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SP = Statement on Sacramental Practices

The Sacraments and the Family of God: Genesis? Exodus?

Meaning of the Sacraments

"Baptism is the sacrament of initiation into life with Christ. Holy Communion is the sacrament that nurtures and strengthens us in this life." (SP 2.5)

Lofty words! Meaning-filled words! Unfortunately, too often also *misunderstood* or *ignored* words.

Many, within our communities of faith, take seriously the role of the sacraments in their lives, both as the foundation of life and as its ongoing support. For them, the sacraments truly are the *genesis* of life in Christ: the point at which such a life begins, and the root from which growth in that life springs. The family of God is a foretaste of God's Kingdom, and the sacraments a visible, tangible extension of God's loving, nurturing and strengthening presence in life.

But what of those whose perception of the sacraments—and of the family of God gathered as the church—is somewhat under-informed, or downright misinformed? What of those who want merely to "get the kid done," and then disappear, in an *exodus*, into the deep recesses of the congregational "inactive/responsibility" list until it is time for a confirmation, a marriage, or a burial? How do we, as a community reflective of God's almost prodigal grace, maintain the integrity of our sacraments, and remain graciously available to all who call upon God through us?

Holy Baptism

Consider, first, the sacrament of Baptism. "In Baptism we are called into the Christian community and incorporated into the body of Christ. The community of the baptized is, therefore, the body of Christ, continuing God's mission in the world and sharing in the hope of the world to come." (SP 3.3) If we take seriously these words, it becomes apparent that baptism is not a *magical ticket to heaven*, but adoption into a community which is grounded in Christ, reflective of Christ, acting in the name of and after the pattern of Christ.

It has been my experience that the majority of the "peek-a-boo" members who ask to have their child "done" are acting either out of a rather superstitious understanding of Baptism or out of a reverence for (or submission to) traditional expectations. When drawn out on the subject, these people have typically been unable to see a relationship between Baptism and daily life. Baptism seems more to be perceived as a combination *insurance policy for the hereafter* and *admission ticket to the church's rites*.

Some, in the church, have suggested that the children of these people should be denied Baptism in the name of honoring the integrity of the sacrament and the community. While I can understand the frustration represented by this suggestion, I have a great deal of difficulty, as a pastor, deciding that an individual should be denied access to God's grace.

Others, in the church, will baptize all who come, regardless of the intention (or lack of intention) on the part of parents to honor the commitments made in the service. This approach, too, is a bit problematic for me. While it is very much grace-filled, and places complete trust in the Holy Spirit to work in and through the sacrament, it seems to me to ignore the relational aspect of Baptism that is, the incorporation of the baptized into a specific community of God's people.

The solution that I have found is taken directly from the Statement on Sacramental Practices: "Baptism is preceded by a period of instruction. Such instruction in faith and life constitutes training in discipleship. *When young children are baptized, the parents and sponsors are instructed...*" (SP 4.4, italics added)

I meet with parents (and, when possible, with sponsors) prior to any arrangements being made for Baptism. In that meeting, I begin by gathering all the information I need for the parish records. When I have the information I need, we proceed to discuss Baptism in general, and what it means for the child in question, in particular. I distribute copies of our baptismal liturgy, and we read through it a section at a time, touching on how each of us understands the material we have read. When it comes to the section entailing the vows for the parents and the sponsors, I make it clear that the promise is not made to me, but to God. I make certain that they realize the importance of their promise to raise their child in the Christian faith. I then ask them a simple question: "Are you prepared to make that promise, and to carry through on it?" It becomes *their* decision whether or not a Baptism will take place, not mine.

I cannot pretend that this solution has ended the *exodus*; it has helped to slow it somewhat. Some parents, it would appear, will promise almost anything in a liturgical service, as they do not feel that it is binding on them. I cannot stop this. However, by making clear what Baptism *is*, and both what the church *offers* to the baptized and expects from the baptized, we may hope that Baptism will reflect more of its true meaning and will be freighted less with superstition.

Holy Communion

For those who claim Baptism as their companion in life, Holy Communion is a tremendous source of nurture and strength. They know—because they have experienced it—that "Holy Communion is a means of grace through which the crucified and risen Christ awakens faith, saves, forgives, unites, gives life, comforts and strengthens God's people for the work to which they are called in the world." (SP 5.3)

However, for those who still persist in seeing Baptism as an "insurance/admittance" thing, Holy Communion, too, is often a time more of superstition than of nurture and strength. "It just doesn't seem as holy or special if we have it too often," I have been told. Another favorite line is, "Children aren't old enough to understand it. They aren't reverent enough when they take it." I like to draw an analogy between worship and regular meals. Just as regular meals serve to nourish our bodies and equip us to live each day, so, too, worship serves to nourish our spiritual beings and equip us to live as God's called people. A person who chooses only to eat solid food once every day or two, and the rest of the time has only fluids and nutritional supplements, will not be nearly as capable of living life fully as a person who has a well balanced meal with all the major food groups represented.

It is the same with worship: a person who is only fed with half of God's liturgy most weeks, and who, once a month gets the whole of God's gift, is likely to be less able to live fully the life that God has called us to.

The superstitious understandings of Holy Communion have, in my opinion, contributed to the *exodus* of so many from God's family. Rather than seeing a joyous celebration of God's love, and receiving God's gift of strengthened faith, they are told to stand in awe of an almost frightening experience that must be treated carefully lest it cease to be special.

Some very strange practices have evolved from superstitious understandings! It has been suggested to me that "only ordained hands should touch the chalice." When asked about the bread, I was told, "It isn't really nearly as holy as the wine, so it doesn't matter."

Another belief I have encountered is that it is sacrilegious to chew the bread—it is to be allowed to sit on the tongue and dissolve until it can be swallowed with the wine. This explains the resistance I found in some to the use of real bread instead of paper-thin wafers. The poor people were leaving church with a wad of glue-like dough on their tongues!

Christian Education: The Key

I believe that Christian education is the key to returning people to a confessional understanding of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. The preaching moment, in my opinion, is not a time for lectures, but a time for God to speak to the gathered family. The time for in-depth study and discussion of matters of faith and practice is in study groups, Sunday School classes, catechetical classes, and pastoral visitation. This opinion seems to be borne out in the *Statement on Sacramental Practices*, which says, "Personal and corporate educational activities of a life-long nature are encouraged as a means of developing an awareness of and receptivity to the gifts of Word and Sacrament." (SP 6.12)

The family of God is *not* a mere "club" that one joins to gain the privileges of using a building when needed. Christian faith is *not* something which exists only to edify and comfort the individual. The sacraments are *not* mere formal rituals done for the sake of show and continuity with the past. Yet these beliefs persist.

As pastors we must do all that we can to promote the Confessional understandings and beliefs regarding the sacraments and God's family. In doing so, I believe that we will stem the tide of the *exodus*, and create a vibrant and active community of faith, worshiping and serving its God.