

RITE OF CONSECRATION

THE CONTEXT (Let the Community rise.)

Priest: In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Community: Amen.

Priest: Members of the community of faith, this child (born to John and Yvonne Stringham) is brought before us for a rite of consecration. She is, as are all humans, born into the abounding grace of God. This act of ours today signifies for us and to her that she is a member of the body of Christ. As a community we once again take part in the universal drama between God and Man. We acknowledge the claim that each new life, and particularly this one, makes on us.

Let the parents give the child to representatives of the community as symbol of her membership in the family of God. Let us praise the Lord of All. (Sing GIVE THANKS)

THE OLD TESTAMENT READING: PSALM 139 (Community is seated.)

Priest: Thou it was who didst fashion my inward parts; thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb.

Men: I will praise thee, for thou doth fill me with awe; wonderful thou art, and wonderful thy works.

Women: Thou knowest me through and through; my body is no mystery to thee.

Men: How I was secretly kneaded into shape and patterned in the depths of the earth.

Women: Thou didst see my limbs unformed in the womb and in thy book they are all recorded.

Men: Day by day they were fashioned; not one of them was late in growing.

Women: How deep I find thy thoughts O God, how inexhaustible their themes.

Men: Can I count them? They outnumber the grains of sand; to finish the count, my years must equal thine.

Women: Examine me, O God, and know my thoughts; test me, and understand my misgivings.

Men: Watch lest I follow any path that grieves thee; guide me in the ancient ways.

THE NEW TESTAMENT READING (Let the Community rise.)

Reader: We proclaim something which has always existed yet which we our selves have seen and heard: something which we had the opportunity to observe closely and even to hold in our hands, and yet, as we know now, was something of the very word of Life. For it was life which appeared before us. It was the very life of all ages, the life that has always existed with the Father which actually became visible in person to us mortal men, We repeat, we really saw and heard what we are now speaking about. The more the fellowship extends the greater joy it brings to us who are already in it.

THE RITE OF CONSECRATION

Context and Issues

Several weeks after our first child's birth we began to talk about what kind of ceremony should mark her entrance into a family that has decided to be Christian and therefore into the Christian community, Being from different denominational backgrounds, our heritage in regard to baptism was different and so we began to ask what the church actually meant by baptism.

We began to examine the life journey of a human being, the journey of becoming a Christian and have attempted to re-

discover the basic questions and their relationships. The church itself is struggling with the question of what form Christian initiation should take. We have used some of the various documents written on the subject to inform our own thinking. We hope this work can be of help to others as they also try to decide how to responsibly bring up children in the Christian context.

Human Journey and the Church's Response

Birth: A human's birth means a new being has entered history - one whose potential is unknown. Early man recognized this and marked the event by a rite and celebration after a new birth. The forms of solemnizing a birth differ widely. The important common elements are these:

- 1) giving a child a name by which the community will henceforth address her,
- 2) claiming promises of the child's future participation in that society,
 1. charging certain adults with particular responsibility for that child's care and upbringing to be a full member of that community.

The church, as the portion of the human community responsive first to God on behalf of the human community, intensifies and particularizes the event of birth.

The Christian community, as it names a child, gives a story to that child about who he or she is. A name points to an historical figure or definition associated with it that becomes a guardian angel or a guide with whom the child can dialogue over his life.

The church, those who accept and live out of the word of Jesus Christ as the truth of life, claims its promise by electing the child to be brought up in that understanding. It looks forward to confirm that decision when the individual indicates her decision to do so.

The Christian community charges the parents as those naturally responsible and the godparents as those responsible in behalf of the whole community with the responsibility of the child's physical care and spiritual upbringing so that she will fully understand and appreciate the truth of the way life is and respond to its demand.

Finally, the community blesses the child, projecting a future of service, participation and spiritual fulfillment. The forms through which this is done and symbolized have often changed and are still changing. Circumcision, infant baptism, dedication ceremonies, forms of anointing, presentation and blessing have been and are still used. The rites and promises also vary but the elements above are common in most.

Passage from Childhood to Adulthood: Every human community recognizes a time when a human being ceases to be primarily a receiver of care, protection, and education from the community and becomes instead primarily a contributor to that community's well being. This shift is always a gradual one. However, our ancestors recognized that an event or events which symbolized this shift was needed for the individual and the community to be clear that a change in status had taken place.

Many rites of passage exist, but all appear to involve the following:

1. and acknowledgment by the individual of the responsibility of adulthood,
2. an acceptance of the person's new status by the community and a bestowal of the rights accompanying the responsibility.

The church again intensifies the step. For the church this becomes an occasion when an individual declares her own free acceptance of the Christian faith and in so doing fulfills the election made in her behalf at her birth celebration. The individual takes on responsibility for the future fulfillment of that covenant. Historically, the rites which have been used to mark these events have been adult baptism, confirmation, response to an altar call, and membership ceremonies.

