

# LITURGY NEWSLETTER

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of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

## NOT AN ACCESSORY

The last two issues of the *Liturgy Newsletter* have focused on the need to revitalize the language of symbol in liturgy, to create strong symbols that speak loudly even before a word is spoken. This issue continues that thread of thought from the perspective of a liturgical environment specialist.

Recently I had occasion to read again, the ritual text *Dedication of a Church and an Altar*. In the actual Prayer of Dedication, a prayer replete with rich theological and scriptural images of the church, we find this reference to Baptism: "Here may the waters of Baptism overwhelm the shame of sin; here may your people die to sin and live again through grace as your children." I had the privilege of presiding at the Baptism of three beautiful infants. It was truly a joyful celebration. It took place during the Sunday Eucharist in a welcoming parish, a parish which has a very strong and healthy tradition of good liturgical practice, but I did not experience a sense of Baptism "overwhelming" the shame of sin.

Last year (2009), I was invited to be the guest homilist for the Triduum in a parish near Ottawa. At the Easter Vigil, a mother and her three children were initiated into the Church. The actual Baptism was done by means of full immersion, and all the elements of the rite were there – the full throated acclamation by the assembly after each baptism, the clothing with a full white garment, candles etc., but it was the action of baptism itself which was unforgettable. No. 206 of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* reads: "Therefore in the celebration of baptism the washing with water should take on its full importance as the sign that mystical sharing in Christ's death and resurrection through which those who believe in his name die to sin and rise to eternal life." On this occasion, a retired priest and close friend of the family was standing next to me. After the actual water baptisms, he said to me in a sincere whisper "I have performed thousands of baptisms over the years and tonight I have finally experienced the awesomeness of its significance."

Fr. Edward Yarnold, in the preface to his book *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation* says he could just as easily "without being unfaithful to the Greek" called his book *The Spine-Chilling Rites of Initiation*, since the complex of initiatory rituals were "calculated to inspire religious awe and to make these rites the occasion of a life-long conversion." In that age of robust liturgy, "people were so sensitive to symbols that the liturgy could be left to speak for itself, even before the preacher had given any explanation." Perhaps it is time to become re-sensitized to the power of symbol.

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In the document *Our Place of Worship* produced by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1999 we read the following paragraph:

*The General Introduction to the Rite Christian Initiation* states that while the water rite may be carried out either by immersion or pouring, immersion is “more suitable as a symbol of participation in the death and resurrection of Christ” (no.22). This suggests that the baptismal font be large enough for immersion, both of adults and children. The Roman Rite has traditionally practiced immersion (the candidate stands or kneels in water which may be of various depths) along with affusion (pouring of water over the candidate’s head and body.).

In this Newsletter, Phil Horrigan reflects on baptismal fonts in two articles – one concerning the renovation of churches and the second for the construction of new churches. The font is where Christians are made. It is far from an accessory.

*Fr. Bill Burke*

## BAPTISMAL FONTS AND THE REONVATION OF A CHURCH

### Phil Horrigan

*Rev. Philip Horrigan, a priest of the archdiocese of Kingston, is a Liturgical Design Consultant working out of Chicago. He is available for consultation and professional guidance on a wide variety of issues for parishes planning to build or renovate churches. The Liturgy website is being renovated and expanded. When that work is completed, we will have a section containing the contact information and C.V.'s for professionals such as Fr. Horrigan, but in the meantime, if you wish to have more information on him now, you can contact the NLO.*

There are three primary liturgical centres in the design of a Catholic church: the baptistery, the nave (the area for the congregation) and the sanctuary. Although these areas are distinct because of the ritual actions that are celebrated in each, and because of the furnishings that are located within each area, the overall design and arrangement of a church should not be a series of unrelated spaces. The community of faith gathers and celebrates as a single body, united in faith through baptism. The nature of the liturgy demands that the community participate as one body, gathered in a place that serves and enhances its image as the one body of Christ in praise of the Father. The architectural imperative of the whole space is one that reflects an integration of design, scale, form, and materials. The integrity of the Church’s worship, as it is expressed in all the many elements of ritual prayer, is best served when there is an organic harmony within the architecture. The primary principle for church design is that it serves the ritual actions of the whole liturgical assembly.

