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Baptism by Desire: A Sacrament for Today

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Audrey is a liturgy and liturgical music student with a special interest in music composition. She was born and raised in Singapore and began studies in the United States as an undergraduate at Fresno State University. As an adult convert to Catholicism, Audrey's own questions regarding the necessity for baptism led her to explore the doctrine of baptism by desire.

In chapter twelve of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus affirms that the scribe is “not far from the Kingdom of God” when he expresses his understanding of Jesus's commandments—that loving God with all our hearts, with all our understanding, with all our strength, and loving our neighbor as ourselves is “worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices”(Mark 12:30-34 NAB). In this affirmation, Jesus essentially asserts that the expression of love through action is a higher and more desirable act than that of ritual, without denouncing the value of ritual worship itself.

In his book *Meeting Mystery*, Nathan Mitchell thus rightly criticizes the adage *lex orandi, lex credendi* (“the rule of prayer is the rule of faith”) and the accompanying debate of whether faith controls worship and vice versa. He proposes that the deeper question, and the one we should be asking ourselves as Christians, is whether faith and worship can be “verified in the absence of a *lex agendi* (a rule of action or of behavior),” expressed in the “Liturgy of the neighbor.”¹ In an increasingly secular post-modern world, it is especially ironic that it is in the “Liturgy of the neighbor” that many non-baptized participate unknowingly, while the baptized are, in contrast, often caught up in ritual wars and satisfied with simply fulfilling their Sunday obligation. Thus, it is to these non-baptized neighbors that I propose we Christians look to, to understand what salvation and living a grace-filled life really means. I propose that a renewed understanding of baptism by desire, the form of baptism in which the non-baptized may attain salvation is necessary. This renewed understanding is one that not only recognizes baptism by desire as a form of baptism that is just as sacramental and valid as baptism by water, but also one that recognizes baptism by desire as the basis for all other forms of baptism (water and blood). I suggest that such a renewed understanding of baptism by desire can help us illuminate the meaning of our own baptisms and has potentially, profound pastoral implications.

In this paper, I will argue the following:

1. That the non-baptized who practice Jesus' commandments are saved through Baptism by desire—a desire expressed through acts of charity with the help of the Holy Spirit. I will frame this argument within in a post-modern context as proposed by Nathan Mitchell, since it is one that is most relevant to current human experience.
2. That similar to baptism by water, baptism by desire has an ecclesial, liturgical and sacramental character inherent to it but as such does not negate baptism by water.
3. That a renewed understanding of baptism by desire can help us better understand the gift of water baptism and Eucharist for the baptized.
4. That baptism by desire and baptism by water are complementary and that a sound understanding of baptism by desire reveals that it is in fact the basis of all other forms of baptisms (water and blood).
5. That baptism by desire is a doctrine that needs to be brought to the forefront of Church teachings as it has the potential to transform approaches to RCIA and youth catechetical programs, take liturgical debates beyond theological justifications for style, signification and aesthetics, and enable more open ecumenical and inter-religious interactions.

The post-modern context

In their work *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari, two prominent French thinkers of the second half of the twentieth century, challenge the traditional image of a tree as a model used to understand the world. The tree is *the* image rendered in *structuralism* as purported by French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss and by “state philosophy,” which is the ideological foundation on which most modern states, including the liberal democracies of Europe and North America, are based. The image of the tree essentially puts forth the concept of cultures as an “organic whole that springs from a single taproot.” Thus the ‘tree’ favors the think-

¹ Nathan Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery: Liturgy, Worship, Sacraments* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006), 38-39.

ing that all social relationships can be ultimately traced back to a central source. The ‘tree’ is also hierarchical – smaller branches stem from larger ones, and it has a structured form that holds it all together. In this model, human connections that occur on a ‘smaller branch’ are often perceived as less significant and are easily dismissed; rather, value is placed on the ‘source’ that is the person, or connection that holds the other connections together.²

Deleuze and Guattari suggest that instead of a tree, lived experiences point us towards thinking of the world as crabgrass, a rhizomatic network of interconnected differences without clear beginnings or ends.³ Such a model allows the possibility for any connection within the network to be as valuable and essential as another, and for spontaneous new connections to arise without dependence on a ‘root’.

