismal faith journey. It is experienced culturally as a baby rite, it precedes conscious faith, and thus seems disconnected from the realities of conversion and commitment. In addition, adult commitment does not necessarily follow on infant baptism, even when the baby's parents do all they can to incorporate the child into the life of the church. This disconnection between infant baptism and commitment is what led some Protestant churches to try to cast adolescent confirmation as a rite of commitment. It is what leads some Christians, from the first Baptists on, to seek rebaptism as adolescents or adults when they experience a conscious conversion of life. It is what led some contemporary liturgical scholars, impressed by the impact on adult candidates of a fullblown baptismal ritual process, to wish that we would rarely or never baptize infants.

Now, I am deeply committed to the practice of baptizing the babies of believing parents, though I do think we need to find better ways to assess both the parents' commitment to the community of faith and the community's commitment to the child. I'm not going to lay out all the reasons why I think our churches are right to go on baptizing babies—except to say that I think that Jesus' ministry witnessed in a prophetic way to a reign of God in which there is no more male and female, no more slave or free, no more Jew or Gentile, and no more grown-up or child. But given that we are baptizing infants, we have to take especially seriously the questions, how do we all come to experience baptism as something which today makes God our own, which daily overcomes sin and strengthens the new self in us? How do we come to experience our continual struggles to come to faith as of a piece with that long-ago washing? As church leaders, educators, liturgists, and as parents and godparents, it is our responsibility to try to make sure that the voice of God in baptism continues to be heard throughout life in the present tense, as the gracious promise of adoption and salvation and as the calling to radical commitment to neighbor love.

One of the ways we do this is to preach and teach baptism at every opportunity, to make explicit how all of Christian life and faithfulness is rooted in God's baptismal promise and calling. This is just talk, and talk alone is not enough, but talk can do a lot to raise awareness. Here I can pay tribute to another member of the Institute's planning team, by telling a story of my friend Jon Nelson's internship. Jon decided that if he could accomplish just one thing on his internship, it would be to raise the congregation's awareness of baptism as the promise they live out of each day. So he talked about baptism all the time, made reference to it in every sermon, and brought it up in relation to all sorts of everyday discussion in committee meetings, classrooms, and general conversation. Since baptism is

related to everything in Christian life, he didn't have to stretch to do this, and it came across as perfectly natural, not as a personal agenda. He didn't tell the congregation they should do anything different in relation to baptism; he just kept it in the foreground at all times. By spring people were spontaneously, with out any prompting from Jon at all, thinking of ways to change what they did in telling ways—for instance, someone asked whether the congregation could send the children baptism day cards instead of birthday cards. So the right form of talk can make a difference all by itself!

Another venue for promoting an understanding of baptism as a life-long promise of grace and call to conversion is the celebration of baptism itself. The ways we celebrate baptism can either limit its apparent significance or make clear its relevance to all of life's changes and struggles. Let me sketch several concrete examples of factors in baptismal practice that influence this message in one direction or the other.

When baptisms were performed in private at church or at home, the significance of baptism was symbolically limited to the private, familial sphere. Celebrating baptisms at Sunday morning worship brings baptism into the heart of the life of the whole Christian community. Some congregations are moving towards grouping the celebration of baptisms together on a few baptismal festivals per year. One advantage of this is that it allows for more congregational participation in preparation and follow-up. One of the things we have learned from the Roman Catholic experience of the RCIA is that it can be renewing for the community as a whole to participate in the initiatory process, by praying for the candidates all along the way, witnessing to all involved and receiving their witness, and observing how important it is to them. Though the dynamics of relating to the candidate are different in infant baptism, some of the same sort of thing can happen when the congregation is corporately involved before and after the baptism, praying and making banners and hearing the parents' stories and learning the babies' names and singing baptismal hymns and anthems and providing before and after educational opportunities or care groups for parents and godparents and throwing a big party. In all but the smallest congregation, this kind of corporate involvement and support can only be brought off if baptisms are grouped together. The more the congregation is actually involved in all baptisms, the more likely it will find in individual baptisms an occasion for corporate renewal. For instance, if baptisms are grouped at Easter, and all during Lent many members of the congregation are helping prepare for those baptisms, and all members are at least praying for the candidates, the people of the congregation may be more likely to experience the meaning of Lent as a reencounter with the calling of God in their own baptism.

