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TOWARD THE RENEWAL OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION IN THE PARISH

1.

The brochure for this year's Institute contained the arresting sentence: "To discuss the question of Christian initiation is, finally, to inquire after the very nature of the church: the issue is of vast ecclesiological significance." The renewed and growing interest in Christian initiation is prompted by a new vision of the church.

From the preceding lectures it would seem that people are in favor of the renewal of the practice of initiation and of recapturing a baptismal concept of the Christian life. In addition to trying to sum up our work in this year's Institute, my assignment is to speculate about what sort of church would result from a renewed praxis and understanding of baptism and to suggest ways to move in that direction. Some of what follows would be applicable now; some of it could become only long range goals.

2.

My first obligation is to sketch what I understand to be included in "renewed praxis and understanding of baptism." Most important,

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it would include the reintegration of the elements of baptism, confirmation and first communion so that the roster of the baptized and the communicant roster would be the same. The rites of initiation would be administered to infants born to parents actively involved in the life of the Christian community, if those parents so desired. If their preference were to delay the rites, no spirit of censure would be attached to that decision. The rites would also be administered according to the more primitive pattern: to those drawn into the community by the Gospel. For such candidates, an intensive period of formation and instruction would precede baptism. For all candidates the community would assume the responsibility of continuing nurture. I use the word 'nurture' instead of 'education' deliberately, for the process I envision would not have as its primary goal the acquiring of knowledge, not even biblical knowledge. It would rather consist of reflection on the life lived in community and the necessary and obvious implications of that life for ministry. It would try to understand what it means to be a community born in God's promise which lives according to that promise.

Ministry would be seen as the practical living out of the Christian life both corporately and individually, not as the activity only of the clergy and other professionals. Yet within the larger ministerial sphere the ministry of those ordained would be seen as the corporate exercise of *episkope*, a function necessary to the life and existence of the community.

Such a comprehensive view of ministry naturally suggests that the church exists for the sake of the world; that the church is a sign of the promised kingdom toward which it works and for which it prays. While the rites of initiation draw a line between the whole

of humanity and the household of faith, ultimately they function for the sake of the world.

But a renewed baptismal praxis could not be recognized fully in a divided church. A vital baptismal understanding of the church cannot tolerate a divided community of faith. We will not be able to recover fully a proper baptismal ethos until our denominational divisions are overcome and all baptized persons everywhere are in communion with all other baptized persons.

My sketch links themes of nurture, communal life, ministry, mission, and unity to a renewed praxis of Christian initiation. True progress will come only when due attention is given to all these themes. I must confess, however, that I think the most fruitful way to address them is from a baptismal perspective. Baptism, as Luther saw so clearly, pervades the whole of the life in Christ. As our fundamental ritual access to the death and resurrection of Christ, baptism remains paradigmatic for the Christian life both in its personal and corporate aspects. The themes of my sketch become the structural elements of this morning's lecture.

3.

3.1. The Rite Itself

My sketch indicated a reintegrated set of initiation rites, and that is a goal toward which I urge you to work. If I read things correctly, there is little standing in the way where children of six or older or adults are concerned. The *Lutheran Book of Worship* (LBW) has, in fact, restored the basic elements of confir-

mation to the rite for baptism and suggests that it take place within the celebration of the eucharist. That is a beginning.

Both by our teaching and preaching about baptism, and by the way we celebrate the rites of initiation, we must overcome the reductionistic heritage received from the Middle Ages: i.e., only the application of water (no matter how) and the trinitarian formula are important. In the realm of theological gamesmanship, such reduction to bare essentials may have a place, though that kind of game fits a church of law better than a church of promise. Whatever its theological values, the reductionistic tendency is out of tune with liturgical reality and, thus, with human reality. Baptism, as the Scriptures reflect it and as the primitive church developed it, is a series of moments all having to do with crossing the threshold from life "in the flesh" to "life in the Spirit."

As Aidan Kavanagh points out,¹ the primitive form of the baptismal liturgy can be accounted for only if one begins with the concept of baptism in the Holy Spirit, and understands the water bath in that perspective. Then the other ritual actions, such as chrismation, fall into place. The concept also allows more room for the fullness of the bath metaphor itself. Bathing in the ancient world was a highly social and ritual action which invariably culminated in anointing. Kavanagh notes how receiving the Spirit through Christ is likened to a birth bath (John 3:3-5), a funeral bath and burial (Romans 6:1-11), and a bride's nuptial bath (Ephesians 5:26). "These cultural practices were consummated in anointing and in arraying the body in clean, new or otherwise special clothing (Galatians 3:27) as the final stages of the bath itself".