An expression of the crabgrass image can be best visualized in graph theory, a theory commonly used in computer science to analyze and organize data structures. The beauty of graph theory is that it does not assume a hierarchical structure, rather seeks to find connections in phenomena that are not understood.

In graph theory, the image of ‘tree’ is rendered in a non-traditional manner in that a root may or may not exist. (The programmer could designate a root.) A ‘tree’ is simply made when any two vertices are connected by exactly one simple path (see Figure 1).

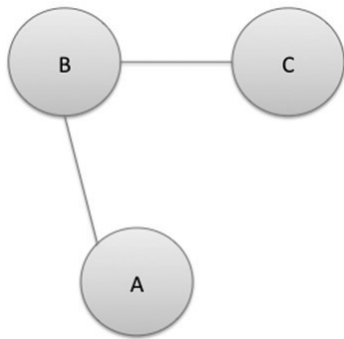


Figure 1 - a “Tree” as understood in graph theory

A rhizome, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, is seen when the trees become a forest to form an undirected graph, all of whose connected components are trees that result in a disjoint union of

trees (see Figure 2). The undirected nature inherent to graph theory allows indeterminate connections that might be easily hidden or dismissed in other data analytics methods to spring forth.⁴

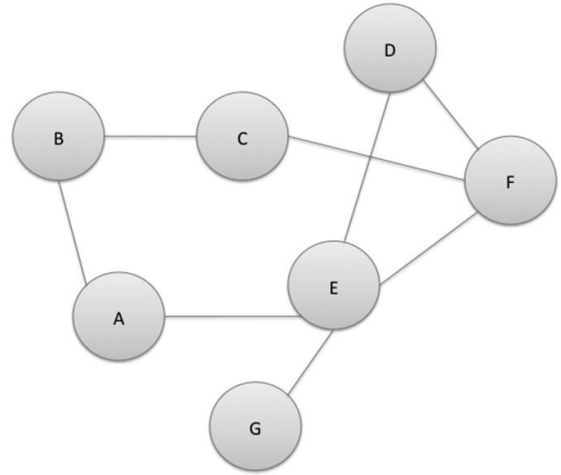


Figure 2 - a “Forest” as understood in graph theory

Applying graph theory to human relationships and our relationship to God allows us to find and meet God in infinitely more areas than the typically neo-scholastic notion of sacraments as *the* means of conferring and receiving grace. Recognizing the ability to encounter God outside of the traditional sacraments has implications on the understanding of the doctrine of Baptism by desire. This ability allows us to better understand how the Holy Spirit can be—and is—at work in the non-baptized, and is enabling a meeting of the divine through the connections they make with other people.

Baptism by desire as a doctrine: why and how it works

The doctrine of baptism by desire is by no means a modern development. St. Augustine, in his writings *On Baptism, Against the Donatists*, clearly recognized the possibility of salvation for those who cannot partake in Baptism by water, if they show a sign of conversion:

...the thief, to whom, although not baptized, it was said, “Today you shall be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). Considering this over and over again, I find that not only suffering for

² Quotations from this paragraph are from *ibid.*, 8-9.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Tom Vacek, PhD candidate, University of Minnesota. e-mail message to author, November 27, 2010.

the name of Christ can supply for that which is lacking by way of baptism, but even faith and *conversion of heart* if, perhaps, because of the circumstances of the time, recourse cannot be had to the celebration of the mystery of baptism.⁵

It is because of this belief that catechumens, who are not baptized but have explicitly expressed their desire to live a Christian life, can be granted a Christian funeral, and are believed to have attained salvation. We can also infer from this belief that baptism by desire is in fact a pre-requisite to baptism by water⁶.

With regard to the salvation of those who have not explicitly expressed a desire for baptism, we can refer to article 16 of *Lumen Gentium* where the Second Vatican Council affirms a unity in *one vocation* through the Holy Spirit:

Since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.

This statement influences the teaching we find in article 1280 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which states that "...those who, without knowing of the Church but acting under the inspiration of grace, seek God sincerely and strive to fulfill his will, can be saved even if they have not been baptized."⁷ From this article, we can infer that the "inspiration of grace" refers to the work of the Holy Spirit; the act of "seeking God sincerely" could be understood as doing so explicitly (as in the case of catechumens) or implicitly as one "strives to fulfill his will," that is the living out of the Gospel and Jesus' commandments.

