

# THE SACRAMENTS AND THE EMBODIMENT OF OUR TRINITARIAN FAITH.

Gordon T. Smith

## Introduction

There is a deep longing in the contemporary Christian community to recover and embrace a thoroughly Trinitarian understanding of the nature and of our experience of God. And part of what makes this whole conversation so animating is that it is such an ecumenical exchange – as Christians from remarkably diverse traditions seek to learn from one another. No where is this more apparent than when it comes to how our faith in a Triune God finds expression in our participation of the sacraments of the Lord' s Supper and Baptism. The last fifty years of conversation between faith communities has led to wealth of insight on this topic and this paper is meant to do nothing more than capture the primary threads of this conversation.

This interplay between conversation about the Trinity and the nature of the sacraments is appropriate and, indeed, essential. Sacramental theology reminds us that at some point we move beyond rational discourse and debate into practice, and that perhaps we do not understand the doctrine of the Trinity unless and until it is embodied. And that the sacramental actions of the church – notably baptism and the Lord' s Supper – are given to us specifically that the Trinitarian character of the Living God might be formed in us.

The sacraments enable us to move beyond our propensity to think this through in an effort to understand the Trinity, and instead to enter into the mystery from within, to actually live it even as we come to understand the mystery more fully. What does it mean to say “ these three who are one” <sup>1</sup>? Its meaning comes to us not so much by critical reflection on the confession of the church – though that is needed; it' s meaning, rather, *embodied* in us through the sacramental actions of the church. Through the

---

<sup>1</sup>Borrowing this phrase from William C. Placher' s chapter heading in *The Triune God: An Essay in Postliberal Theology* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 2007), p. 119, which he acknowledges as borrowed from a book by the same title by David S. Cunningham.

sacraments, the mystery of the Tri-unity of God becomes a mystery in which we live. Through Baptism and the Lord' s Supper, women and men are both invited and graced to enter into intimate communion with the Triune God – their Creator and the giver of all good gifts, who is revealed to them through the incarnate, crucified, risen and ascended Christ, and who by the Spirit, “ the Lord and Giver of Life” is present and known.

The force of these recent ecumenical discussions on the sacramental actions of the church – evident most notably in the benchmark publication of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM) in 1982 – is that we need to see that the Lord' s Supper and Baptism are both an activity of the Triune God, and a means by which the church responds to this saving activity. And I fear that those church traditions that have ignored this discussion because of their antipathy to the World Council of Churches or to any kind of ecumenical dialogue have missed out on this extraordinarily rich conversation.

For some, for example, this has meant that they have continued to adhere to a form of christomonism rather than a Christocentric Trinitarianism in their practices of Baptism and the Lord' s Supper. For others, it has meant they have not been enriched by the strong call to appreciate the dynamic role of the Spirit in the celebration of the Lord' s Supper or the vital place of ‘ chrismation’ in the practice of baptism.

Further, by bringing together both Trinitarian theological discussions and sacramental theology, we have moved forward the continued, nagging question about the efficacy of the sacraments. Part of the abiding dilemma of the church has been to delineate who is the actor in the event of baptism or the Lord' s Supper. For ‘ sacramentalists’ , as they are often called, the assumption is that God is the actor and that the sacrament is a means of grace.

Those who have rejected such a perspective have done so largely out of a concern that it violates the principle of faith – the conviction that without faith we cannot know the salvation of God. And they have,

on the whole, endorsed a vision of these actions as fundamentally human: at baptism a person testifies to the salvation of God; the Lord' s supper is an occasion to celebrate the salvation of God and to remember, and to renew one' s covenant commitments (the renewal of baptismal vows). And this is typically articulated with an insistence that there is nothing inherently redemptive in the elements of or in the acts of baptism and the Lord' s Supper.

But, must we chose between these? Are we inevitably torn between the one and the other, or is there a resolution, perhaps precisely in a full recovery of the Trinitarian character of our faith and of the events themselves, the sacramental actions of Baptism and the Lord' s Supper? The way forward is likely twofold:

(1) to affirm that we must, regardless of where we stand on this polarity (i.e. is it the action of God or a human response to the (prior) action of God?), insist that this is not purely an individual, interior and expressive effect. Surely, this is an act of the church; it is a church event, and that as individuals, our participation in the sacraments is one and the same a participation in both God' s gracious work (however this is defined) and the communion we have with fellow Christians.

And then, (2) to affirm that God remains sovereign (as Karl Barth insisted) and so is not constrained by the sacraments, which are located within the church but not owned by the church, and that the church together responds in thanksgiving to God as the summit of our common life in Christ. But more, this act of response is not merely with an *idea* that we have; it is not purely cerebral – something we are remembering or recalling, or even a principle with which we are identifying (i.e the cross) – but, rather, it is a real-time encounter with the living Christ, crucified, risen and ascended, and that therefore it is necessarily salvific. We can only speak this way, however, if we enter our celebration of these sacred acts with a consciousness of their Trinitarian character.

The grace of God is inherently Trinitarian; the grace of God is communicated to humanity by the Father,

through the Son and in the Spirit. This is, in truth, the only way that we can conceive of the sacraments. And more, this suggests something further: that we cannot know the grace of God except by the sacramental actions of baptism and the Lord' s Supper.