We cannot simply return to the bathing practices of the ancient world, though when one looks at commercials for cosmetics, hot tubs, saunas, and health spas, ancient practices do not seem so remote. Our ritual task is to recapture the sense of *event* and, thereby, to overcome the trivialization of baptism which we have inherited. William Willimon, professor at Duke, is emerging as a pungent commentator on the foibles of the Church:

We conceal, mask, and trivialize such primal human experiences in hopes of avoiding contact with the mystery and the threat which enshroud them. . . .
I have marveled at the studied efforts of my fellow pastors who do everything possible to avoid the act of baptism. Baptismal fonts have become progressively smaller, moving from bathtub capacity to fingerbowl size in a few centuries. . . . Great care is taken to be sure that nobody gets wet, that it is all done as painlessly and pointlessly as possible. . . .

In addition to the bathing emphasis, we must reassert the importance of the moment of chrismation and thereby the biblical teaching about the "seal of the Spirit." To employ another metaphor, crossing the threshold from "flesh" to "Spirit" involves a change of obedience or ownership. Just as slaves were branded with the sign of their owner and as Roman soldiers had the mark of the emperor tattooed on their hands, so the Christian bears the seal of the Holy Spirit.

This sign, borne in faith and recognizable only by faith, remains even after the baptismal water had dried. We Christians have been stigmatized by God; our seal is born where ancient slaves bore it. *Stigma* is still a negative word, but the plural, *stigmata*, has precious spiritual connotations. Our seal is in the shape of Christ's cross. We receive the marks of his passion, his suffering for the sake of the world. But just as Christ's resurrection transformed the cross into the sign of victory, so our cross is the "guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it," which is

another way of saying that chrismation is the baptismal promise of our share in Christ's victory.

Emphasis on chrismation not only counters the momentary concept of baptism; it also underlines the future, promissory concept and the paradigmatic function.

The major obstacle toward reintegration of the rites of initiation is our recent Western scruple about the communion of infants. As I indicated at the 1975 Institute, I find the theological arguments Lutherans make against infant communion artificial and the historical evidence for it convincing. If our theology permits infant baptism, then it also permits infant communion. That is not to say, however, that the moment is ripe for large-scale reintroduction of infant communion. Lutherans have more remedial problems to deal with in the realm of Christian initiation.

For pastoral reasons I cannot yet *advocate* infant communion. At the same time, I cannot just acquiesce when it becomes official policy in two of our churches that infant communion is "precluded." Such a statement is unprecedented in Lutheran circles. Rather than saying nothing and, thus, in good Lutheran fashion, leaving the matter in the realm of adiaphora, these churches have, by their pronouncement, forced the issue. In a pastorally questionable manner, the opponents of infant communion have brought the matter into the spotlight and made it virtually impossible to resolve in a way that will not injure our baptismal and eucharistic development.

Work toward the full reintegration of the initiation rites will eventually have to solve the illogic of the *LBW* pattern pointed

to by Hans Boehringer. If you view the present situation from a strict liturgical stance, people will be confirmed twice.

My own hope is that as the fuller baptismal concept pointed to by the *LBW* rite begins to register, the illogic of the situation will become increasingly clear and the original Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship (ILCW) proposal will become the solution. But we shall see. Certainly that hope will never be realized if the implications of the *LBW* baptismal rite are not exploited positively. There is a value in the unwillingness of Lutherans to give up confirmation as they have known it. A pastoral approach will attempt to redirect that value and not destroy it.

3.2 Communal Life

There is a reciprocal relationship between a vital praxis of the rites of initiation and a lively Christian community. Crossing the baptismal threshold, one enters a house where the Christian community makes its home. One cannot be incorporated into Christ without becoming related to all others God has adopted through baptism. Fundamentally the church is a natural and received community, a community into which one is called and incorporated, a *Gemeinschaft*. Even the adult convert's decision to "join the church" cannot be understood theologically in a voluntaristic, free-choice manner. This essential corporateness of the church is clearly reflected in the New Testament and remains fundamental to any theological concept.

Our situation is, of course, rendered very difficult by the denominational structures. While, in any ultimate sense, one does not choose to join the Christians, one can choose to join the Catholics

instead of the Lutherans or the Methodists instead of the Presbyterians. Our only access to the corporate reality of the church is via the free associations we call denominations. And even if denominational boundaries have lost all but their formal significance it is in such structures that the church subsists.

Whatever value one places on the maintenance of the "Lutheran denomination" it must be clear that where it exists alongside other denominations (as it does in North America) it is itself a hindrance to grasping and acting upon the essential corporateness of the church. Justifying the separate existence of a denomination inevitably mutes the corporate and catholic character of the community. That is true even where such justification may be necessary for the sake of the Gospel.

