

HOUSE OF BISHOPS

BAPTISM AND FONTS

Preamble-

I.1 The way in which baptism is administered has become a source of debate within the Church today. This should cause no surprise, given the fact that new rites are being forged, new discoveries have been made about the tradition in which we stand, and new awareness of the needs of a fresh generation are coming to the fore.

I.2 The question of how baptism is performed reflects theological, liturgical and practical concerns, and becomes most acutely felt when a new church is built or an old church reordered. The following Canons related to baptism are worth quoting:

1.3 Canon B 21

It is desirable that every minister having a cure of souls shall normally administer the sacrament of Holy Baptism on Sundays at public worship when the most number of people come together, that the congregation there present may witness the receiving of them that be newly baptised into Christ's Church and be put in remembrance of their own profession made to God in their baptism.

1.4 Canon F1 - OF THE FONT

1. In every Church or Chapel where Baptism is to be administered there shall be provided a decent font with a cover for the keeping clean thereof.
2. The font shall stand as near to the principal entrance as conveniently may be, except there be a custom to the contrary or the Ordinary otherwise direct, and shall be set in a spacious and well-ordered surroundings as possible.
3. The font bowl shall only be used for the water at the administration of Holy baptism and for no other purpose whatsoever.

1.5 Taken together, these directions underscore the traditional Anglican stress on baptism as a corporate activity, reverently administered with specially blessed water and none other, at a font in a symbolic position which speaks of the doctrine of baptism not only at service-time.

1.6 However, these Canons say nothing about the *size* of font, and this factor has led to a number of rulings by diocesan Chancellors which have granted, with varying degrees of reluctance, petitions to install a sunken tank-like font for a more dramatic celebration of baptism, particularly in the case of adults where baptism by immersion (or submersion) is desired.

1.7 Such fonts would be hidden from view when not in use and would be additional to the already existing font in the church in question. (See *Chancellor Blackett-Ord, in St. Nicolas Gosforth (1988)*; *Chancellor George Newsom, in Re St. Barnabas Kensington (1988)*; and *Chancellor John Newey in Re St. George's Deal (1990)*).

I.8 It is clear from these Judgements that, even given the fact that our Church has never before permitted more than one permanent font in a church, pastoral pressure has played a considerable part and that there was little theological base from which to

work. It is fortuitous that the Chancellors have asked the House for advice on this matter. To their questions we now turn.

2. The Chancellors' Questions, followed by answers:

2.1 (i) Is it the view of the bishops that the legal requirement of a font with a cover, in a fixed position, should be the only facility for Baptism in a church?

This has always been the view of the Church of England. Examples can be taken from the past, when there was pressure to use basin-type fonts of a moveable sort. Elizabethan Visitation Articles insist on the use of the Church's proper font, which should not be moveable. (See Archbishop Parker's directions in this matter.)

2.2 (ii) If so, does it not follow that the provision of a portable font or of a pool should not be allowed?

To have more than one font should be regarded essentially as an anomaly, necessary under certain circumstances, but not, to be encouraged. The important thing at present is to promote a deeper awareness of the theology of baptism which is based on the traditional methods of immersion and affusion, and to provide practical examples of how baptism might be administered in different ways. Total submersion seems to be a more recent addition. However, it is interesting to note that in the case of infants, the Book of Common Prayer contemplates dipping as the normal method, the rubric in Public Baptism of infants stating that if "the child is weak it shall suffice to pour; water upon it". Today, as Chancellor Garth Moore observed in his book "Introduction to Canon Law", I.74, "it seems to be assumed that nearly every child is weak, for immersion is in practice the exception rather than the rule". In the case of adults it would seem that the Prayer Book expresses no preference between immersion and affusion. (Rubric in the Ministration of Baptism to such as are of Riper Years). Nevertheless, no one method is any better than another, nor more biblical.

2.3.1 (iii) In any event is it agreed that there can be only one font?

That should be the aim. There is an important ecclesiological background to such a position. One baptism once only is the teaching of the Church from earliest times, and archaeology witnesses to the importance of a significant font from the time when churches first started being erected. It is true that methods of baptism have varied, according to the three rough categories indicated previously, to which a fourth category, aspersion, could be added as a Post-Reformation fashion in northern climes. This variety has gone hand in hand with variations in eucharistic theology and practice, which led to patterns as diverse as the multiplicity of side-chapels for Guild Masses in medieval times, and today's freestanding altars in the central space.

But there are two essential differences. First, the eucharist is celebrated in a variety of contexts, and is a necessarily repeatable sacrament. People are baptised only once. Consequently, while it is one thing to have a variety of altars - though good liturgical practice says not more than one per room - it is quite another to offer a multiplicity of fonts which might be taken to indicate different sorts of baptism, each administered in their own way, from their own font. The *cognoscenti* may themselves understand one Baptism as the official teaching of the Church. What ordinary people will actually 'hear' from such practices is bound to be different. In the kind of consumer, post-christendom society of today, it would seem injudicious to appear to provide potential, if not actual, pastoral confusion at this vital point in people's lives. Church buildings have a proclamatory life of their own apart from the confines of public worship.

A second reason for adhering to one font as the norm is the possible wedge that might be driven between 'christening infants' and 'baptising adults'.

2.4.1 (iv) When new churches are consecrated, should not the Bishop insist on the provision of a traditional font and cover as required by Canon FI and-of no further provision?

