

Baptism

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the font to a place to change in a reverent way?"

When it comes to baptisms, however, the rule is the more water, the better — even if it means the newly baptized drip water in the church, diocesan officials said.

"One of the things we are learning is we have kept our sacramental experience very neat," said Joan Workmaster, the Diocese of Rochester's director of liturgy. "It doesn't really speak to us of the struggles being a Christian is all about. So some largeness of the symbols is good."

Older parishioners may have "the whole business of original sin still on their minds," and baptism is still the cleansing of sin, she said. But for the more recently baptized, "the understanding that baptism is a means of dying and rising with Christ and being incorporated into the body of Christ, is most important."

Workmaster said probably all churches will eventually have permanent fonts that can accommodate an adult, enabling them to follow the intentions of the Second Vatican Council. However, because of so many other post-Vatican II changes, she noted, churches are just getting around to installing larger baptismal fonts.

Tradition restored

At the direction of the Vatican II, the initiation rights were revised to clarify their purpose, resulting in the 1969 Rite of Baptism of Children and the 1972 Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, explained Father Robert Kennedy, assistant professor of liturgical studies at St. Bernard's Institute.

"Both documents restored immersion, as the first and therefore the preferred form of the sacrament," he noted. The U.S. National Statutes on the Catechumenate reinforced that preference, he said.

Immersion was the main mode of baptism throughout church history, at least in its first thousand years — in rivers, later in baptisteries built in the catacombs and after the fourth century, in larger baptisteries in churches to accommodate the twice-yearly administration of baptism, according to historians. Sprinkling may have emerged to baptize ill or dying people.

The word "baptize" itself comes from the Greek word for "dipping or plunging into water"; "font," from Latin for "flowing water or fountain."

The 1983 Code of Canon Law (No. 854) states, "Baptism is conferred either by immersion or by pouring..." That revised canon omitted mentioning sprinkling "lest it appear to be as appropriate and fitting as immersion or pouring," according to *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary*.

As for the meaning of baptism, Father Kennedy said, "The emphasis of post-Vatican II is much more on the substance of what baptism is going to mean in your future life, how am I going to live the life from here on out as a Christian believer... It still forgives sins. It's two sides of the same coin."

"Christ went down himself into the waters of the Jordan and was baptized and came up, and the Holy Spirit came upon him and his mission was confirmed by the voice of God from heaven," Father Kennedy said. However, Bible accounts don't detail the method of the baptism.

Today at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church in Hamlin, Father William Amann walks right into the font with a baptismal candidate. Using a pitcher, he pours water over the person's head.

Most adults choose baptism by immersion, and about 70 to 75 percent of the parish's babies also are baptized by immersion, Father Amann said.

At St. Mark's Church, Greece, Father Thomas Erdle totally submerges adults. The priest carefully helps the person lean back under the water after entering it.

"We certainly explain to adults how we are going to go about it," Father Erdle said. "We take for granted they will be immersed. If there is any objection, I would use pouring of water over their heads."

He takes "immersion" to mean total immersion, he said.

Babies, too, can be submerged, he said, because the smaller basin of the two-level font has about 1½ feet of water, but parents usually choose to have their babies held while water is poured over the babies' heads.

Fonts allow option

Baptism by immersion is an option, not a requirement, in most parishes that have new fonts.

To accommodate the new rites of baptism, Diocesan Building Commission guidelines, which follow the Environment and Art in Catholic Worship document. U.S. bishops approved in 1978, state that "It is the EXPECTATION of this diocese that a NEW [or RENOVATED] worship space would include... (a) permanent baptismal font, with flowing water, large enough for immersion of an infant and at least partial immersion of an adult."

"We had a little resistance," acknowledged Sister Estelle Martin, RSM, of the commission and chair of the Environment and Art Committee of the Liturgical Commission. However, she added, "In general we've found them fairly receptive. There are always going to be some people who disagree. People don't want to change, and there is misunderstanding of the theology of it, and of the concept of immersion."

