

On Baptism and the Spirit: The Ethical Significance of the Marks of the Church

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As the church rounds the close of its second millennium, Christians must recapture the ecclesial and sacramental character of Christian ethics. They must see clearly once more that their ethics belongs to the mystery of the incarnation and the redemptive mission of the church. They must see afresh that their ethics issues directly from their adoption through baptism as sons and daughters of God. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit itself is present within the sacrament of baptism. And so, Christian ethics is also a gift of the Holy Spirit, and the kingdom of God is the proper horizon of the church's ethical striving. Some years ago I wrote that "baptism is where reflection upon Christian ethics ought to begin".¹ But this is not all that needs to be said about the relation of baptism and Christian ethics. By itself such a statement might leave the impression that baptism is simply a text which one mines when occasion demands in order to engage in the academic activity of writing Christian ethics; whereas baptism, rightly conceived, is a defining and self-constitutive practice of the church which is itself the wellspring of the church's ethics. Baptism gives "birth" to Christian ethics, much as it gives birth to new Christians, new ecclesial persons and the church itself, the body of Christ in the world.

This connection between baptism, ethics and the work of the Holy Spirit may seem obvious once it has been stated. But it is an insight that has been lost to much of contemporary Christian ethics. In many quarters this forgetfulness of the relation of ethics to sacrament has led to a confusion of Christian ethics with other human ethics grounded solely in reason. An impoverishment of pneumatology also lies at the source of this crisis in Christian ethics. This impoverishment is undoubtedly connected with the autonomies that both liturgical theology and Christian ethics have

¹Vigen Guroian, *Incarnate Love*, Notre Dame IN, Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1987, p.56.

asserted in our time. The two disciplines have grown far apart from each other and rarely are engaged in serious conversation.

In 1982 an ecumenical landmark was achieved within world ecumenism when the Lima statement on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* was issued. Through the commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches a broad spectrum of churches agreed on common language regarding these essential characteristics of the church—baptism, Eucharist and ministry. The BEM statement pushed strongly in the direction of regrounding Christian ethics in liturgy, and in baptism particularly. It properly located the origin of Christian ethics in baptism. Likewise, it rightly identified the complete act of baptism-chrismation-Eucharist as a work of the Holy Spirit. The key BEM passage reads as follows:

In God's work of salvation, the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection is inseparably linked with the Pentecostal gift of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, participation in Christ's death and resurrection is inseparably linked with the receiving of the Spirit. Baptism in its full meaning signifies and effects both ... Christians differ in their understanding as to where the sign of the Spirit is to be found ... All agree that Christian baptism is in water and the Holy Spirit (Baptism, para. 14).

Unfortunately, BEM's strong insight into the pneumatological character of baptism has caused hardly a ripple in the pond of Christian ethics. So it is with an eye towards remedying this absence of pneumatology in contemporary Christian ethics that I wish to discuss the baptismal origination and formation of Christian ethics.

A case in point

Stanley Hauerwas is perhaps the most influential Christian ethicist in the English-speaking world today. Not surprisingly, his work also suffers from a want of attention to pneumatology. When Hauerwas addresses the connection of sacraments and Christian ethics, his neglect of the Holy Spirit is conspicuous. For example, Hauerwas says this about the importance of baptism in the ethical life of Christians and the church:

The sacraments enact the story of Jesus and, thus, form a community in his image. We could not be the church without them. For the story of Jesus is not simply one that is told: it must be enacted. The sacraments are means crucial to shaping and preparing us to tell and hear that story. Thus baptism is that rite of initiation

necessary for us to become part of Jesus' death and resurrection. Through baptism we do not simply learn the story, but we become part of it.²

One should not underestimate the power of the biblical stories in the formation of the Christian life, and in his writings Hauerwas has done everyone a favour in reminding them of this. But it simply does not suffice to say that through the sacraments persons learn and become a part of a story. Who is to say that everyone in the church learns even the biblical story in the same manner? The story by itself does not have the power to make the church one and catholic. This unity and catholicity are the work of the Holy Spirit acting in and through those who call on the name of Jesus and together declare him Lord. The narrative is not a substitute for the Holy Spirit, and baptism in the Christian faith is the primal act through which human beings receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