Baptism not only witnesses to the communal nature of the church's life, it keeps the paschal or resurrection nature of that life in focus. The seal of the Spirit testifies to our life under the cross, but under a cross that is the promise of resurrection. To speak of living by God's promise, therefore, is to imply the paschal nature of such life.

The primal connection between baptism and Easter is increasingly recognized by our congregations. In a thoroughly pastoral way we must move away from seeing baptism determined by the rhythm of births to seeing it in the rhythm of the Christian year. An experience of baptism in the Vigil of Easter should convince anyone of the need for such a move. Only when Easter is seen as the primary focus of baptism will it then be possible to transfer the paschal motif to baptisms performed at other times.

When baptism is connected with Easter, it is not sufficient to operate with a full concept of baptism; we must also see 'Easter' as shorthand for the *Sacrum Triduum Paschale* and for the Great Fifty Days between Resurrection and Pentecost. Together the events of the Easter *triduum* commemorate our Lord's passover and they should not be seen in isolation one from another. Saint Augustine wrote of "the most sacred triduum of the crucified, buried, and risen Lord."³ The full celebration of Christ's passover lends a matchless context to baptism.

It may be less obvious but more significant for the renewal of our worship that *baptism* gives present and tangible reality to our celebration of Easter and to the paschal character of the community. The passion, death and resurrection of Christ are contemporary in the baptismal celebration. We needn't rely only upon narration of events long past; they become real again as persons receive God's gift of baptism. As we recall liturgically the death and resurrection of Christ in the threshold between Good Friday and Easter, we see the impact of Christ's death and resurrection in those being baptized. Their reality is there in flesh-and-blood persons who emerge from their baptism dripping with real water. Somewhat irreverently, Willimon urges us to "stop trying to prove or defend or explain the resurrection, and (to) get out of the way and let God do one. This time in water. . ."⁴ To restore the Vigil as *the* occasion for baptism would aid our recovery of this fundamental baptismal motif. And, conversely, the baptisms would lend their sense of present reality to the Easter celebration: "Jesus Christ is risen today"; look at Mary and John who have just been raised with Christ!

The Easter motif is not complete, however, until the resurrection is connected intimately with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament contains two traditions about this. We have based our calendars on the synoptic tradition which is, in turn, rooted in the Jewish calendar: Pentecost fifty days after the Day of Resurrection. But there is also the Johannine tradition: Jesus appears to the disciples on Easter evening to commission them for ministry and straight away gives them the Spirit:

he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." (John 20:22)

Jesus' resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit are two sides of the same coin, as the *LBW* calendar tries to make clear.

So the full concept of Easter to which baptism is the ritual access encompasses the Easter *triduum*, the Ascension and Pentecost. Begun with the outpouring of the Spirit at his own baptism, Jesus' ministry culminates in his death and resurrection which inaugurates the ministry of the apostles similarly begun with the pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And our baptism makes us participants together in all this, giving us the same Spirit to enable our ministry in Christ. Having its source in baptism, the Christian community exists for ministry and, thus, in mission. But before turning to these themes, let us pause at nurture.

3.3 Nurture

The communal, familial view of the church implies nurture. It is that which has encouraged the church to take the risk of baptizing infants. At stake theologically is the necessary relationship between God's action and our faith.⁵ On the whole, Lutherans have done a responsible job of the education of their children and youth. It must be recognized that our customary practice of

confirmation has enforced that concern--a value to preserve if and when confirmation customs change.

For the future, our programs could be more oriented toward spiritual formation and sensitizing for ministry outside the Church. They could also more self-consciously use the reality of baptism as their point of departure.

Is it not ironic, however, that we have demanded so much from our parish youth before we would admit them to the Eucharist, and so little from those we baptize in later life? We badly need a re-birth of the catechumenate in a form congruent with our cultural situation. The catechumenate being proposed to the Roman Catholic churches is exemplary in its attention to formation, in its liturgical rhythm, in its conferring of status on the candidate, and on the scope of its content. It certainly is more attuned to a renewed praxis of initiation that the programs one often encounters among Lutherans (advertised as inquiry "with no strings attached"). Possibility for inquiry may be a desirable first step, but there must be more. How can the church deal with candidates for baptism adequately and responsibly until they themselves have made a commitment in response to the Gospel? Preparation of youth and adults must be much more than displaying the Christian wares to prospective buyers. In that respect the Roman pattern is worthy of emulation.