The move to a fuller celebration of baptism in word and action also helps to expand the semantic range of baptism to cover all of life. In the flood prayer, baptism's water is linked to creation, to the flood as an act that simultaneously destroyed evil and salvaged good, to deliverance from slavery and homecoming, to Jesus' baptismal anointing at the onset of his

public work, and to his death and resurrection. These images apply to a very wide range of life's experiences, and they provide powerful *baptismal* metaphors for salvation, conversion and calling, metaphors available for recall in sermons and conversations and rituals that attempt to link baptism with later stages and transitions in the life journey. Similarly, the actions and words using the biblical metaphors of enlightenment, clothing, and anointing all open up new possibilities for connecting all dimensions of our experiences to the baptismal reality. For instance, if baptism is just seen as washing away sin, its link to our calling in and for the world is not all that clear. The metaphor of enlightenment, symbolized by the candle-lighting, speaks directly to both our receiving and giving light, linking calling directly to baptism.

One of the main ways we restrict the symbolic applicability of baptism is by celebrating it as a sentimentalized "baby rite." We can and should be tender and loving in our baptizing, but a sentimentalized approach says, "This is for babies only." The danger of sentimentalism has actually increased over the last half century in our society, as we have moved away from the religious habits of solemn awe and from the social habits of formal discourse. A folksy, casual style in worship doesn't necessarily lead to more sentimentalism in worship with children, but it does allow for certain expressions of sentimentality a more formal style would exclude.

Sentimentalism in baptism takes many forms. The pastor may use a rose to sprinkle the water on the baby's head and give the rose to the parents as a keepsake. Baptismal candles may come decorated in pink or blue, Galatians 3:28 notwithstanding. An unofficial part of the rite in many congregations involves the pastor's presenting the newly baptized child to the congregation. This may be done with loving seriousness, in a way that says, "This is your new sister, you'd better get to know her, because you're responsible for her now"; often, however, the pastor's bearing and tone of voice invite the congregation to respond, "Aw, look at the baby, isn't he cute?" The baby's baptismal outfit, if not a traditional gown (which was, at least, gender-neutral), is often, like most fancy baby clothes in our culture, designed for maximal cuteness. The hymns sung may be songs geared to early childhood, such as "Jesus Loves Me" or "Jesus Loves the Little Children." Or they may express a somewhat sentimentalized image of God, as a tender parent whose only interest is in protecting us and who only lets things happen that are good for us, as in "Children of the Heavenly Father."

Juvenile songs and cute outfits and precious symbolic gestures can all help turn baptism into a mere baby rite. This doesn't even do justice to the complexity of a *baby's* experience, full of rage and fear of abandonment as well as innocence and trust. It certainly doesn't leave room for the struggling adult to see her or his own experience of transition, loss, or new calling reflected and transfigured in the waters of the font.

The baptismal space itself often says "for babies only." The movement towards larger fonts with more water helps the baptism to speak other

metaphors than washing. I think of one hot summer day in the Chapel here at Valpo, when I saw a group of young people who had just been doing something athletic walk through the narthex. As they reached the baptistry stairs, they started making jokes about diving in. Such thoughts would never have been occasioned by the fonts in most churches, small as they are (not to mention covered or dry!). A larger font also says, this font is ample enough for a grown-up's needs. Even if I never see an adult baptized at my church's font, I should be able to imagine such a scene, in order to be able to imagine myself as an adult finding there sufficient water for my washing, for my burial, and for my rebirth and re-creation.

One very important area for development in relation to our practice of infant baptism is that of post-baptismal mystagogy (exploration of the meaning of baptism), for the children baptized, their parents, and their godparents. We are doing much better than we used to do in baptismal preparation, with widespread practice of prebaptismal meetings with parents and sometimes other family members and godparents. As is true with other rites, though, we do better on preparation than on follow-up. Most pastors and congregations leave parents and children pretty much to themselves after the baptism, until the children are old enough for some form of Sunday School. The education and pastoral care provided to babies and their grown-ups after the baptism is a key venue for teaching the lifelong significance of baptism and a witness to the entire congregation that baptism is not over when the water is towed away.