"*Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est!*"! Since the Holy Spirit is Charity, and the Holy Spirit is what enables grace, we can agree that, "Catholic theology sees grace as ultimately social."⁸

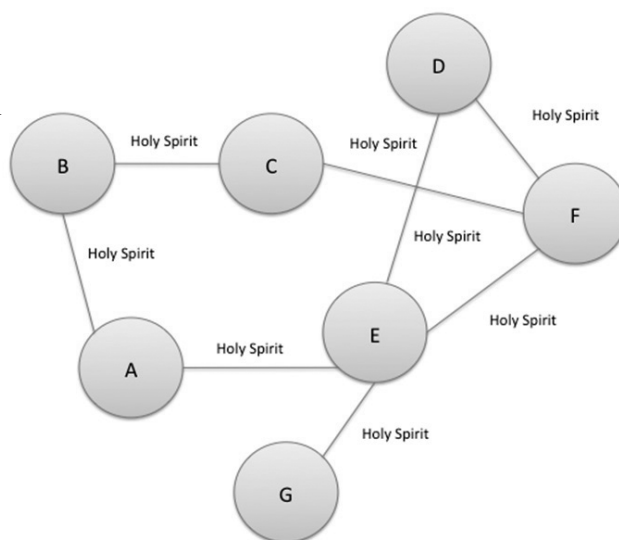


Figure 3 - Holy Spirit acting in each connection

When we apply this understanding of grace as social to the rhizomatic forest of indeterminate connections, we find infinite places where the Holy Spirit is at work (see Figure 3). When two or more people connect in a charitable act, the Holy Spirit is present and at work. The Holy Spirit confers grace to all the parties involved in these charitable interactions. This is the grace that a non-baptized person shares in with Christians who share in it more explicitly through the Church's traditional "seven sacraments." It is also that same grace that enables salvation for the non-baptized, and the grace that Christians explicitly attain for salvation in the liturgical rite of baptism.

Understanding baptism by desire as a sacrament

The father of sacramental theology, Thomas Aquinas defines sacrament as "the sign of a sacred reality that is acting to sanctify man." (q.60 a.2.)⁹ Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P. expands on and clarifies what Aquinas means in his definition in the following statement.

It is not the sacred sign that acts but the reality of grace that it signifies and, supremely, the author of grace himself: Christ who acts through the sacraments in the great sacrament which is the Church herself.¹⁰

⁵ Augustine. On Baptism, Against the Donatists. 4:22:29. Translation by J.R. King, available at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/14084.htm> (accessed November 25, 2010).

⁶ Infant baptism is included in baptism by water. While unsuited to the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that an understanding of how desire is possible in infants can be found in Karl Rahner in his essay "*Ideas for a Theology of childhood*".

⁷ Catholic Church., *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (Vatican City; Chicago, IL: Libreria Editrice Vaticana; [distributed by] Loyola University Press, 1994).

⁸ Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery: Liturgy, Worship, Sacraments*, 133

⁹ Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Aquinas's Summa: Background, Structure, and Reception* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 60. Emphasis added.

¹⁰ Ibid.

When we take apart Torell's explanation of Aquinas's definition of sacrament, we find three specific traits that qualify something to be sacramental. The first is that a 'sign' of some sort must be involved. The second is that the sign signifies the reality of grace and its author, Christ. When we speak of Aquinas and 'signs,' we cannot avoid addressing the sign's relationship to 'cause.' According to Chauvet, Aquinas himself wisely pointed out, "in the sacraments, the sign has this altogether singular trait, to exist only by mode of causality, and that conversely, this cause has this altogether singular trait, to produce its effect only by mode of sign."¹¹ In today's culture, it is common to understand sign and cause as separate concepts that differ in nature and level. I see a stop sign hence I stop, but it is friction that *causes* the wheels of my car to stop turning. Such an understanding of sign and cause is surely not what Aquinas intended. Replacing the word 'sign' with 'symbol' as Chauvet suggests, is better, since it connotes the idea of contract, pact or covenant that can exist at a social level when there is agreement to the meaning of a symbol. In the context of 'symbol', the stop sign is what causes me to stop (even though it is friction that enables me to do it) because it is a symbol with a common meaning my society has agreed upon.

