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SP = Statement on Sacramental Practices

Considering Baptismal Sponsorship

Christian Koinonia

The secular, highly-mobile, pluralistic society in which we live today has some definite ramifications for baptismal sponsorship. Our ELCIC Document, *Statement on Sacramental Practices*, has endeavored to recognize and address this matter. It identifies a basic shift in focus, around the understanding of sponsorship, as formerly a familial orientation now moving toward the parish community. The ongoing process of Christian nurture, formation, and support for the baptized remains the *raison d'être* of sponsorship.

In a society beleaguered by temporary, shallow, fragmented relationships, Christian koinonia, i.e. community-building, unity, sharing, identity, needs to be very intentional about baptismal sponsorship.

The *Sacramental Practices Study Guide*, published by the Division of Parish Services 1988, remains an excellent help in interpreting and reflecting upon the *Statement on Sacramental Practices*. While the *Statement on Sacramental Practices* evolved, somewhat from its proposed form of 1988, and while some of the material was rearranged and Section numbers changed, the commentary is still accessible and helpful.

Baptismal Sponsorship: Act of Hospitality

Under the section entitled "Rubrics of Baptism", the issue of baptismal sponsorship is lifted up. Especially helpful are subsections "Rubrics as Evangelism" and "Rubrics as Stewardship". If a baptismal sponsor moves and becomes a "stranger," he or she may begin to feel guilty, irresponsible, or frustrated about her or his sponsorship role. Therefore, we appreciate the suggestions in the document that a congregational sponsor be appointed especially to new members. This may, in fact, give legitimate expression to a congregational concern that already exists namely, hospitality to newly arrived strangers in the community. Pastors and parishioners generally are concerned that newcomers especially children and youth be encouraged to participate in worship, Christian education, and the parish's social life in order that their faith may be nurtured. A congregational sponsor would provide a personal connection that enhances specific relationships between new and established members which, in turn, would have further consequences for Christian koinonia.

Baptismal Sponsorship: Act of Loyalty

Herbert Anderson, an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America pastor, in the book *Alternative Futures for Worship: Volume 2, Baptism and Confirmation* suggests that sponsorship is a sign of loyalty toward the newly baptized and points to the greater loyalty of God, in relation to that person, which lasts forever. It also emphasizes that as a new member of God's family, the baptized person is to be a loyal disciple to Jesus and other sisters and brothers in Christ. Thus according to Anderson:

"Whether the congregation as a whole or specific individuals are the sponsors or godparents is less important than the symbolic function of sponsorship: in baptism the child is incorporated into a larger family which both promises and demands loyalty. Baptism is the beginning of a life of discipleship, which demands to be given priority over any and all other loyalties. The promise given in baptism is that God will not abandon us on the way."

This focus on loyalty is certainly a necessary one in our contemporary world where we are tempted and bombarded daily by a legion of idolatries which demand, attract, even seduce us to other loyalties. The result is that people neglect their loyalties to God, church and family.

Baptismal Sponsorship: Act of Responsibility

Section 4.9 of *Statement of Sacramental Practices* is correct to stress the need for all sponsors to be: “involved in the faith and life of a Christian community.” This is vital if the sponsors are to fulfill their role. Thus Section 4.9 points out that: “The primary role of sponsors is to provide spiritual nurture and encourage integration of the baptized into the community of believers.” How is this to be accomplished if the sponsors are not active in their faith and commitment to the church? We believe that Section 4.9 is a good corrective to those who view sponsorship as merely an “honorary” position.

Faithful, responsible sponsors are crucial, especially in light of the complex problems and issues in our contemporary world.

A growing number of children are brought to the font by one parent. He or she is either a single parent, or their spouse is not a Christian and is therefore unable to support the Baptism. In such cases, both parent and child who come to the font shall benefit greatly from the support and nurture of active, faithful sponsors.

Marital breakdown and divorce also may have some important repercussions for sponsorship. The process of choosing sponsors in these situations may become an arena for power-plays or manipulations to please both sides of the family for the sake of “political correctness.” There is the danger that the child may not be baptized or, if baptized, not nurtured and supported by the sponsors because of the friction that can be created around these matters.

Baptismal Sponsorship: Some Tough Issues

In Canada today, a growing number of Christians are married to people of other religions. Consequently, it will become a real issue whether or not to baptize children of inter-faith marriages. When pastors are requested to baptize these children, considerable sensitivity, respect, tolerance, love, as well as open, honest dialogue are all essential for everyone involved. While non-Christian family members are always welcome to witness the Baptism, sponsorship really is to be entrusted to active, faithful Christians.

Another quite different matter which the *Statement on Sacramental Practices* does not address is having a person of the Anabaptist tradition proposed as a sponsor. This person may be an active, faithful member of her or his church but how is it possible for such person to be a sponsor if he or she does not accept the theology and practice of infant Baptism?

Baptismal Sponsorship: Act of Comfort and Guidance

After several years of serving as parish pastors, we have become aware of the increasing number of adolescents and adults requesting Baptism. We appreciate the comment of the *Sacramental Practices Study Guide*, under the subsection “Rubrics as Baptismal Practice:” “In the past, sponsors were chosen to assist in the spiritual nurture of the baptismal candidate, *child* or *adult*, and to accompany him or her in a new life in the worshipping community.” This is helpful to adolescent or adult baptismal candidates, for they need that support, as well as someone with whom they feel at ease to ask questions without feeling like fools. The sponsor is often a comforting, guiding presence in the baptismal service itself, the pre-baptismal classes, as well as during other parish events. For newly baptized adult or youth members, there is a letdown after the Baptism if they are not specifically nurtured and supported by someone into parish life hopefully this will be a key role of sponsors.

Baptismal Sponsorship: Act of Intercession

The one consistent, theological and practical function of baptismal sponsorship surviving down through the ages has been intercessory prayer. According to Martin Luther’s *Lenten Sermon of 1525* on Matthew 8:1, the intercessory prayers of sponsors are so vital that they help to make effective the baptized child’s faith. In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer goes so far as to say that Christian koinonia is possible because of intercessory prayer:

“A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses.”

Considering Baptismal Sponsorship

The *Statement on Sacramental Practices*, and the early *Sacramental Practices Study Guide*, especially, have considered some of the difficulties associated with baptismal sponsorship in our society. The emphasis on the congregation, and on congregational sponsorship, finds its liturgical reflection in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* Order for Holy Baptism. There, provision is made for the involvement of a congregational representative in the service and, later, at the end of the rite, the congregation is invited to express its welcome of the newly-baptized.

Having a congregational sponsor is an important way in which the baptized can become “connected” and embraced by Christian community in the faith we hold in the Triune God.