There needs to be post-baptismal education and support for parents. There can be classes and support groups for the parents of babies and toddlers, with explicit attention to the religious dimension of parenting young children: the formation of patterns of family prayer and story-telling, the strategies for getting a little child through a church service and for eventually teaching them how to participate, and the Christian motivation for listening respectfully to a child who is driving you bananas. When baptisms are grouped together at festivals, the education before and after can be done for the whole group of parents. In some cases such cohorts of parents who went through the prebaptismal meetings together have formed a natural support group that continues to meet after the baptism.

Mystagogy about the meaning of baptism for children baptized as infants should pervade the educational materials used in Sunday School and other settings (always with a sensitivity to unbaptized children present). Congregations can recognize baptismal anniversaries by marking them in Sunday School, mentioning them in the Prayers of the Church, sending cards, or suggesting to parents and godparents ways to celebrate them at home. My church just had an intergenerational series of educational events before the midweek Lenten services this year, focusing on baptism. One outcome of this is that a bunch of kids now dip their fingers in the font when they pass it and make the sign of the cross on their foreheads—a tactile and sometimes playful way that they enjoy remembering baptism.

School-age children can be involved in baptisms in various ways, including making art or music for the service, learning the candidates' names, or making a gift in Sunday School for the candidate. Browning and Reed describe in their new book on confirmation a practice of having a different Sunday School class "sponsor" each baby baptized at Easter. In addition, children's sermons should often relate the day's texts to baptism.

Most of all, I want to say that baptismal education for children should not be simplistic and "sweetness and light." This is an improvement over the old obsession with sinfulness, but it falls short in its own way. Baptism is not just becoming part of God's family and being special in God's eyes. It is also our hope in the face of all the deaths in our lives and our call to do joyful and hard things for the sake of the world. Children need to hear that word of hope over death, since their lives also are touched by death and fear and despair. Children need to hear that they are called as much as any working grown-up—and called *not* primarily to be nice and obedient (think how nice and obedient Jesus was!) But to be loving, even when the loving act upsets the system.

Another important group deserving mystagogy is the godparents. The church has treated godparents with benign neglect for quite a while, not putting much effort into teaching them about their particular calling as godparents. Many church leaders have given up on godparents as a lost cause, assuming that it's now just an honorary role like that of bridesmaid or groomsman, and the fact that many godparents don't live near their godchildren means they can't have much of a relationship. I feel strongly that we should raise awareness of godparenthood and educate godparents in how to live out their calling. While some godparents will not take the role seriously, many would do more to carry out their role if they only had suggestions on how to do that. We typically give them virtually no help in imagining what a godparent might do. We've traditionally told them "pray for your godchild" and "be an example to him"—advice that doesn't help you form a relationship with a child in which you can talk about God. We need to give godparents a clear job description: help your godchild remember her baptism, and explore with her what it means to be baptized. And we need to give godparents concrete suggestions on how to build a relationship with the child, whether locally or long-distance; how to talk with a child about values and feelings and faith questions, how to celebrate baptismal anniversaries, how to godparent a child in crisis, and so on. Since many godparents do not live in the same area or attend the same church as their godchild, congregations may have to take responsibility for this post-baptismal education for all adult members who are godparents of children elsewhere.

If we want children to encounter more deeply the meaning of their baptism as they grow up, who better to enlist to that end than godparents? This means educating the godparents about the ongoing significance of baptism in Christian life, which is also deepening the godparents' under-

standing of their own baptism. We can also promote and enhance godparenthood by doing things to raise general awareness of godparenting: asking if people have prayer requests for their family, friends, or godchildren; using godparenting stories in sermons; or following the Greek Orthodox by having an annual Godparents' Sunday. It also might be wise to ensure that the godparents take an active part in the baptismal rite itself, holding the baby or toweling him dry or lighting the candle or receiving it lit—or at any rate, not just standing there like groomsmen. If we want godparents to take their role seriously as the children grow up, we have to create that role vividly for them in the baptismal event.