By baptism the sinful self is renewed and becomes a new ecclesial being with the seal of the Holy Spirit. Henceforth, this new Christian bears the church's marks of wholeness, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. Baptism also incorporates the person into the mystical body of the church, which itself is an eschatological vehicle of the kingdom of God. The church owns a powerful story, rooted in scripture, which it perpetually recalls through liturgy and prayer. However, the church is first in the order of salvation. The story does not make the church or the Christian. The church and every living stone that comprises it makes, remembers, rehearses, proclaims and lives this story, which is without beginning or end, hidden in the mystery of the eternal God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The church must call upon the Holy Spirit by name. Short of this, Christian ethics fails to embody and express the whole truth of the faith and to bring hope into a despairing world. The Orthodox baptismal prayers dynamically join pneumatology and remembrance as the church prepares to continue Christ's own redeeming work in the world. They invoke the Holy Spirit to come down at each and every baptism, as the Spirit did at Jesus' own baptism in the river Jordan and at Pentecost, so as to effect a radical change of heart and mind in every believer and help to bring about the kingdom of God.

²Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, Notre Dame IN, Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1983, pp. 107f.

Christian ethics and the Holy Spirit in the Armenian rite of holy baptism

The work of the modern ecumenical movement has affirmed all of this, and yet, as I have been saying, contemporary Christian ethics remains largely blind and deaf to its significance. In the vast corpus of Christian rites of baptism, few are as pneumatologically rich as the Armenian rite of holy baptism. This rite of my own church contains four hymns to the Holy Spirit, which appear at crucial moments within it. The second in the sequence, which is said over the font just before immersion, states the important truth that the Holy Spirit is the bringer of the “newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). The hymn contrasts baptism with the birth-giving of Eve, in this way also connecting the new birth through baptism with Mary’s conception of the Son of God by the Holy Spirit. The hymn does not make the latter connection explicit—indeed, it does not mention Mary. However, the church remembers Eve as the “first mother” because the “second mother” is Mary, the Mother of God, the new Eve. Eve is the mother of the “old man” and Mary is the mother of the new humanity born of baptism and adopted in the Spirit as sons and daughters of God. The salient verses of the hymn read as follows:

This day the sorrowful and nocturnal travail of the birth of the first mother has been loosed, for those who are born with body unto death and corruption have been born again by the Spirit to be sons of light of the heavenly Father; and therefore we bow down to the Father in spirit and truth.³

This is just one example of the pneumatological riches in the Armenian rite. It is significant also because, according to the rite, our ethical charge as Christians gains intelligibility only from the perspective of this new birth and adoption as sons and daughters of God and inheritors of God’s kingdom. The prayer which is said over the holy oil (chrism) is even more explicit. It mentions the new people, the new spiritual body, to whom the newly baptized individual henceforth belongs: “Blessed art thou, O Lord, God almighty, who has chosen for thyself a new people unto priesthood and kingship to be a holy nation and thy own people.” Then it enumerates the virtues that the Holy Spirit plants within each new Christian. These gifts (or goods) of baptism assist the Christian through this life towards “the inheritance of the state of the saints in the light”. The rite orders these

³ *The Order of Baptism: According to the Rite of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church*, Evanston IL, St Nerses Seminary Press, 1964, p.31.

goods carefully. The first that is named is “holiness of spiritual wisdom”. This may be interpreted as the power that the Spirit gives to see the saving truth and apply it to life. Second is the “courage to struggle and triumph over the Adversary”. Evil is in the world—and within each one of us—and has to be confronted as such before “turning” to the task of wholly conforming oneself to the pattern of Christ’s own life. Faith needs courage to wage this spiritual struggle. The third good is the “strength to keep the commandments that enjoin virtuous deeds”. This strength comprises such virtues as patience and perseverance. Finally, there is the “perfect discipline” to “honour” and glorify the Holy Trinity.⁴ This prayer articulates an ethic for the church, an ecclesial ethic, and it makes our forgetfulness of baptism as the well-spring of Christian ethics seem that much more strange.

Baptism and the Spirit

But I have jumped ahead of myself. I must return to my central thread, which is the specific question about pneumatology and ethics, and reserve for later some comments about baptism and ethics and the new ecclesial person that is born within the baptismal waters. The text of Romans 6 is a centrepiece in all the Eastern rites of baptism and most Western rites as well. In this letter, the apostle declares that all Christians are baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection, “so that we too might walk in the newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). The church distinguishes its baptism from the baptism of John the Forerunner in the important regard that John’s baptism was purely of water for the repentance and remission of sins, whereas baptism in and with Christ *through water and Spirit* is a mystical and eschatological passage with Christ through death into the new life of the kingdom. Christologically speaking, this new kind of baptism is the church’s principal expression of following Christ obediently in conformity to his perfected humanity.