The renovation of Catholic churches during the years following the liturgical reforms of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (1963) has posed a number of challenges for architects, liturgical consultants, pastors and parishioners. The most obvious being that the churches built prior to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) were designed to accommodate a different liturgical practice. Today the nature of liturgy calls for full, conscious and

active participation on the part of the gathered community, and this principal is a critical consideration for the renovation of any church. It has been said that when it comes to renovating any building to serve a new purpose that what was originally intended, the building always wins. Whether that is an absolute truth is debatable, but there is some truth in the statement nonetheless. The renovation of churches designed in a former liturgical era present both challenges and opportunities for those parishes that want their liturgical space to serve well the ritual demands of the liturgy today.

This article deals with one of the liturgical areas and its furnishings, namely the baptistery and the baptismal font.

The importance of the rites of initiation can hardly be over-stated in the liturgical tradition and theology of the Church. Of all the sacraments, it is the first one to have a scriptural reference in the New Testament, namely the baptism of Jesus recorded in all three of the synoptic gospels (Mark 1.9-11; Matthew 3.13-17; Luke 3.21-22). Since the apostolic era, the Church has welcomed new members into its midst through the rites of baptism. Through the centuries, these rites have changed a number of times, but the immersing in or the pouring of water has been the central action. The place for the celebration of baptism changed through the centuries, as has the design and style of the baptismal font. (See article in previous edition of this Newsletter). Prior to the restoration of the *Rite for Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)* as demanded by the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (1963, see paragraphs 64-66), most churches had pedestal type fonts, since infant baptism was the normative practice. These fonts were designed with a basin on top of a pedestal. They were located in a number of different places within the church: in a small baptistery adjacent to the narthex, in the sanctuary or close to it; in a back corner of the nave; or in a side chapel. Although they were often beautifully designed they rarely were visible and almost always were empty.

Several years before the restoration of the adult catechumen, the liturgy for the Easter Vigil had been reformed (1951-52) and the rites of initiation were given particular prominence within the celebration of the Vigil. The pastoral notes for the *RCIA* expressed the important connection between the sacramental theology of baptism and the liturgical practice as expressed in and through the words, actions, gestures and symbols of the rite (see nos. 1-28). Accordingly, parishes desired to provide a more appropriate place for the celebration of baptism and a more worthy font to express that “those who are baptized are united to Christ in a death like his, given new life and with him rise again to the newness of life” (Romans 6.4-5).

When parishes contemplate a renovation of their church, the question concerning a more suitable place for baptism is raised because of several factors: the existing font is inadequate, it is a pedestal and looks like a temporary piece of furniture (it may even be on castors and often stored out of sight); it is poorly designed and struggles to look like a worthy liturgical symbol; it is inadequate for the immersion of infants or adults; it is located in a space that does not allow for the gathering of more than a few people; it is in an area removed from the main worship space and thus does not allow the whole assembly to have a sense of participating in the celebration of the rites of initiation.

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See, I am making all things new.

(Rev. 21.5)

Thus the three sacraments of Christian initiation closely combine to bring us, the faithful of Christ, to his full stature and to enable us to carry out the mission of the entire people of God in the church and in the world.

(*Christian Initiation*,  
General Introduction no. 2)

What to do? This Q&A format is intended to assist parishes with this discussion.

Q. What is a baptistery?

A. It is the area where the rites of initiation are celebrated, particularly the rite of baptism. In the early centuries it could be a separate structure or a separate part of the church joined to the main church by a passage way. The font was located in this area and for the first few centuries the font was designed to accommodate baptism by immersion. Over the centuries, with the changes in the baptismal rite, the baptistery was often located adjacent to the narthex. Today the baptistery is still the place for the celebration of baptism but in many churches this area is less defined and often there is no dedicated place for the celebration of baptism. More recent developments in church design have seen the return of a dedicated place for the rites of initiation.

Q. Where to put the font?

A. The more important question is, "Where is the best place for the celebration of the rites of initiation?" It is important to see the placement of the font as central to the area where the rites of initiation can be most suitably celebrated rather than a piece of furniture that has to go some place.

In a new church construction it is possible to design the baptistery near the main entrance area, which is the most appropriate location. In a renovation project that option may be limited by the amount of space available near the entry. Other locations will depend on the arrangement of the nave and whether it is possible to remove some pews in order to provide sufficient room for the ritual actions.

The font should not be located in the sanctuary. None of the Church documents concerned with liturgical design mention locating the font in the sanctuary. That is the place for those furnishings that serve the liturgy of word and the liturgy for Eucharist.