Outside of the practice of baptism itself, we say a great deal about baptism as the ongoing core of a Christian's identity by the ways we connect funerals with Easter via baptismal symbolism. Across a wide ecumenical spectrum, the liturgical texts of the new funeral rites make much more explicit reference to baptism. The paschal candle lit at the funeral becomes the clearest symbolic link between Christ's death and our death, Christ's rising and our rising—a link forged in baptism. The pall is also meant to speak the baptismal connection, but I'm not sure how well that works, since it is meant to recall the baptismal garment that we don't really use.

Another liturgical link that some make between baptism and ongoing life involves bringing explicit baptismal symbolism into the Sunday morning general confession. The pastor may stand at the font to lead the confession; the congregation may have to turn to face the font in some churches. The pastor may even asperge the congregation at the absolution. This can be introduced with an explanation that the forgiveness of our sin flows from our baptism to our whole life; that all confession is crawling back to the font to be cleansed and to find ourselves restored to the fullness of our true identity as children of God.

The liturgy in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (*LBW*) that was designed most of all with this concern in mind—to link the event celebrated with baptism—is, of course, the Affirmation of Baptism. The renaming and reworking of the rite of adolescent "confirmation" was precisely intended to transform confirmation from a rite that competed with baptism to a rite that reinforced baptism's ongoing centrality. I think that the name and content of the *LBW* rite have in fact gone a long way toward fulfilling this objective and helping people to understand adolescent confirmation as a way of touching base on baptism. Part of the way the *LBW*'s proposal meant to reform the practice of confirmation was by arguing for the use of the new rite of Affirmation of Baptism in other contexts. If the rite is celebrated for adolescent confirmation only, it can continue to seem to be the one-time-only action that brings baptism to completion—the understanding of confirmation that we are trying to get away from.

Many congregations do use the rite as a congregational rite involving the corporate reaffirmation of baptism. This is often practiced at the Easter Vigil, Baptism of Jesus Sunday, other appropriate festivals, or on special

occasions such as congregational anniversaries or mergers. This, again, is an effective way to raise awareness of baptism as the ongoing core of Christian identity, our constant promise and continual calling. Regularly scheduled congregational affirmation rites can also provide a context for individuals to affirm their baptism at various times in life, as we'll discuss in a moment.

General congregational affirmation rites aside, I'm not sure how much the rite of Affirmation of Baptism is used at other times than adolescent confirmation. The *LBW* suggests two reasons other than adolescent confirmation for its use: when Christians from other denominations join a congregation and when someone returns to active participation in the church after a significant hiatus. Some congregations use the rite at these times, and some do not. But even if they do use it for these purposes, the rite would still rarely be repeated in any individual's life with an individual focus. I want to spend the rest of my time this morning on this question, because the Confirmation Task Force of the ELCA had a proposal for developing the use of the Affirmation of Baptism rite for other occasions that I want to share with you.

First, a little history. Contemporary Worship 8 suggested, in addition to adolescent confirmation and the reception and restoration of members, a fourth category of occasions for the use of the rite of Affirmation of Baptism: "from time to time special moments in life—undertaking a new occupation, entering into marriage, undertaking a particular service or being elected to office in the church, moving to retirement—may motivate (members) to join with others in a solemn affirmation" (10). I am told that the intent here was that the rite would be used to mark a significant stage in a person's spiritual growth: a spiritual experience of deepened faith (e.g., someone who has a reorienting experience at a Bible camp and requests rebaptism), a major vocational step, the taking on of some mission or important task in the church's life, and so on. My informants tell me that this fourth category was dropped because they were hearing reports of the rite being used for all sorts of occasions, including some that seemed to them to trivialize the rite (the one that stuck in Hans Boehringer's mind, for instance, was the investiture of acolytes). The time may have come to reconsider this question and to think about how the Affirmation of Baptism could become a truly repeatable rite, used in other significant transitions besides early adolescence.

Does any other group use the affirmation rite for other occasions in life besides confirmation and the reception and restoration of members? The Episcopalian rite for the Reaffirmation of Baptismal Vows is made use of by people for various reasons. Sometimes it is suggested by a priest in counseling, as a mark of recommitment, of a significant step in the faith journey, or of a major transition of some sort. The interesting thing here is that the person can go through this publicly without having to explain publicly why he or she is doing so. The occasion for it is provided by the

visit of the bishop to the parish, often for the confirmation service. The bishop as presider at affirmation rites brings in a factor that would be absent from the Lutheran equation. Not only does the bishop's visit provide the occasion, her or his blessing can be sought by adults without loss of face. One might provide an occasion for an individual's affirmation in a Lutheran parish by holding a congregational rite of affirmation several times a year, but the fact remains that kneeling before a bishop whom you don't know well and who represents the authority of the larger church is a whole different ballgame from kneeling before your own pastor!