The third trait of a sacrament that must exist according to Torrell's reading of Aquinas is that grace must act through "the great sacrament", which is the Church—this implies that an ecclesial character must be present for something to be sacramental. The ecclesial character is not explicitly mentioned in Aquinas's short definition of sacrament, but is assumed in his understanding of the Church as found in his Christology and Pneumatology.¹² The ecclesial character is an especially important one as it has influenced modern doctrines of sacraments found in Vatican II documents and sacramental theologies of modern theologians such as Edward Schillebeeckx. Specifically, the Church today recognizes that the Church is the primary sacrament instituted by Christ on the cross from which all ritual sacraments stem.¹³ The mediation of the Church is thus, necessary for all sacraments.

¹¹ Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2001), xxv.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Sacrosanctum Concilium 1, Lumen Gentium, 1

Using Aquinas' definition of sacrament as our foundation, let us examine how the first two characters of his definition of sacrament are fulfilled in baptism by desire. In the prior section of this paper, we already established that grace is social and enabled by the Holy Spirit. 1 John chapter 4 expresses "*Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ebi est*" and tells us that the Church agrees that Charity *is* the Holy Spirit. When we replace Aquinas's "sign" with the more suitable "symbol", we can easily identify the act of charity as a symbol, which makes real the grace that is already present.¹⁴ Most importantly, the acts of charity symbolize and illuminate the presence of the Holy Spirit, or Christ, who is the author of grace.

The ecclesial character on the other hand, seems to be least apparent in baptism by desire. To discern this character in baptism by desire, I turn to Augustine who said in his writings on baptism against the Donatists:

When we speak of within and without in relation to the Church, it is the *position of the heart* that we must consider, not that of the body [...] All who are within in heart are saved in the unity of the ark.¹⁵

In this statement, Augustine recognizes those who may be physically outside of the Church (the unbaptized) but actively participate in the mission of the Church, as part of the ecclesial body of Christ ("the unity of the ark"), are "within in heart" and thus also saved.

If baptism is one of the "seven sacraments" of the Church, then all forms of baptism, be it by desire, water or blood must be sacramental. The 'sacramental' character of baptism by desire especially, as demonstrated above, is further proof that this is true. Yet when we apply the understanding that the unbaptized are also part of the Church by virtue of baptism by desire, some seemingly

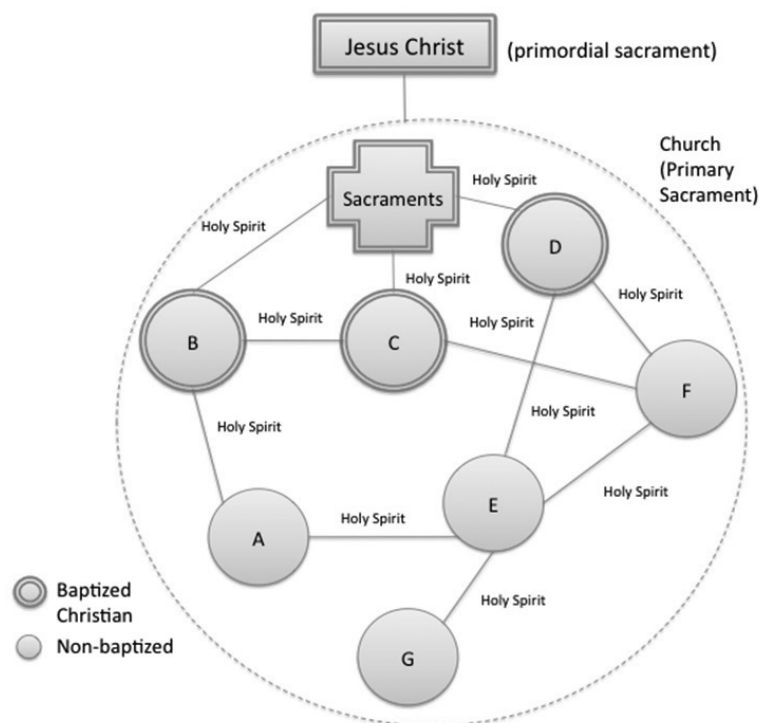
¹⁴ It is worthwhile to note that Aquinas does not regard baptism by desire or baptism by blood as sacraments in his limiting notion of "sign"(Summa, IIIa. q66. a.11). My intention here however, is not to dispute the meaning of "sign" but to suggest that "acts of charity" can be "signs" in the same way "ritual sacraments" are signs by virtue of the fact that they 'effect what they signify' – the grace of the Spirit. Aquinas's definition of sign can be found in Summa Theologica, Part IIIa. q66. a.11, in The "Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas", literally trans. by fathers of the English Dominican Province. Available at <http://www.op.org/summa/summa-IIIq66.html> (accessed December 15, 2010).