As the enclosed illustrations demonstrate, it is quite possible to design a font in which people can be baptised easily either by affusion (pouring of water over the head), immersion (pouring of water over the whole body, only parts of which are submerged), or, with careful management, submersion (placing as much as possible of the body under the water) This sort of design owes a good deal to models of the Patristic and early medieval eras and is making something of a come-back today, both in the Roman Catholic Church and in other western Churches, including the American Lutheran. It safeguards the 'one font' principle. Fonts of this kind of design need no covers, unless the water is blessed only occasionally. But it has a yet further use in contemporary liturgy, quite apart from its eloquent testimony to the single character of baptism (however performed), and that is in the possible use of its water on occasions when baptismal vows are publicly renewed.

2.4.2 Where such a font is not practicable or acceptable, an alternative might be a dignified font, large enough for affusion standing over a pool large enough for immersion or submersion with steps leading in and out. The pool would need to be kept covered when not in use for reasons of safety, cleanliness and aesthetics. Such an alternative approximates to the one font rule.

2.5 (v) If, however, the bishops are of the opinion that more than one place of Baptism is acceptable in the same church, or the use of more than one font, are there any conditions which they would like the Chancellors to impose before granting Faculties for other facilities, such as a pool or portable font?

The type of font illustrated here meets the requirements for different modes of baptism, including the baptism of different age groups at the same liturgy - an increasing trend within the Church as a whole at present.

2.6.1 (vi) When application is made for additional facilities (assuming that the answer to question 5 is in the affirmative), would the Bishops welcome a decision by the Chancellors not to grant such applications unless the Petitioners produce an episcopal authority for what is sought (as is common in the case of Reservation)?

There may be certain circumstances where it is almost unavoidable to install an additional font, e.g. in a building which houses an historic font from an era in which minimalistic use of water led to designs which are inflexible in this regard, and/or are so positioned as to deny easy access or visibility for an appropriate liturgical celebration as envisaged by Canon B 21. Sometimes an historic font can be given a spacious setting with appropriate surrounding floor pattern to enhance its significance in the church, and to enable more substantial quantities of water to be poured over a candidate before draining away through the redesigned floor. But we would stress the need for new fonts to be designed with adaptability of use in mind - a good legacy to convey to future generations.

Mention has been made of the different modes of performing baptism. It is important to note that history does not come down on one method exclusively, until the Anabaptist controversy in the 16th and 17th centuries, when submersion was regarded by that group as the only 'biblical' way of doing baptism. There are those today who hold to this view. While it reflects most completely the imagery of Rom 6.3-11 (dying and rising in Christ), the other methods have their own biblical warrant, too. Affusion tells of divine adoption (Jn 3:5). Immersion speaks of passing 'from an old life to a new (Gal 3:27, 2 Cor 5:17).

The position of the font is a parallel case: different positions indicate different theological emphases, and certainly the position should not be decided solely on the basis of visibility. And while a position at the door may speak of our entry into Christ's church, a position in - for example - the centre of the congregation may have more to say about the outpouring of God's grace as he brings his people to a new birth, and a position in close proximity to the altar will emphasise the paschal link between baptism and the eucharist.

An age like our own that is recovering so much of the symbolic character of liturgy, both in word and act, needs to avoid possible confusion over the way baptism is performed and understood. Historians of the future will doubtless see the twentieth century's enthusiasm for lashings of baptismal water as a natural (and perhaps unconscious) reaction to the minimalistic token of sprinkling, which is often at the heart of the folk religion that has been inherited.

- 2.6.5 The thrust of this paper is to point to a large, single font in which baptism can be administered in the three ways indicated previously. This we impenitently regard as the coming norm. However, churches have their own momentum, both in terms of developing liturgical practice, and in ways in which their liturgical furniture is adapted to changing pastoral needs. In the immediate future, we hope that sufficient fonts of this style can be encouraged in key parishes (and all cathedrals?) throughout the dioceses.

Conclusion

3. If these principles are to be adopted, then there are a number of corollaries.
- 3.1 First, the Church needs to affirm yet again, that there is *one* baptism, and that the way in which it is performed varies from one tradition to another. The Canons quoted above are the Church's collective memory in the process of safeguarding baptism from being hijacked by one particular group within the Church. It may be that bishops need to give a lead in teaching the importance of lavish symbolism, as well as the theology of baptism, and what it is supposed to convey in the way of God's free gift of grace.ⁱ
- 3.2 Secondly, the Church needs to adopt this policy of one font per church building as the norm. Anything else must be an anomaly. In order to implement this principle, which has the overwhelming weight of tradition behind it, as well as pastoral commonsense, DAC'S and Diocesan Worship Committees need to have an open and informed discussion about the ordering of new churches as well as the reordering of old ones. As Anglicans, our buildings are, as a rule, public and open, so that our liturgical furniture speaks silently to all who enter, even when no liturgy is being celebrated.
- 3.3 Thirdly, the Church needs to come to terms with the fact that we are living through a time which could be described as 'The Baptism Movement', just as our predecessors lived through 'The Parish Communion Movement'. It is no coincidence that, in the light of the events leading up to the York General Synod debate on Christian Initiation (July 1991), one of the results will be yet further work by the Liturgical Commission on Rites of Christian Initiation. Liturgical *texts* are vital - but the *context* of celebration, fonts included, are no less important for the health and witness of the Church as a whole.