We would need a catechumenate, however, which responded more realistically to two factors: a) Few candidates will begin with such a corporate view of the church which suggests the sort of commitment traditionally demanded of catechumens. The program will itself need to transform a voluntaristic concept of "joining the church" into an adequate communal understanding. b) There would be problems

with understanding the catechumen's traditional status. Most American Protestants would not understand the point of ritually granting catechumens participation in the *pro-anaphora* while withholding baptism and access to the Eucharist because their own piety is so largely "*pro-anaphoric*," and they hold personal belief to be more significant than sacramental participation.

Before the catechumenate would be viable attention to these matters would be required. For initiation makes assumptions not only about the candidates, but also about the receiving community. A real catechumenate involves risk and should not be undertaken before estimating the cost. Nor should it be used, as Kavanagh warns us, as an indirect method of spiritual renewal for the parish itself.⁶

Until a reasonably demanding catechumenate becomes possible, an essential insight will be precluded: that becoming a Christian is a paradigm for remaining a Christian. Aidan Kavanagh puts it in words reminiscent of Luther:

The whole economy of *becoming* a Christian, from conversion and catechesis through the Eucharist, is thus the fundamental paradigm for *remaining* a Christian. The experience of baptism in all its paschal dimension, together with the vivid memory of it in individuals and the sustained *anamnesis* of it in every sacramental event enacted by the community at large constitute not only a touchstone of Catholic orthodoxy but the starting point for all catechumens, pastoral endeavor, missionary effort, and liturgical celebration in the Church. The paschal mystery of Jesus Christ dying and rising *still* among his faithful ones at Easter in baptism is what gives the Church its radical cohesion and mission, putting it at the center of a world made new.⁷

We have shortchanged ourselves and others if we have taught the paradigmatic character of baptism but then implied that the paradigm is the baptism of infants. That can lead to cheap grace and an immature sense of Christian ministry. Until a functioning

catechumenate can inform our insight about the Christian life, we will not yet have arrived at a renewed praxis and understanding of Christian initiation.

3.4 Ministry and Mission

The quality of the Christian community's life is gauged not by its liturgical celebrations, but by its sense and practice of mission. Lest I be misunderstood, I am not suggesting that we worship *in order to* engage in mission. Rather, as such folks as Hendrik Kramer and J. G. Davies have pointed out, worship is basically involved in mission.

The mission of the church is to be a sign of the kingdom of God which broke into history with Christ's death and resurrection. "At this end of all ages," God sent Jesus to announce his reign and to embody his kingdom. The church exists for the kingdom and, thus, for the world. In its members the church has a priestly function in the world: it offers itself for the world as it lives in and from the passover of Christ its Lord who offered himself for the world. The church is, then, not so much an extension of the incarnation as it is an embodiment of Christ's mission.

Luther thought of baptism as ordination into this priestly service. Two things, at least, follow from that view: a) the ministry of the church is a task shared by all Christians, b) any concept of an ordained ministry must fit *within* this total ministry. Thus, neither the church itself nor ministerial responsibility for its mission can be identified with the clergy. In no sense may the church ever be 'them'; it is always 'us'.

In a church with renewed praxis of initiation, this corporate involvement in ministry would be understood and practiced. The mission of the church would grow out of its life as a people of God's promise. Promise (the eschatological dimension basic to the church) is rooted in Christ's resurrection into which baptism incorporates us. The seal of the Spirit marks us as those whom God has claimed in Christ, as those who may live in the reality of the promised resurrection.

The rites of initiation, then, in our speculative church of the future, would have a prominent priestly and mission-thrust. While the *LBW* probably marks a step forward in this respect, the final part of the baptismal rite could have been stronger and more pointed.

It would deter us too long to discuss in any detail the relationship between the ministry of the whole church and the ordained ministry. But just as the baptismal concept of ministry forbids transferring the exercise of priesthood to the clergy (and other professionals), so it also forbids regarding the clergy as the *real* Christians. It can still happen that someone who has a vivid religious experience which motivates him or her to service immediately wants to go to a seminary because that is the route to real Christian service. If however, our understanding of ministry were informed by baptism, it would be seen that ministry is the task of all and that much of it is done least well by ordained persons. On the other hand, the apostolic tasks we have come to associate with *episkope* are the shared responsibility of the ordained ministry. One should not, therefore, seek to enhance the ministry of the universal priesthood of the baptized by tearing down the ordained ministry.

3.5 Unity

My sketch of a renewed praxis claimed that it could be realized fully only in a reunited church, that a vital baptismal understanding of the church cannot tolerate a divided community of faith. We must continue what was begun in a discussion of communal life.