Baptism and Christian ethics begin with the renunciation of Satan and a penitent turning from our fallen and discordant existence to a new way of holiness and peace patterned after Christ’s relationship to the Father. But baptism and Christian ethics entail even more. A merely christological Christian ethics can err in several ways. For example, on the one hand, it can lapse into a totalistic belonging to the body under the strict regime of law or ecclesiastical authority; on the other hand, it might express itself,

⁴Ibid., p.33.

as in certain forms of liberal Protestantism, as an individualistic ethic of imitating the example of the ethical man named Jesus. But if we take the lead of scripture, we are able to avoid these mistakes and recapture the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian living. Once more the distinction between the baptism of Jesus and that of John is important. Only in the former is the Holy Spirit present, transforming the “old humanity” into the “new”. The Acts of the Apostles relates that on Paul’s first visit to Ephesus, he encountered several disciples whose understanding of baptism was indeed limited to the influence of John the Baptist. Luke continues:

He [Paul] said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” They replied, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” Then he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They answered, “Into John’s baptism.” Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.” On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them ... (Acts 19:2-6).

So Christian baptism is baptism under the sign of the cross and of the Holy Spirit. A truly trinitarian Christian ethic acknowledges and reflects this pneumatological character of baptism. Centering Christian ethics eucharistically, as some have suggested, is not sufficient to recover this pneumatological dimension. The church constantly needs to recollect the coming of the Spirit in the washing with water and anointing with oil. Baptism and its perpetual recollection is essential, as is reflected in the communion prayer of the divine liturgy of the Armenian church. The prayer addresses the Father, “who hast called us by the name of thine Only-begotten and hast enlightened us through the baptism of the spiritual font” and asks him to “impress upon us the graces of the Holy Spirit, as thou didst upon the holy apostles, who tasted thereof and became cleansers of the whole world”.⁵ It is true that “Christ is sufficient”, but only because he himself is obedient to the Father and does his will in all things and because he gives us the gift of his Holy Spirit. In the gospel of St John, Christ says: “He [the Father] will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:14-15).

In its strong pneumatological awareness, the Orthodox tradition understands chrismation as the completion of baptism. Baptism is itself epicletic; but chrismation is the completion of that action of the Spirit in

⁵ *Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church*, London, St Sarkis Church, 5th ed., rev., 1984, p.97.

baptism which launches each new Christian into the world for holy service. The Holy Spirit's work does not halt with baptism and wait for our next move. It continues to the logical conclusion, in which the Holy Spirit comes on the person as total gift, a personal Pentecost that is quite distinct from baptism and yet is also its completion, its fulfillment. Just as the Holy Spirit at Pentecost prepared the apostles to go out all over the world and pursue the calling of their own baptisms, so by being anointed with the oil every new Christian is readied to do the same. "It is the seal", writes Alexander Schmemmann, "that preserves and defends in us the precious content and its fragrance; it is the sign of our high and unique calling."⁶

Baptism, ethics and the marks of the church

I have said that a new ecclesial person is born by baptism of water and the Spirit. This is a mystery that transcends empirical and biological categories of individuality. Baptism not only reveals anew what scripture already reports, that the human being is created in the image and the likeness of God. It also commences a process by which the image of God is in fact fully restored in each person, by virtue of God's own accomplishment of this for us through the incarnate Word. The 14th-century Byzantine theologian Nicholas Cabasilas comments on these mystical and ethical effects of the rite:

When we come up from the water we bear the Saviour upon our souls, on our heads, on our eyes, in our very inward parts, on all our members—Him who is pure from sin, free from corruption, just as he was when he rose again and appeared to his disciples.⁷

The contemporary Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas has stated that the spiritual birth in the baptismal font constitutes the appearance of an ecclesial hypostasis (person), which is "a new mode of existence", replacing the biological hypostasis that is in bondage to the law of sin and subject to corruptible death. Baptism effects this change in the person immediately as well as proleptically, as this new mode of existence begins to grow and assimilate the old Adam into the new. I Peter 1:3-4 describes this: "By his [the Father's] great mercy, he has given us a new birth into

⁶Alexander Schmemmann, *Of Water and the Spirit*, Crestwood NY, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974. p.80.

⁷Nicholas Cabasilas. *The Life in Christ*, Carmino J. De Catanzaro, Crestwood NY, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974, p.62.

a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you.” The completion of this process remains hidden in the mystery of God’s own freedom and love. Nevertheless, it is an ascetical undertaking that we are called to here and now. Our complete rebirth and reconstitution into new ecclesial beings is contingent on constantly putting to death our old selfish selves for the love of God.