"The purpose of the whole process is to give more, highlight more the symbolism

of baptism, which is water. And more water is better than less water. To move from a minimal baptism, the kind of baptism you and I probably had, to... the more symbolic representation of being immersed in the life of Christ and the theology that baptism is the sacrament by which we die with Christ and rise, the greater amount of water shows that."

The font, which can cost \$15,000-\$35,000 to install, should be placed near the entrance of the church, Sister Martin said, to emphasize baptism is an entry rite and to reserve special prominence for the altar, ambo (pulpit) and chair.

The placement, she said, "is a greater fight than whether or not to have a font. People think it means you aren't going to see it; they want it near the altar."

Churches without permanent larger fonts have reported using hot tubs, "salad bowls," wading pools, horse troughs, and in some parts of the country, large aquariums.

St. Louis, which had used a horse trough, was renovated in 1996, specifically to install the permanent granite font. Father Schwartz estimated 70 to 80 percent of the church's baptisms now are by immersion.

"There was considerable anxiousness about it, but it has really sold itself," he said.

"I've become a firm believer in it," he said. "There's no sense in being stingy about the water... It's a pretty important sacrament in the Christian journey, and is symbolically expressed more beautifully and fully in immersion."

To this day when he presents the newest member of the community, people break into applause.

Stephen Morris, 63, who converted to Catholicism last year, remembers sitting in St. Louis' font with water up to his shoulders and having water poured over him.

"It was very important to me," he said. Although he may have dripped on the way to the changing room, the old baptistery room, he said, "Gee whiz, this is a religious service, and that's unimportant, that you were dripping."

One church's transition

Although it has taken 15 months of planning, by Easter Vigil, Holy Trinity Church in Webster hopes to have installed its permanent baptismal font.

It is the biggest change in the church's environment in years, observed parishioner Eva Yervasi, who served on the parish's font committee.

"I can't wait. I'll be here an hour ahead of time staking out a place," she said.

Parishioner Chris Cass noted that Father Thomas Nellis, the pastor, could have simply installed what he wanted. But he invited people to form a committee after he

preached about the sacrament. By the time he was done with his talk, Yervasi was saying, "It's such a powerful sacrament. I thought holy shmoley, we've got to do more than what we called 'the birdbath.'"

The committee drew 17 parishioners including engineers, architect Kathleen Williams — who eventually drew some 100 sketches and a dozen more formal drawings — and Cass, a trained negotiator who served as chairman.

Their process would take some 15 months, 50 hours in 25 meetings, a few field trips, and construction of three full-size cardboard mockups adults tried out. Eventually they reached consensus on a two-level, Celtic cross-shaped font with flowing water.

Opinions had varied widely. Rocco Yervasi said a friend of his commented, "You really want to dunk 'em? Take 'em to the river."

"We all wanted this to happen. We all just had to have time to listen to each other," Cass said, adding that each member submitted drawings of the ideal font, no matter how wild or subdued.

Committee members are so excited about their font, they wish they could experience it, Eva said.

However, as Father Kennedy pointed out, baptism "happens only once in a person's life."

Today the only time a person might be rebaptized is in the event the original baptism can't be proven, he said. The church accepts many non-Catholic baptisms as valid, done with water and a Trinitarian formula, including those by mainline Protestant churches, Assembly of God and Adventists.

"Some pretty difficult barriers" between churches have existed partly because of baptism, according to the Rev. Dwight Cook, adjunct professor at Colgate Rochester Divinity School and pastor of Mount Olivet Baptist Church, Rochester.

The Greater Rochester Community of Churches may soon begin issuing certification for baptisms sanctioned by most denominations, he said. "It is a great effort to kind of bridge the gap that really has been a chasm in much of religious life," he said.

"Baptism is supposed to bring us together as the body of Christ. All of us ought to be able to embrace and accept it, whatever it may be," Rev. Cook said.

Having an option is important to Dan Stark, 25, who will join Holy Trinity Church this Easter Vigil, and has requested submersion.

"I think submersion is more a dying of self," he said. "I've thought of water submersion as a journey, in a sense... It just seems more complete to me."

"I'll only have one baptism in my life."

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