Typically the heirs of the Protestant Reformation recoil at such a suggestion. How can something tangible and tactile – the water, the bread and the wine, be necessary for our salvation? We are so adamant that the salvation of God can be known on no other basis than the interior response of repentance and faith. But the language of the New Testament, while insistent on faith and repentance, is not so inclined to affirm that we must choose. The simple language of Acts 2:38 – “repent and be baptized” – for example, suggests that the sacramental dimension of our response is not optional or secondary. This is not just a case of good advice, recommendations from the Scriptures: these things are ordained, mandated. We can, and should, also appeal to the Trinitarian character of our faith to appreciate why these actions are so essential to the very faith we long to express and sustain.

#### A. The Lord' s Supper as a Participation the life of the Triune God.

If the Lord' s Supper is to be a means by which we witness to the salvation of a Triune God and respond to that salvation, then we are wise to be explicitly Trinitarian in our celebration of the Lord' s Supper – especially in the rubrics that shape our practice, and give understanding to our experience of this event. And thus the wisdom that coalesces in the BEM publication suggests that our language in worship – our rubrics – need to affirm God as Creator and giver of all good gifts; God as the Son, in whom and through whom we know the salvation of God; and God the Spirit as the “Lord and Giver of life.” Increasingly we are witnessing the emergence of such liturgies that reflect the kind of ecumenical dialogue that led to BEM, that the very structure of our participation in the Lord' s Supper is three-fold: we give thanks to the Father-Creator (this is a eucharist), we do this in remembrance of Christ (anamnesis) as we invoke the presence of the Spirit (epiklesis). And the unity of this structure demonstrates that these three are one.

##### 1. Giving Thanks to the Creator.

In the Lord' s Supper we give thanks, certainly, for the gift of the Son and the work of Christ on the Cross; but BEM reminds us that this meal is a Eucharist in which this specific act of thanks is located within the great thanksgiving for all of God' s providential work as Creator and benefactor.<sup>2</sup> Everything is from God, who is good and whose mercies endure forever. So we give thanks, we offer a eucharistic sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to the Creator. And the church does this on behalf of the whole of creation, bringing the fruits of the earth – bread and wine – as offerings, along with a hymn of praise to the one who gave us these gifts and the capacity to cultivate them into bread and wine.

## 2. In Remembrance of Christ Jesus

While we begin and end with eucharistic praise, the pivot on which everything rests, and the focus of our attention is the second person of the Trinity – in whom and through whom we give our thanks, and by whom we know the salvation of God. And when we speak of Christ Jesus, it is imperative that we acknowledge the full scope of his redemptive work – from Incarnation through Pentecost, through the full realization of his reign.<sup>3</sup> The crucified one is the incarnate Christ who is the risen and ascended one, and that, in the words of Charles Wesley, whose wounds are yet visible above.

But the work of Christ is always perceived through a Trinitarian lens – for what we see and enter into is, precisely, the dynamic that exists between Father and Son; this is the heart of the matter – and it is in this dynamic that our salvation is found. For the work of Christ is an offering to the Father, and the Lord' s Supper is but a proclamation of this work and, further, a participation in the relationship that exists between the Son and the Father.

The Ascended Christ is the operative agent of Christian worship: our High Priest calls us into worship and then leads us into the presence of the Creator God. Our worship is a participation in the communion

---

<sup>2</sup>*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982, II:3,4; pp. 10 - 11.

<sup>3</sup>I am indebted for this perspective on the work of Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001), p. 156.

that has existed for all of eternity within the Triune God. The sacramental actions of the church make this reality visible, and enable this reality to be embodied – and, thus, to be lived. James B. Torrance asks the rightful and probing question: is our worship truly Trinitarian or is it, in effect unitarian?<sup>4</sup> He contends that everything depends on who we think is the operative agent in baptism and the Lord' s Supper. He insists that we are fundamentally unitarian if this event is no more than a human act, a human accomplishment. If it is truly Trinitarian, it is a participation in what is already happening. This worship is Spirit generated and sustained – which I will come to – and this worship is participation in the communion that already exists between Father, Son, and Spirit.

Yet so many of us within ' free church' or what might typically be called " Evangelical" theological traditions (and this would mean low church Anglican as much as Baptist, and Christian & Missionary Alliance) have deeply ingrained in our consciousness the idea that the work of the Lord' s Supper and that of Baptism is fundamentally *our* work. And the irony (perhaps even the tragedy) is that we have done this to preserve the doctrine of justification by faith, and perhaps inadvertently established in both Baptism and the Lord' s Supper a justification by works.