Q. Why immersion?

A. There is ample evidence from archaeological sites and from homiletic texts from the early Church that baptism by immersion was the gesture for baptism. Early textual references frequently allude to Pauline theology that speaks of the catechumen "dying and rising" to a new life in Christ. The gesture of immersion was an obvious expression of that theology. The practice of immersion was essentially lost when the catechumenate "disappeared" around the sixth century. From that time into the twentieth century the baptism of infants and adults was done by pouring water over the head of the one being baptized.

Although this manner of baptizing is acceptable, it is clear from current Church documents that immersion is the preferred gesture. The pastoral notes in the *Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults* (no. 22) and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (No. 1239) indicate that the gesture of immersion is more expressive of the fullness of the sacrament.

Q. What are the design issues?

A. Baptismal fonts are liturgical items and as such should be distinguished by their beauty, scale, design and materials. The overall design of an immersion font could use one of the traditional designs: hexagonal, octagonal, tomb, or cruciform. The font needs to be large enough to hold sufficient water for an adult to be able to stand, kneel or bend forward into the water. The usual materials are those that work well with water: stone, marble or metal. The size, colour and arrangement of tiles used for the interior should be carefully chosen so that they do not give the appearance of a domestic type installation. Because water has a mind of its own, the fewer seams that can be used in the design, the better. The use of wood for the exterior of the font is rarely a good choice.

Q. What are the practical issues?

A. Perhaps the most practical issue in a renovation project is to make sure that the necessary mechanical needs are available; namely access to plumbing and electrical supply. Although these can always be made available, sometimes the cost can be prohibitive. However, if the commitment is to provide a worthy place for the celebration of the sacrament of baptism, then the effort is worth the cost.

Q. What are the pastoral issues?

A. First, there needs to be a commitment to provide a worthy and dedicated place for the sacrament of baptism. If a suitable location can be arranged near the main entry of the church, then the waters of the font become accessible for the faithful as they enter and leave the church. The opening rites of welcome and sprinkling for the funeral liturgy also take place at the font. Often there is concern that the font be located so that everyone can see the baptism. Although this is a laudable consideration, it is rarely possible no matter where the font is located. Usually the font is surrounded by the immediate family and the remainder of the assembly does not actually see the gesture of baptizing. It is helpful to remember that participation in the liturgy is not limited to "seeing." Other modes of participation include hearing the prayers and responding to them, singing during the processions to and from the font, and waiting in silent anticipation for the new members to be brought into the midst of the assembly. Also, there is no requirement that the entire rite needs to be celebrated at the font. The anointings, the profession of faith, the presentation of the candle and the baptismal garment can take place in the midst of or at the front of the assembly.

Q. What else goes in the baptistery?

A. There needs to be a place for the paschal candle and usually the blessed oils are placed in an ambry nearby.

Q. What other considerations are there?

A. Not only should there be a dedicated place for the baptistery, but the font should be fixed in a permanent place within the baptistery. If the existing pedestal font is a worthy art piece, it could be incorporated into the design of a new font.

Father, look now with love upon  
your Church and unseal for her  
the fountain of baptism.

*(Blessing of Water A, Rite of  
Christian Initiation of Adults)*

We ask you Father, with your Son  
to send the Holy Spirit upon the  
waters of this font. May all who  
are buried with Christ in the death  
of baptism rise also with him to  
newness of life.

*(RCIA – Blessing of Font)*



## BAPTISMAL FONTS IN THE NEW CHURCH BUILDINGS

The baptism of Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry by John the Baptist, is the foundational event for the practice and theology of the sacrament of baptism in the Christian tradition.

The stories of baptisms in the early Church, as recounted in the Acts of the Apostles and in Pauline letters, tell us that this water ritual became the manner of welcome and initiation for those who sought membership in the fledging Christian community. It was Paul who developed an early theology of baptism, especially in Chapter Six of his letter to the Romans, that has continued to be the primary understanding in the Church today of this first sacrament.

The historical development of the theological nature of baptism, its ritual practices and the changes in that practice, and the evolution of the place and design for fonts, provide a fascinating study of the sacrament — a study that is beyond the scope of this article.

However, the place for baptism, along with the design, scale, and location of the font are of particular interest today for those parishes considering the construction of a new church.

When parishes begin discussions on the design of a new church, a brief review of the history of the place for baptism would be especially helpful.

Liturgical historians and scholars agree that there were special places for baptism prior to the church building initiatives of the early fourth century that were due in part to the Peace of Constantine (313). These places were either in nearby streams or located in a domestic type setting, similar to the room in the third century house church of Dura-Europus, later to be called “baptisteries.”

