

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

In last month's question about baptism "in the name of Jesus" as opposed to baptism "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," I cited the instructions for how to baptize found in the Didache, the early (perhaps even first century) church order: "Baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" in running water. But if you do not have running water, baptize in other water. And if you are not able [to baptize] in cold, then in warm. But if you have neither, pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

I suggested that although baptism "in the name of Jesus" may have been the practice of the earliest Christians (as evidenced by the Book of Acts), before long (probably before the end of the first century) at least some Christians (Matthew's congregation and the Didache's congregation) were using the Trinitarian formula. And even if the Didache is considered to have no weight,

Matthew 28:19 ("Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit") means both formulas have New Testament warrant

Well, there is a little more I would like to say about Didache's instructions for baptism that I think is relevant for our liturgical practice today.

As you read the Didache on baptism, did you wonder why running water, cold water and immersion were preferred? This is only my opinion, but I think each was preferred because it was better symbolically, that it reinforced what was believed to happen in baptism

Have you ever decided not to go swimming in a pond or small lake because it was covered with pond scum? We feel that getting into stagnant water will make us dirtier than we were, that afterwards we will need to take a bath to get the pond scum off. In contrast, we perceive running water, especially from a stream where

the water is clear and we can clearly see the bottom, as clean and cleansing. Running water is therefore better for baptism symbolically than stagnant because it "fits" better with the idea that in baptism one's sins are "washed away."

If you have ever jumped into a cold lake or stream, you will remember how shocking and invigorating it felt. You may have been sleepy before you jumped in, but now you were totally awake and alive! This experience would "fit" well with the belief that in baptism a person is "born again" and "alive unto God."

Finally, why would immersion be preferred? I think because it "fits" with the symbolism of baptism as burial and resurrection. Paul uses this analogy in Romans: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too

might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:34).

When the person baptized goes under the water and is entirely out of sight for a moment or two, then emerges to stand bolt upright, this looks sort of like being buried and then bursting forth from the ground alive again. Pouring and sprinkling suggest washing but none of the resurrection imagery we can see in immersion and coming up out of the water.

So, as I see it, immersion in cold, running water is preferable because it better expresses symbolically what we believe is going on spiritually in baptism. Too bad many churches are not near cold and clear mountain or spring-fed streams.

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