¹⁵ Augustine. *On Baptism, Against the Donatists*. 5:28:39. Emphasis added.

troubling questions arise. It seems reasonable to ask, why then would we still need baptism by water? Is a baptized Christian any different from a non-baptized charitable person? To answer these questions, I propose we study the relationship between the baptized and non-baptized within the Church in the today's post-modern rhizomatic context.

The place of baptized Christians amongst the non-baptized

The graph below is a culmination of all that we have established so far: it illustrates the Church as the primary sacrament all other sacraments are mediated through; it shows how baptized Christians and non-baptized are within the Church, even if baptized Christians are distinguished by virtue of their explicit membership in the visible church; and reminds us that it is the same Holy Spirit that is at work among the baptized, non-baptized, and in the sacraments, thus allowing us to share in the same grace. New to the graph is the ultimate *gift* of the divine incarnation, the gift of Jesus Christ, the primordial sacrament.¹⁶



¹⁶ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 13.

Recognizing Jesus Christ as the ultimate gift and primordial sacrament is an important first step for us to understand what the Church and its “seven sacraments” mean for us. Schillebeeckx tells us that the Church and its sacraments are essentially symbolic *gifts* bestowed to us creatures in an earthly guise so we may more visibly encounter the Christ of Heaven through tangible signs, symbols and rituals.¹⁷ Chauvet’s theology of symbolic exchange and gift helps us understand what these gifts mean for Christians and the non-baptized:¹⁸

1. Symbolic exchange does not have economic value—more does not mean better. More frequent reception of the Eucharist thus does not equate to an increased reception or value of grace. The grace received by the non-baptized is no less valuable than the grace the baptized receive in the sacraments.
2. What is vital to symbolic exchange is not the value of what is exchanged, but the fact that the exchange happens. Reception of Eucharist for example, is not more of something to be received than that of the way in which we come to receive Eucharist, or proceed from the

Eucharistic liturgy. The acts performed outside of the Eucharistic liturgy are just as vital as participation in liturgy itself.

3. God’s gift of grace in the sacraments is gratuitous and gracious. That is to say that grace is given without reason, and without regard to value. God is thus free to give the gift of the visible Church and its sacraments to who he wishes to, when he wishes to. We must in Christian faith, continue to trust that even though not everyone on earth has the opportunity to encounter the visible Church and learn of Christ, God’s omni-benevolent grace can still be realized. This is precisely why baptism by desire continues to be a doctrine of the Church.

4. The gratuitousness and graciousness of God’s gift invite and allow a gracious response of a ‘return-gift’, in human freedom, through ethics (charity), which is always inspired by

¹⁷ Ibid., 40-42.

¹⁸ Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*, 123-125.

love. All who are gifted the sacraments of the visible Church (the baptized) receive this invitation explicitly. It is this explicit invitation that calls a Christian to ‘return’ the gift in love and differentiates a baptized Christian from a nonbaptized person.

With an understanding of the *gift* of sacraments mean, let us now return to our initial questions about water baptism.

Why do we need baptism by water?

I am hesitant to use the word “need” when speaking about the seven sacraments for two reasons. For systematic theologians, “need” tends to steer theological discourse towards a direction that is skewed toward finding symbolic meaning so ritual can be justified. Such debate eventually reveals pastoral implications but often distances non-theologians. On the other hand, it has been my experience in RCIA and catechetical programs that cleansing of “original sin” is often used as the main or only reason to convince one of the “need” of baptism by water, which is theologically myopic. The main difficulty that arises in both of these methods of discussion of baptism (or all sacraments), is that they often unintentionally omit the fact that baptism is a gift. In today’s language, “needs” seek to fulfill utilitarian values, be it practical, social or psychological — “I need this textbook for school”, “I need this toy because everyone has it” or “I need to avoid clowns because they bring back bad childhood memories.” If baptism by water was a need in the same sense, water baptism would be primarily psychological and socially driven.¹⁹ These psychological and sociological intentions would not matter to the giver of the gift, but do not fully recognize the significance of the gift, or the intentions of the giver, and thus deny the principles of symbolic exchange.