The rites of Christian initiation are administered by the several denominations. Yet no one presumes to speak of "Lutheran initiation" or "Catholic initiation." People do speak of being "baptized Lutheran" or "Catholic," etc. Actually, of course, we baptize in the name of the triune God and into the church of Christ (and the Kingdom). The whole sacramental life of the church derives from Christ who, in the final instance, is *the* sacrament, the real presence of God among us. It is on that basis, of course, that the resounding series of 'ones' rings out in Ephesians: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all (4:4-6). To that, the Fathers at Nicea appended "one church."

Without entering into the question of cause and effect, it is significant that a growing emphasis on the importance of baptism parallels a growing impatience with Christian divisions. Surely a positive feature of the joint statement on communion practices is its reinterpretation of the Galesburg Rule. With few exceptions, churches are now prepared to accept the validity of each other's baptisms and have come to see how scandalous rebaptism really is.

If there is a way to come down with biblical and primitive emphasis on the concept of one baptism without, at the same time, raising serious questions about confessional divisions, I have never found it. Habitually, of course, we first build our defense of our

confessional integrity and only then come to the sacraments. As long as these were interpreted primarily in terms of personal salvation, we got by without much flak. But when one *begins* with the call of the Gospel and baptism and proceeds to the community and to the Eucharist, divisive confessional boundaries become less than self-evident. Only by assuming that a given confessional family is the only true church can one really pull it off, and Christians are increasingly reticent to do that. Therefore, a renewed praxis and understanding of baptism will be the most powerful incentive to Christian reunion and the most probing obstacle to justifying our confessional separateness.

To that should be added two further observations: a) Confessional boundaries would seem to have all but lost their theological significance for parish life. They remain important for jurisdictional and legal purposes. The real and operative difference among Western Christians today cut across all the denominations: fundamentalist, non-fundamentalist; charismatic, non-charismatic; ethically-oriented, non-ethically oriented; politically activist, politically quietist; sacramentalist, non-sacramentalist; corporate, individualist--one could go on. Are we not unrealistic therefore, if all our efforts at Christian reunion are addressed to historic confessional differences? What about the common bond of the liturgy? Is not that more of a factor than has yet been officially recognized?

b) The second observation is that the Second Vatican Council has altered customary Protestant thinking about divisions. The vast body of Western Christians which continued in unbroken structural relationship to the pre-Reformation church has modified its exclusivist claims, acted upon its rediscovery of the Gospel, and reformed many aspects of its life in accord with Reformation

demands. This remains true even in the face of the Schillebeeckx-Kung affair and the Synod of Dutch Bishops.

Since I assume that full theological agreement among Christians is a canonist's fantasy, and since my Lutheran heritage suggests distinguishing in faith and life between central and peripheral, I am led to ask in all gravity: Are the differences which still remain *between* the mainline churches of the west significant enough to deny in practice the baptismal prerogatives of any of them? With the collapse of Christendom, with the pluralism that our global communications network reinforces and furthers, with our efforts to be faithful ministers in such a context, can we afford the luxury of our divisions? Is not what we have in common more significant than what still may divide us? Do we really, given our various verbal habits, really have disputes over the core of our Christian faith--over the Gospel and the sacraments? Is it not high time to commit ourselves to unity to declaring it and then dealing with our differences *within* a reunited church?

If the answer is even 'perhaps,' then in the light of all I've said about baptism, let me make one final suggestion. To let our renewed praxis and understanding of baptism have its full impact toward Christian reunion, let us board up all our fonts. In every town or area let the churches build or arrange one baptistery (it must be on neutral ground), and from that time onward do all baptizing in common. Except for procedural quibbles it could be done; the theological and liturgical bases exist now. It would even be effective if at first the various churches performed their own baptisms in a common baptistery. Think what a powerful bond of unity that practice would begin to forge! And think

how unbearable would be the separate processions back to separate eucharistic halls!

Cardinal Willebrands was right, I believe, in his Cambridge sermon of a decade ago when he said that Christian unity should not require the creation of a new or reconstituted ecclesial *typos*. Reunion should rather mean the gathering of the various authentic *typoi* into one household, under one roof. A common practice of baptism could lay the groundwork for that.

NOTES

1. Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (New York: Pueblo, 1978), p. 29.
2. William Willimon, "A Liberating Word in Water", *The Christian Century* (March 22, 1978), 303.
3. *PL* 33, 215.
4. *PL* 33, 306.
5. Eugene Brand, *Baptism: A Pastoral Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975), pp. 35ff.
6. Kavanagh, p. 189.
7. Kavanagh, pp. 162f.