

MEMORANDUM ON INFANT BAPTISM (1936)

The Origin and Catholicity of the Sacrament of Baptism.

The New Testament teaches that our Lord Himself submitted to the baptism of St. John, and that by His authority the rite was instituted in the Christian Church. From the day of Pentecost onwards Baptism was the Sacrament by which believers were received into the Christian Community, and this apostolic practice has continued in the universal Church unto this day. While there are many differences within the one Church, and while some of these affect the interpretation of this Sacrament, yet, as every Christian community which practices Infant Baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity accepts the validity of the baptism of every other, this Sacrament is a great symbol of Christian unity.

How Infant Baptism Arose

The Sacrament of Baptism is the 'outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace,' and when administered to adults and received in faith, the outward sign is in itself a conscious means of grace. The word of the Saviour, 'Suffer little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of God,' placed them among His people, and since Baptism was the outward symbol of initiation into the Church, this rite was naturally extended to the children of Christian parents. In the early Christian centuries, the desire of Christian parents that their offspring should be included in the Church to which they themselves belonged, led to the baptism of their children even in infancy.

The Sacramental Difference between Adult and Infant Baptism

While the Spirit of God is present and active in every child, whether baptised or unbaptised, from birth onward, the special object of Baptism is to claim the child for the Kingdom of God's grace in Jesus Christ. In this Sacrament, when administered to infants, the outward sign and the inward grace are in some ways to be distinguished. The outward act anticipates the day when the child will consciously accept the inward grace. Our hope and confidence is that, through the operation of the Holy Spirit, in answer to the prayers of the Church, and through the influence of Christian nurture to which the parents pledge themselves, this Sacrament will be inwardly completed and made effective when the child through faith in Christ responds to the grace proclaimed and pledged by the rite.

Infant Baptism is the Sacrament of Initiation into the Church on Earth and a Symbol of Universal Grace.

By adult Baptism, Christians are outwardly identified with the 'congregation of Christ's flock,' the visible fellowship of His disciples in which the Holy Spirit dwells. This Sacrament is thus, not only an outward symbol, but also a channel of inward grace. Membership of the Church involves for all who voluntarily seek it a covenant both with Christ and with His Church. Since an infant is incapable of entering into conscious fellowship with the Lord and His people, the child's membership is necessarily incomplete. By Baptism the child is brought into the household of faith, and as such should be regarded as remaining therein, in hope of the time when he will personally receive Jesus Christ as His Saviour and Lord. Meanwhile, alike in infancy,

childhood, and youth, the ministries of the Church are his, as are those of his home, though he may be little aware of either.

What Baptism Symbolises for the Church and for Parents.

For the Church and for the natural guardians of the child, Infant Baptism has an immediate symbolic and spiritual value. Christ is the minister of His own Sacrament, and the covenanting parties through whom He works are the Church and the parents. In this Sacrament, the Church as representative of Christ, pledges itself to instruct and train the child in the doctrine, duties, and privileges of the Christian religion. In like manner, the parents on their part pledge themselves to be the ministers of God to him for good, to make for him a Christian home, and to share with the Church in the Christian nurture and care of the child.

Responsibility taken for the Child an Essential Element in the Baptismal Service.

Whenever Baptism is administered to an infant, there ought to be those present who take definite responsibility for the religious upbringing of the child, and the Order of Service provides for this. Without such undertaking, vital parts of the Sacramental Service are neglected. It is the plain duty of all who administer this Sacrament to assure themselves as far as possible that the person or persons who present the child are taking real responsibility for its Christian training. Baptism is degraded to something little better than superstition unless the parents or guardians of the child are participators in the Sacrament along with the ministrant of the rite.

The Baptism of Unfortunate Children.

Normally it is the duty and high calling of parents to take the responsibility. There are, however, cases for which special provision must be made – e.g. orphans, or children born out of wedlock. In such instances the Church should appoint its own representatives to take responsibility for the training of the child, and, if need be, to answer the questions put to parents in the Baptismal Service.

The Christian Obligation of Infant Baptism.

We assert in common with the general body of the Church of Christ, that a solemn obligation to Christ, the Church, and the child rests upon parents to present their children to Christ in Baptism, and thus to honour the ancient ordinance whereby they are joined to the visible community of Christ's people.

(Minutes 1936, pp.400f)

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