Without any disrespect and intention to diminish the value of systematic theology’s contribution to the “need” for water baptism, or the doctrine of “original sin”, I propose instead, ‘gift’ as *the* word to relate to the sacraments, and especially to water baptism as it better engages today’s societal and pastoral needs. If we understand baptism by water as a gift, we recall that as with all gifts from God, water baptism is inspired by love, is

gratuitous, and is gracious.²⁰ It is a form of baptism that is different from baptism by desire, but shares the same result, that is grace. As with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, God is also free to give this gift of water baptism to whomever he pleases, whenever he pleases. This gift of water baptism could be offered to adults who make choices to enter RCIA programs, or to infants, in which case the community, or parents decide whether to allow the infant to accept the gift, or not.

When we realize the profound love that inspires this gift, and the fact that some of us are chosen specifically to receive this gift (even if for reasons that remain a mystery), it becomes natural for us to actually *want* the gift, and to *want* to use it. Water by baptism is thus, not a need per se, but a *want*, a want that is motivated by the realization of God’s profound love, and the want to respond to that love by an explicit acceptance of God’s gifts in the sacraments, and the eventual ‘using’ and sharing of the gift.

Is being a baptized Christian any different from a non-baptized charitable person?

Yes, and no. No, because we all share the same call to live out God’s will through the ‘Liturgy of the neighbor’, that is the practice of charity in our daily lives. It is through this liturgy that the baptized and non-baptized are united in the Church. In this liturgy, we literally use and speak the native language of liturgy—the *language of the body*—by allowing our actions to directly affect the life of another²¹; it is a liturgy that is not simply ritual that is *rehearsal for God’s arriving kingdom*²² but one that brings God’s kingdom to people in their day to day lives; it is one where graces are freely given and frequently given; it is one that thrives in a rhizomatic, non-hierarchical framework where a person’s wealth, intellect, culture and social status are rendered irrelevant in which everyone can participate at anytime.

The ‘liturgy of the neighbor’ however, is also one that may be difficult for us “ ‘Cartesian Christians’ who tend to privilege mind over matter and thought over action”²³ to accept, yet are called to, more so than the non-baptized, because of the explicit gifts of the sacraments we have received. “In baptism, the Eucharist begins, and in the

¹⁹ Ibid.,183.

²⁰ Ibid.,125.

²¹ Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery: Liturgy, Worship, Sacraments*, 223.

²² Ibid., 71.

²³ Ibid., 223.

Eucharist baptism is sustained.”²⁴ It is this gift of being a member of the visible Church, the gift of Eucharist and it being sustenance that differentiates us from the non-baptized, and invites us to share the gift of Christ we receive in the sacraments more so than others.

Putting baptism by desire into perspective

In the beginning of this paper, I proposed that a renewed understanding of baptism by desire is needed today. In this section, I will expound what this renewed understanding of baptism by desire means in relation to our common understanding of baptism on the whole.

Baptism by desire is complementary to baptism by water.

Recognizing baptism by desire, and in turn that the Holy Spirit is at work and also confers grace to those outside the visible “Church” through charity is a good reminder to us baptized Christians that the Holy Spirit is still present in our world, even if it seems less evident to us today. Baptism by desire is also useful to help us better appreciate God’s gifts of the sacraments and remind us of our explicit call to holiness as his chosen people through the sacraments. For the non-baptized, baptism by water continues to be essential as it explicitly reveals the divine to those who may already participate in God’s will unknowingly and allows them to come to know God in worship. It is vital to recognize that neither baptism by desire nor baptism by water is better or more indispensable than another; rather, one form of baptism complements another.

Baptism by desire is the pre-requisite and basis for all forms of baptisms (blood and water).

For adults in RCIA, the required profession of intention to enter the catechumenate, and later, the profession of faith for baptism by water is the explicit expression of baptism by desire.