Liturgical documents from these early centuries indicate that there was ample water used, that it was fresh (and probably cold), and that those to be baptized entered the water for the accompanying rites. (Note: baptism means “to be dipped.”) The use of “living” water was significant as it expressed the new life that was poured out upon the one seeking to enter the life of Christ.

(See: *Didache*, 7; Justin Martyr’s *First Apology*, 61; and *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, xxi, 2).

Archaeological excavations from these early decades show that the design of the fonts varied; some were tomb-like, some in the shape of a hexagon or an octagon, and some were cruciform. Each shape had a symbolic meaning: the cruciform design reflecting the mystery of dying and rising in Christ; the hexagon referring to the sixth day of the week on which Christ died; the octagon meaning the eighth day — the day of resurrection; the tomb design, sometimes with three steps into it, referring to the three days that Christ spent in the tomb.

These fonts were large enough for adults to enter them and to be baptized by immersion. It is conceivable that the catechumens either stood or knelt in the water as the bishop or presbyter poured water

This sacrament is called Baptism, after the central rite by which it is carried out: to baptize (Greek baptizein) means to “plunge” or “immerse”; the “plunge” into the water symbolizes the catechumen’s burial into Christ’s death, from which he rises up by resurrection with him, as “a new creation.”

(*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.1214).

over them. There is reference in the *Apostolic Traditions* (xxi, 3,11) that the catechumen was naked for the pouring of the water.

Although there are some indications that children were baptized along with other members of a family household, the baptism of adults was the normal practice.

With the demise of the catechumenate after the sixth century, the practice of baptizing infants became the norm. With this development there was a corresponding change in the design, scale and shape of the baptismal font. Large immersion fonts were no longer needed and over the course of the Middle Ages the design of the font resembled a large chalice, with a bowl on top of a pedestal; frequently a lid was attached to prevent the water from being stolen. Eventually the water disappeared altogether, though these pedestal fonts continued to have covers on them which is a design feature that still exists in some churches today.

During this time the location of the font also changed. The large baptisteries of earlier decades were no longer needed and the font moved inside the main church, sometimes in the narthex or in a small baptistery adjacent to the main entry. In later centuries the font was placed either near or in the sanctuary to provide more convenient access for the priest or deacon who baptized. In some cases the font was placed on a set of casters so that it could be moved to any location in the church; and when it was not in use it was stored out of the way. This was one of the more regrettable developments in church design!

As a result of these later developments a number of conclusions can be made:

- ~ The loss of the catechumenate affected not only the theology of baptism, but the design and location of the font.
- ~ The place for the celebration of the rites of initiation became less and less important in the overall design of the church and thus the importance of the sacrament itself in the life of the community was diminished.
- ~ The font became more of a furnishing and the baptistery was no longer a liturgical center or a dedicated space for the celebration of the sacrament.
- ~ The removal of water from the font meant that the primary liturgical symbol of the sacrament was no longer visible or accessible to the community. Hence the introduction of small fonts or stipes attached to the walls near the doors of the church for the gesture of blessing; a gesture that was to be a reminder of baptism.
- ~ The rites associated with celebration of baptism were "condensed" and minimalized since the baptism of infants became the norm. The Rite for the Baptism of Infants became the normative rite and was used for adults with only minor changes in the words.
- ~ The participation of the faithful (apart from the immediate family) was lost and the relationship between baptism and

Since the beginning of the world, water, so humble and wonderful a creature, has been the source of life and fruitfulness. Sacred Scripture sees it as "overshadowed" by the Spirit of God: At the very dawn of creation your Spirit breathed on the waters making them the wellspring of all holiness.

*(Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1218).*

Eucharist was forgotten, at least in the ritual practice and in the church design, even though it still existed in theological principle.

Since it is through the sacrament of baptism that Christians enter the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ and are named and anointed as children of the God, and since all the other sacraments flow from the grace and identity that is poured out at baptism, it is of critical importance that the place of baptism, the baptistery have a significant location within the footprint of the church design.

The following points need to be considered:

**1. The most important question** Where is the best place for the celebration of the rites of initiation? This is a ritual question and the answer can be found in an understanding of the ritual importance of the font within the liturgical celebrations of the Church. If the question is only, “Where can we put the font?” then the answer is less likely to be suitable. In one sense, the font can go anywhere; but that’s been part of the problem in our history and was solved with a set of wheels so it could move about the space. The ritual issue has to do with the participation of the assembly in the rites of initiation, in the funeral rites and in the gesture of blessing as people enter and leave the church. The baptistery is a liturgical centre, as is the sanctuary, and is more than a site for the font.