The new Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* has forms of rite addressing two additional categories. There is a form of "Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant in Pastoral Counseling," intended "for use in the context of private pastoral counseling with persons who struggle to live up to the implications of their baptism" (485). There is also a form titled "Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant Marking Occasions of Growth in Faith." This service "may be used in a variety of situations to mark occasions such as a significant deepening of personal commitment or answers to the call to a particular ministry in the church" (478). There are no suggestions about how to tailor this rite to different sorts of occasions of growth in faith, though some congregations are doing that on their own. The book of trial services in the Supplemental Liturgical Resources series that preceded the new book of worship included a form titled "renewal of Baptism for the Sick and the Dying," but that didn't make it into the current book.

The only published examples I have seen of baptismal affirmation services tailored to various times of life are the liturgies authored by Kathryn Steen in the last section of Robert Browning and Roy Reed's new book, *Models of Confirmation and Affirmation of Baptism*. Following Browning and Reed's schema, Steen wrote liturgies of baptismal affirmation for several stages of life, including middle childhood, young adulthood, midlife, and retirement. While this focus on stages of life is different from the Confirmation Task Force's focus on times of passage as occasions for baptismal affirmation, Steen's liturgies are still excellent examples of how one might tailor the rite to a particular point in life.

The Confirmation Task Force report argues for developing the rite of Affirmation of Baptism for use at various important transitions in life. The reasoning here is that these are "teachable moments," times when people are especially open to exploring questions of meaning and identity, and there is often a "felt need" for ritual at times of transition. Theologically, this proposal seems appropriate because baptism is all about transition, the great death that shapes and transforms all our endings. For Luther all the little deaths of life were a part of the lifelong process of baptism, of our dying more and more to rise to a new life. They were a rehearsal for death itself, so that the Christians who used these trials well would have sunk their dying so deeply into Christ's in the process that death itself would

hold no fear. It is in such a spirit that the Task Force suggested that we mark the major transitions of our lives with a baptismal sign of the cross. Relating these transitions to our baptism, and casting them as aspects of our baptismal, paschal passage with Christ through death to resurrection, could be one of the most powerful ways of making the lifelong reality and relevance of baptism vividly incarnate.

Some major transitions have their own rituals already, notably weddings, graduations, and funerals. But many do not. Many transitions could use ritual marking; in fact, a number of family systems therapists create rituals to help people negotiate difficult transitions, e.g., when an adolescent leaves home. Here are the examples given in the Confirmation Task Force's report of transitions that might be marked by a baptismal affirmation: moving into a nursing home, beginning parenthood or grandparenthood, choosing or changing an occupation, moving out of the parental home, having a chronic illness diagnosed, ending the first year of mourning, ending a relationship, and retiring. The draft statement "The Use of the Means of Grace," just issued, adds the occasions of losing a job, adoption and the naming of an already baptized child, release from prison, reunion of an immigrant family, and new life after abuse or addiction. Let me add a few more: moving (especially when children are moving), receiving the diagnosis of disability or disease in one's child, losing one's farm, selling the family home, giving up a child for adoption, and experiencing the death of one's last living parent.

In such times of significant passage as these, an affirmation rite could become a way of *drawing this transition into the paschal pattern* through the use of baptismal symbol, action, and story. This would take a reworking of the rite in two directions. First, one would have to tailor the rite to a specific transition, in order to make possible the connection between this transition and the baptismal reality. Second, one would increase the use of and focus on baptismal symbolism and biblical stories of passage, such as the stories from the Easter Vigil. The biggest problem with the rite of Affirmation of Baptism in the *LBW* is that it is talk-heavy and symbol-poor. Gathering at the font would help, as the Presbyterian book directs. If we can interact somehow with the water, better yet. The Presbyterians also suggest anointing at the laying on of hands, but that will only speak baptism if we start anointing at baptism itself!