Death: Dying is a lifelong process. The individual rehearses and experiences the completion of her own death many times

before the final event. Acceptance of death as the inevitable and final fact of life is necessary if a community or an individual is to survive as a healthy entity.

The church understands death to be a celebration of life completed and a sendout into the unknown but faithfully anticipated fulfillment of union with the Mystery itself. Each individual's death is the occasion for the rest of the community to rehearse their own to-be-completed lives, to affirm the worth of the member who is no more physically present and to give thanks to that which causes man to be, to be sustained, and not to be. Burial services, ashes on Ash Wednesday Remembrance Day, etc., are ways in which this is done.

Our Response

We are agreed that the sacrament claims the promise that the child would at some point in the future decide of her own free will to assume the life style of a Christian, that the parents and congregation jointly participate in taking responsibility for teaching the child what is involved in being a Christian, and that the sacrament rehearses that the child belongs to God.

Most of our discussion and research have centered around the symbolism of immersion in water and when that symbol should be used, i.e., the effectiveness of baptism as an infant vs. Adult baptism in a person's life.

The most powerful statement we found on infant baptism came from The Sacraments Today by Juan Luis Segundo, S.J.

"Baptism ostensibly gives to the Christian child what God gives to all children: birth into a redeemed world, that is, participation in the liberation which Christ brought to the world. This means that ... baptism does not set up two groups of opposed human beings by virtue of some magic applied from the outside... Baptism constitutes the sign of a grace that all human beings receive at the moment they are born into a world which could have been a world enslaved to the powers of death and destruction but in fact is not. Because grace abounded even more than sin did, it is a world where love and life triumph so long as they are not opposed by man's free and express will. Christians do not have a monopoly on grace, but they do have a monopoly on its sensible, significative, sacramental manifestation."

The power of symbol at baptism for an adult is in the dramatization of death to the old life and resurrection to the new life. The most profound sign of accountability and absolution is captured with the baptism. That which has been true in the life of a human being since birth is acknowledged and received and therefore experienced with wonder and gratitude.

It seems that in our time baptism as a sacrament has lost its sign-bearing power for the community whether administered to infants or adults. For infants, baptism is often reduced to something that is thought to give a child supernatural defences against evil or as a special option on future blessing. It is more often limited to a service for the sake of the child, rather than an occasion for the community to reaffirm its basic understanding of life and covenant together to live out the sign of God's mercy. For adults, baptism has been confused with a church membership ceremony or simply a very personal decision which does not involve the community except as witnesses.

In this light, we decided that the power of the sign which baptism is to the individual and the community is far greater in our time when that person is baptized as an adult.

We have decided that the Church today needs to dramatize the adult commitment to the life lived in the word. Baptism is the preeminent sign of acceptance of that Grace-filled life.

Nevertheless, there still needs to be a way in which an infant is accepted into the Christian community, and responsibility for its growth as a person born into grace assumed by its parents, Godparents and the community. Therefore, we proposed this following Rite of Consecration be used. (separate copy)

John & Yvonne Stringham

1974

THE ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF GOD'S GRACE

Priest: Beloved ones, God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he has for us, gave us life together with Christ. It is,

remember, by grace and not achievement that we are saved.

Community: What we are we owe to the hand of God upon us. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do those good deeds which God planned for us to do. Though sin is shown to be wide and deep, thank God his grace is wider and deeper still. Now grace is the ruling factor.

Priest: Let us pray. (Let the Community be seated.)

Community: O ThouWhoHastEverBeen, we yield thee hearty thanks that it hath pleased thee to add this child to the human family and to thy Holy Church. May we be found attentive to the part we play in thy Creation. Amen

DEDICATIONS (Priest, godparents rise)

Priest: In giving up our lives, life abundant is given to us. We consecrate this day Dara Elise to live in the Christstyle, to be daily crucified and daily risen from the dead in service and love for the world.

(Mark her with the sign of the cross.)

Do you, the parents and godparents of this child, vow before God and this community to love Dara as a representative of all people, to care for her, to teach her the truth of Life? Do you take responsibility for her life?

Parents and

Godparents: We do, God being our helper.

Priest: Do you, the people of God, vow to continue to create a world where the love that is justice operates unceasingly forever, to assume responsibility for her life and the lives of all?

Community: We do, God being our helper.

Priest: Dara, the blessing of God is with you.

Let us pray. (Let the Community be seated.)

Our Father we give you again that which is yours, the life of Dara. We receive her again as a gift from you. Use her and us in the care of a suffering world. Amen.

Community: Amen.

(The Community rises.)

Priest: Go in God's peace. Hallelujah! Amen.

Community: Amen.