Baptism and the ecclesial character of Christian ethics

Let me return to a claim I made at the start—that through baptism the church itself is being born into the world. The church is born and renewed every time a new Christian is made; and by anointing with oil the Holy Spirit also confers all the essential marks of the church on that new Christian as gift and as calling. The church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic because through baptism the Spirit brings into existence whole, holy, catholic and apostolic persons. Again this is not an instantaneous or in any sense magical occurrence. The seed is sown with all its potential to grow into a healthy plant. The plant, however, must be nurtured and cultivated so that it will bear fruit. St Paul advised the Christians of Corinth that when a man joins himself to a prostitute he becomes united with her flesh. The archetype of personal union which this act perverts is the unity achieved by adherence to Christ performed and accomplished through baptism. The essence of the unity of the church is each new Christian’s adherence to Christ. In like manner, the church is also holy. Yet it is holy only because the Spirit fills each new Christian at baptism and will not depart so long as the Spirit is welcomed. Indeed, what good is a body united and one if it is not also holy? The Armenian prayer of chrismation speaks of the person as “sanctified..., in the truth and in the light of the grace of the Holy Spirit, so that he [or she] may be a temple and a dwelling of thy Godhead and may be able to walk in all ways of righteousness”.⁸ Ethically speaking, the holiness of the church is a gift and also an ascetical undertaking of love, love that gives itself up even to death so that the other might live and be together with all in God and his kingdom.

The church is catholic. It is catholic because through baptism a new ecclesial way of being human is brought into existence which transcends

⁸*The Order of Baptism*, p.67.

every difference of race, culture, social status, and sex. Thus, St Paul writes:

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ (Gal. 3:26-28).

Catholicity, however, is neither mere universality nor multiculturalism. In the first instance it is something not external but interior. It is Christ through the Holy Spirit abiding within the person. Catholicity concerns truth. It is the inward confirmation of the truth of salvation in Jesus Christ. This truth is given to every baptized Christian by the Spirit. All the virtues that are conferred by baptism and learned and practised through a life-long living and dying in Christ ought to serve this truth of salvation, and not the reverse. Whether this truth takes root and grows into catholic consciousness, however, depends on the nourishment and support of all who bear that truth within the community of the faithful.

In the Armenian prayer of chrismation, God, who is described as great and eternal and “know[ing] all secrets”, and who is “holy and dwellest in the saints”, is also named as the one who grants “the knowledge of thy truth to all them that believe in thee” giving “them the right to be sons of God through regeneration of water and spirit”.⁹ This describes the birth of the catholic mind of the church within each baptized person. It can be no other way. It is not the church as a human institution that gives the truth but God acting through the Spirit granting to each new Christian this truth through baptism. This truth is profoundly personal and yet it is also powerless unless shared and communicated by the entire community of faith.

And finally there is apostolicity. Apostolicity is both the handing on of tradition and the mission of the church into the world. The ethical force of this hardly needs to be described. At the close of the gospel of St Matthew Jesus gives his great commission to the apostles: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” This is the summation of all Christian ethics. For I do not think that there can possibly be Christian ethics unless there is mission and conversion. Yet even this apostolicity, this spirit of mission, first has to be born freely within the ecclesial baptized person. It is never an obligation imposed by the church upon the individual. The Holy Spirit

⁹Ibid., p.65.

must be active in each person, making that person free so that the church is apostolic as well, inspired to preach the gospel of salvation to all peoples. St John records that “Jesus said [to the disciples]..., ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you’”. But let us not forget what Christ then also did. “When he had said this he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:21-23).

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me report that throughout this discussion of the ecclesial and ethical dimensions of baptism, I have tried to lend expression to a broader meaning of baptism than one single event in the life of a Christian, or even as a string of singular events that punctuate the normal rhythm of the church. Baptism should be seen as the concrete expression of a full life lived and dying daily in Christ. I mean this symbolically in the deepest sense of the Christian rite of baptism itself as death and burial and rebirth in Christ. But I also am speaking plainly. *Baptism encompasses the entire temporal life-span of a person.* It is beginning and end. We need to recapitulate and review, revisit and reflect upon our baptisms throughout our lives in order never to forget from whence we came and to whom our lives are finally bound and destined. In this manner, our ethics may become a complete way of life, a way of being in the world in service to the world and yet belonging entirely to God, and to God alone.