Where and when would this sort of rite take place? There are various options. Although they celebrate transitions in a person's life, some rites might involve a group of people going through the same transition, e.g., all those who are leaving home in the summer after high school, or a group of people in recovery from addiction. Usually, though, the rite will be more meaningful if it occurs close to the actual time of transition. If we are ritualizing in an individual's life when the transitions occur, how and when could that best happen? Some rituals might take place during the Sunday liturgy, if they were relatively brief. I can imagine, for

instance, doing such a rite at the time of the creed: having the person come to the font, lighting the paschal candle during a brief statement of the nature of the transition being marked, saying the creed in question and answer form, ending with a blessing of the person tailored to the occasion, and marking him or her with water from the font. That would not add too many minutes to the liturgy. Alternatively, a more extended rite could be done in any of a number of other contexts: a Sunday school class (child, youth, or adult), an evening Bible class, a care group, a women's or men's group or service group that is a circle of friends, a support group (some of these already ritualize passages), a congregational "family night" meal, a potluck supper or other group setting in the church, or a gathering in the person's home or a friend's home. The key to promoting the use of baptismal affirmation for different situations would then be helping pastors and others introduce it into these various communal settings, so that it could develop a life of its own apart from Sunday liturgy or the pastor's office.

How would the rite be tailored to different life passages? First, by naming the transition and describing it as a little death—whether the transition feels happy or sad, whether the past is mourned or escaped from, whether the future is scary or hopeful. Second, by using readings or references in the prayers to link this transition to the stories of like transitions in the biblical narrative or in the lives of the saints (not just the ones on the calendar—any Christian we take as a model of faith). Who left home and moved far away to an unfamiliar place and found God's purpose for them there? Abraham, Rebecca, Ruth. Who, like a single mother, had to act on her own to take care of her child the best she could, and found surprising new life? Hagar, the widow of Zarephath, the Syrophenician woman. Who found God in a new way late in life? Who lived with a chronic disease? Stories could be found of people who lived their transitions according to the paschal pattern, and who, even when the reality was all loss, lived through that loss in hope of the resurrection.

What would be the constant elements in the rite of affirmation that would remain no matter what the occasion? The profession of faith in the words of the baptismal creed. Possibly a version of the "Do you intend" question in the *LBW* rite, or a statement of intent to seek one's vocation in this new state of life. References to the death and resurrection of Christ, and other paschal stories. A blessing of the person, with the laying on of hands (*CW* 8 suggested this for all uses of the rite, but some group in the church insisted it be kept to adolescent confirmation only.) Baptismal symbols, such as a lit baptismal candle and water. I would like to see water used at every affirmation of baptism. Saying the creed may feel like my act of commitment, but receiving the water feels like grace, the remembrance of what God has promised me.

Let me come back to Luther once more:

This message (of salvation promised through faith and baptism) should have been impressed upon the people untiringly, and this promise should have been dinned into their ears without ceasing. Their baptism should have been called to their minds again and again, and their faith constantly awakened and nourished. For just as the truth of this divine promise, once pronounced over us, continues until death, so our faith in it ought never to cease, but to be nourished and strengthened until death by the continual remembrance of this promise made to us in baptism. . . For the truth of the promise once made remains steadfast, always ready to receive us back with open arms when we return. *LW 36:59*

Upon this truth, upon this alliance with God, a man must joyfully dare to rely. Then baptism goes into force and operation. Then his heart again becomes peaceful and glad, not in his own works or "satisfaction," but in the mercy of God promised to him in his baptism, a mercy which God will keep forever. *LW 35:37*

Baptismal affirmation in the transitions of life could be one way of reminding people, again and again, to return to the promise of God. If we wanted to introduce a characteristically Lutheran note into the rite, it might be to ask people, perhaps before signing them with the water, "On what do you rely?"; and having them answer, "I rely on God's promise to me in baptism." If we invite people to say this in many of the passages of life, they may learn to say it on their deathbed. It is that radical trust out of which commitment and conversion continually spring. For the promise is always also a calling. When we come home to those outstretched arms, we find ourselves always blessed to be a blessing, and when we come home to the promise and are received with your arms, we are welcomed to welcome the neighbor.