In the case of infant baptism, the presence of baptism by desire is slightly less obvious, but just as present. Like Mark Searle, in his essay *Infant baptism reconsidered*, I hesitate to speak of ways in which infants experience God through preconceived notions of infancy, but believe in the possibility that infants

have a capacity to meet and respond to God in their own pre-rational ways.²⁵ To discern the presence of the Holy Spirit in infants, I suggest that it might be more fruitful to consider our adult relationships with infants and how infants contribute to our faith by their sheer presence amongst the family and community. The Second Vatican Council recognized this fact when it said, “As living members of the family, children contribute in their own way to making their parents holy” (GS 48).²⁶

In the rhizomatic context in which the Spirit allows us to constantly realize grace, the infant is simply another one of its participants. The ‘act of charity’ an infant participates in may not be as obvious to our adult lens because we tend to favor the meaning of ‘act’ as ‘actions’ or an active ‘doing’ of something charitable, such as donating money, or helping a needy person, things that are impossible for an infant. But let us consider the first time a new born infant rests its head on its mother’s chest and the intense joy the mother feels at that very moment—is that not a moment of grace effected by an action? We must recognize that like a non-baptized person, an ‘act of charity’ by infants, even though expressed pre-rationally and differently from adults, is possible, and qualifies them for baptism by desire. If infants can be saved by baptism by desire, why then should we baptize them with water? This question is answered when we understand baptism by water as a *gift*. As Christians, we cannot help but agree with Cyprian of Carthage’s report from a 3rd century synod: “...nobody is hindered from baptism and form grace – how much rather ought we to shrink from hindering an infant, who being lately born has not sinned...”²⁷ Indeed, there is no reason to hold back the gift of water baptism from an infant, if he or she is offered it by virtue of the fact that God gives the infant access to it.

Baptism by blood (martyrdom) is the highest expression of baptism by desire. Aquinas puts it best, “since the shedding of blood is not in the nature of a Baptism if it be without charity...baptism by blood includes baptism of the Spirit (baptism by

²⁴ Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (New York: Pueblo Pub. Co., 1978), 122.

²⁵ Mark Searle, “Infant baptism reconsidered” in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation*, edited by Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1995), 397.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 401.

²⁷ Maxwell Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007), 91.

desire) but not conversely, and from this it is proved to be more perfect.”²⁸

Pastoral implications

Even though the Church recognizes baptism by desire and baptism by blood as valid forms of baptisms for salvation, these forms of baptisms are hardly mentioned in homilies and discussed only briefly in catechesis and RCIA programs if even at all. On the other hand, the frequent allusions in liturgy and catechesis to Romans 6 and John 3 seem to elevate baptism by water as a *better* and more desirable form of the sacrament. My critique of the elevated status of water baptism is not intended to reduce the value or change the theological doctrine of water baptism, but to suggest that increased emphasis be placed on baptism by desire and participation in the liturgy of the neighbor. I propose that such an increased emphasis could change the way parish programs are run, the way we manage differences in liturgical tastes, and pave the way to more opportunities for ecumenical and inter-religious engagement. Here I offer some possibilities for further pastoral reflection:

Dare we imagine an RCIA that began every week’s meeting with service at a soup kitchen? How different could Easter baptism be for a catechumen whose RCIA program was structured around a lived liturgy, the liturgy of the neighbor? How

would confirmation programs change if emphasis was placed on opportunities for youth to encounter Christ in their daily interactions with others, rather than purely doctrinal matters? What would music ministry look like if it were integrated with a social justice program? Could a conscious participation in the ‘liturgy of the neighbor’ among liturgists of differing tastes in ritual aesthetics be a potential place for unity? Could the sharing of social ministries among different Christian traditions and other religions be a way to recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in people of different faiths?

Conclusion

Even though the Church has not traditionally emphasized baptism by desire, from our study, it is clear that like baptism by water, baptism by desire is sacramental and has an ecclesial character, thus allows Christians to share in a liturgy, the liturgy of the neighbor with the non-baptized. In today’s increasingly secular world, the doctrine of baptism by desire has profound pastoral implications that are too important to ignore. It is time the Church lives out a renewed understanding of the doctrine of baptism by desire so we may evangelize God’s love and illuminate our gift of baptism by water to others, through our participation in the liturgy we share—the liturgy of the neighbor.

²⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part IIIa. q66. a.12