

A REFLECTION FOR THE FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD BY THE WISE IRISH KILTEGAN FATHER, FR DONAL DORR

Donal Dorr

Baptism and Conversion

More than sixty years ago, when I was still a student, studying for the priesthood, I went to work near London during one summer vacation. I found it difficult to get lodging in the area and was delighted when one kind man offered to put me up. He was a very committed Baptist who believed that only adults should be baptised. So we had interesting conversations whether infant baptism is meaningful and other related topics. I also had the opportunity to listen to the speakers at Hyde Park Corner, where there were regular arguments between Catholic speakers and evangelical Protestant speakers about 'being converted'.

This was a couple of years before the Vatican Council began in 1962, and our Catholic theology of the time didn't put any emphasis on the need for each person to have a memorable conversion experience in order to be a true Christian. So we Catholics had great difficulty in understanding why the Baptists and other Evangelicals were insisting on the need for a major act of personal conversion. The Catholics at Hyde Park Corner were saying that when an infant was baptised he or she was already converted and was fully Christian.

For me, the arguments between Evangelicals and Catholics were fascinating and they sparked in me a great interest in this whole topic of conversion. So when, a couple of years later, I was asked to do postgraduate studies in theology I chose to do my research on this subject. After some initial exploration I decided to focus on the works of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. I spent almost three years immersed in study of his life and writings, as well as the works of modern Methodist theologians and other Evangelicals. And, of course, I had to delve deeply into the corresponding Catholic theology in order to look for points of convergence, and areas where we might have theological differences or divergences in emphasis. I also studied everything I could find about the whole psychology of conversion.

WHAT I LEARNED FROM THE EVANGELICALS

I found these years of study enormously enriching for me not only in my theology but, more importantly, in my personal spirituality. I came to realise that in many

ways John Wesley's preaching and teaching combined many of the best elements of Protestant and Catholic spirituality. I could sum up this convergence by saying that Wesley, in his teaching and writing, put great emphasis on two major points:

1. The typically evangelical Protestant insistence that each person must turn personally to Jesus for salvation and that this salvation is purely a gift of God's grace, rather than something we earn by our own efforts.
2. The typically Catholic insistence that every Christian must cooperate with God's grace and strive hard to live a deeply moral and religious life.

One of my main learnings from my study and reflection on the evangelical position was the extent to which I had previously more or less assumed that a person could become a fully committed Catholic by being brought up in a Catholic family. I came to realise how important it is for every Christian to be personally committed to God. We cannot just imbibe our faith in some automatic way from our surroundings—even from a very devout family. At some stage each of us has to make a personal choice: do we believe in God, in Jesus, in the Holy Spirit? Furthermore, we have to learn that our faith is a free gift from God.

THE CATHOLIC EMPHASIS

Up to about fifty years ago Catholics saw it as a matter of great urgency to get each infant baptised as quickly as possible, even if it meant that the mother was still too exhausted from the birth to be able to come to the church. The teaching at the time was that an unbaptised child could not go to Heaven. The most that could be hoped for was that the child would go to a kind of intermediate place or state called Limbo. This teaching caused great heartbreak for parents whose infant died shortly after birth and for women who suffered from a stillbirth.

The notion of Limbo has now been quietly dropped out of Catholic teaching. Catholic theologians and most Catholic parents now widely take for granted that God loves every child from the first moment of its existence. People no longer accept the older idea that 'original

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sin' would prevent an infant child who died before being baptised from going directly to God. The result is that there is no longer this great sense of urgency to get the child baptised very quickly. Many parents are willing to wait for a couple of weeks or even longer.

WHY BAPTISE INFANTS?

What then is the point of infant baptism? Here is where we come to a far richer understanding of the Catholic position. Over the years I have come to a deeper appreciation of the value of the Catholic emphasis on infant baptism. I see now that the baptism of an infant is very much a family affair. An infant child cannot make any personal choice, so the role of the parents, the grandparents, the other members of the family and the godparents is very important.

I see infant baptism as a beautiful and meaningful rite which celebrates the reception of the child into the Christian community. We recognize that nobody is an isolated individual. Even a mature woman or man cannot survive on their own. And this applies far more to a child.

The Catholic ideal is that each infant will be loved and cherished in a fully committed Christian family, which itself is part of a Christian community. As little girls and boys grow up, they gradually learn to take responsibility for their actions. Their parents, their godparents, their teachers, and their older companions are committing themselves to play a key role in teaching the children what is involved in living a Christian life. One aspect of this is learning the difference between good behaviour and bad behaviour. And, alongside this moral education, the children in a Christian family also have a religious education. They come to have a growing understanding of how much God loves them, what is involved in responding to that love, and how Christians celebrate and foster this love.



Fr Vitalis Inyang SPS carries out a baptism in Chapada dos Guimarães, Diocese of Primavera do Leste-Paranatinga, Mato Grosso, Brazil. (Photo: V. Inyang)

A MOMENT OF TRUTH

However, every human has to make a fully personal choice at some point of their lives about whether or not they really want to live a fully moral life. Usually this choice is made implicitly, in a situation where the person is tempted to take advantage of somebody else or to fail to do what they know would be the right thing to do.

In a somewhat similar way, those who have been brought up as Christians will at some stage during adolescence or early personal adulthood have their faith 'put to the test'. Do they still believe that God loves them and that they can trust God even when everything seems to have gone wrong or when life is beginning to seem meaningless? Do they accept that Jesus is the one who has brought them salvation and who gives them hope? If they say a wholehearted 'yes', then, in the language of Evangelical Protestants, they are 'converted'.

Catholics have not been accustomed to using this kind of language about a personal religious conversion. But, like the Evangelicals, we too must accept that there has to be 'a moment of truth' in our life of faith. Each of us must make a personal act of faith commitment as a member of the community of faith into which we were baptised as infants. We can help to promote Christian unity by acknowledging that we have much to learn on this issue from the Evangelicals. ■

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