**2. The location of the baptistery** The sacrament of baptism has been referred to as the “threshold” of our faith journey. With that in mind, it is most appropriate that the baptistery be located near the entry of the church. The baptistery is really a place of transition. The faithful move through this area to celebrate Eucharist; the funeral procession pauses here as the body is sprinkled in the opening rites of the funeral liturgy; people encounter the font as they enter and leave the church. It is a place of memory and mission for through the gesture of blessing we remember who we are as we gather as the Church and are dismissed into the mission of the gospel.

The baptistery is intended to be a dedicated space; it is not part of the gathering area or of the main aisle. It is the place for the font, the paschal candle and usually an ambry. It is an ample space, suitable for the rites of baptism both for infants and adults. The use of architectural detail can give this space a definitive character; for example, recessed lighting, an arch that gives the sense of portal, a change in the floor material with an inlay pattern, as well as some appropriate art pieces that reflect the rich imagery associated with biblical references. If possible the chapel of reconciliation should be located close to the baptistery, thus making the connection between the sacrament of reconciliation that returns us to the fullness of our baptismal commitment. In the early history of the Church, the sacrament of reconciliation was called “second baptism.”

**3. The font** The design of the font should have some connection to the theological and liturgical traditions of the sacrament.

See where you are baptized, see where Baptism comes from, if not from the cross of Christ, from his death. There is the whole mystery: he died for you. In him you are redeemed, in him you are saved.

*(Catechism of the Catholic Church, no.1225, citing St. Ambrose, De Sac.)*



The font is not a garden sculpture or a vessel that might look more at home in a shopping mall display. Although it is a liturgical item, it is both functional and symbolic. As a functional piece it needs to hold a generous amount of water. It needs to be large enough to allow for the immersion of adults. The plumbing system needs to work well, allowing for the circulation and heating of the water, easy maintenance and accessibility to the mechanical parts.

The symbolic nature of the font relates to the use of “living” water, i.e. it should be moving water, though it need not be a waterfall; the materials should speak of it being a liturgical appointment, well crafted and beautiful; the design should reflect a shape that is identifiable with the traditional designs: octagon, hexagon, cruciform, round, or tomb-like. Some contemporary font designs have attempted to reflect a “womb-like” style thus echoing the new birth that is celebrated in the sacrament. In all cases the design and scale of the font needs to avoid being too lavish or ornamental such that it detracts from its liturgical purpose.

**4. Elements of design** As with many liturgical furnishings, there are no exact details required for their design. There isn't any direction about how much water is needed for an immersion font. It is helpful to look for “clues” in the ritual texts and in the theology of the sacrament. In the Rite for the Dedication of a Church and an Altar, the dedicatory prayer includes this phrase, “here may the waters of baptism overwhelm the shame of sin.” Perhaps it is helpful to ask, what does “overwhelm” look like as a way to determine how much water is needed. Certainly the sacrament of baptism, as with all the sacraments, celebrates the abundant grace of Jesus Christ; and since water is the principal sign of that abundance in the sacrament of baptism, then what amount of water best signifies such abundance. The understanding of baptism as “washing away” sinfulness gives the sense of bath, so enough water is needed to be seen as a ritual bathing in preparation for the new life in Christ. Some fonts are designed so that the one being baptized crosses through the font, as in passing from death to life, and emerges from the font facing the altar, thus echoing that the passage of initiation is a journey “from font to table.” The font should be deep enough to go down into, again symbolizing the theology of St. Paul — to be baptized into the death of Christ is to be baptized into his life.

The celebration of the sacrament of baptism is one of the most ancient and significant rites in the Christian tradition. The rituals for both adult and infant baptisms are rich with symbols, gestures and human emotions.

The font is the place for memorable rituals marking births and deaths, and the blessings of many spiritual journeys. The waters of the font call all who enter it, or touch it or are blessed by it, into that transformation whereby “we are alive for God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6.11).

Baptism makes us members of the Body of Christ: “Therefore, ...we are members one of another. Baptism incorporates us into the Church. From the baptismal fonts is born the one People of God of the New Covenant, which transcends all the natural or human limitations of nations, cultures, races and sexes: “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one living body.”

*(Catechism of the Catholic Church, no.1267).*

Incorporated into the Church by Baptism, the faithful have received the sacramental character that consecrates them for Christian worship. The baptismal seal enables and commits Christians to serve God by a vital participation in the holy liturgy of the Church.

(*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1274)

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