Not so for Calvin and Luther, who were well aware of the grace that is found in Christ and is appropriated through the ministry of the Spirit in the sacraments. John Calvin is as good as Calvin gets in Book 4 of the Institutes, where he develops his theology of the sacraments, addressing specifically the Lord' s Supper. Calvin speaks of the extraordinary exchange – Christ takes what is ours (our broken humanity) and cleanses us with his life, which he offers back to the Father. And then Christ comes to us in the power of the Spirit and urges us to eat in remembrance of him. So that his death becomes our death, so that, indeed, his life becomes our life. At both Baptism and the Lord' s Supper, the grace we seek is one of radical identification with Christ – immersed in the life of Christ, the waters of baptism over around us, and then taken deeply into our bodies, as we eat and drink his body and blood. We consume so that we

---

<sup>4</sup>James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, (IVP, 1996) p.

are consumed by Christ.

Thus, the Gospel is not only known, thought or understood but *embodied* – first, having been embodied in Christ, and now in to the sacramental actions of baptism and the Lord’ s Supper is embodied in us.<sup>5</sup>

And what is begun in baptism is then sustained through the Lord’ s Supper. Calvin puts it this way:

For as God, regenerating us in baptism, ingrafts us into the fellowship of his Church, and makes us his by adoption, so we have said that he perform the office of a provident parent, in continually supplying the food by which he may sustain and preserve us in the life to which he has begotten us by his word.<sup>6</sup>

And thus Christ, “ Having received our mortality, he has bestowed on us his immortality . . . . having undertaken our weakness, he has made us strong in his strength.”<sup>7</sup>

The grace we seek, Philippians 3, is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection: that death might be at work in us so that life might be at work in us. Notice then, that Trinitarian thought becomes practice; it establishes for us and within us that “ religion” is not ultimately our task, but only our participation in the work of God. On this the church rests – on the work of the Triune God. So Leslie Newbigen aptly has observed: “ The Church . . . is not constituted by a series of disconnected human responses to supernatural acts of divine grace in the word and sacraments. It is the continuing life of Christ among . . . “ us, in the life and witness of the Church.”<sup>8</sup> And as Newbigen stresses, it is precisely through these tangible things – water, bread, wine – that we are incorporated into the life of God.

---

<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of The Christian Religion, Vol. II*, trans. by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972 reprint) Book IV, 17:2

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, IV, 17:1.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, IV, 17:2.

<sup>8</sup> Leslie Newbigen, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church*, London: SCM Press, 1953. p. 77.

Indeed, how we celebrate the Lord' s Supper and Baptism (along with our approach to preaching, by the way) reflect how we think the church is sustained, and at heart whether we see the church as the product of our efforts or the fruit of the work of God. What is crucial is that we intentionally signal that which we believe: that this is not fundamentally our work, but the work of the Triune God, such that: first, there is a deepening consciousness of the presence of the Ascended Christ – remembered as in the Revelation of St. John as the slain lamb who is now seated on the throne, remembered so that we are conscious that the one who is in our midst is the crucified Lord and Savior (there is no other). Indeed, the whole of Christ' s work – from Incarnation through to the consummation of the kingdom – is present to us in the meal, but the presence is cruciform, and by this form brings us into fellowship with the Father. If the work of salvation is God' s, and if this is effected in us through Christ by the Spirit, then this needs to be patently evident in our rubrics and practices surrounding the sacramental actions of the church.

### 3. And the Spirit is the Giver of Life.

The Lord' s Supper reminds us of this extraordinary exchange between the Father, who is God and the Son who is God. How then do we participate in this life-giving exchange? Only by God who is the Spirit – only by the enabling of God' s very self. So that we might know the grace that Christ effects in the Cross, the Father and the Son send another, the Comforter, the Spirit of truth.

Christ Jesus is the revelation of God and as the action (or Word) of God, stands and mediates between God' s very self and humanity, between God and the church. Yet it is by the Spirit that we see, understand, and live, – the same Spirit who inscripturates the Word of God, by whom Christ is conceived in the womb of Mary, by whose anointing Jesus moves into the desert and then into the world, and by whose filling the church becomes the “ body” of Christ, and a living witness to the world of the in-breaking of the kingdom.

We do not understand or participate in the work of God in the world without a dynamic theology of the



Spirit; it is by the Spirit that Christ is present in the world and it is by the Spirit that Christ is present in the Lord' s Supper.

The life of the church, therefore, pivots on the dual reality of the Ascension-Pentecost – the Risen Christ *and* the Outpouring of the Spirit. And the sacraments are but “ the gifts of God for the people of God” , by which the church participates in this two-fold triumph over the forces of darkness. Only by grasping this – the mutuality of relations between the ascended Christ and the Spirit given – can we appreciate what it means to call God Triune, as this finds expression in the Lord' s Supper.

God longs to give the very God-self to us; and this is offered to us through the ministry of the Spirit. Thus the work of God in the Lord' s Supper is the work of the Spirit; this is all about the Spirit' s ministry in our midst and in our lives. It is by the Spirit that Christ is present. It is by the Spirit, further, that we are able to see Christ, believe in Christ, and then turn from the meal and witness to Christ in the world. Ultimately it is not we who witness to or for Christ; rather, it is the Spirit who glorifies the Son, and our witness is but a participation in the on-going ministry of the Spirit to make Christ known – among and in the world.

The Spirit does not replace Christ in the Lord' s Supper. Rather, as John Calvin helps us to see, the Spirit is the means to the end, the one who unites us with Christ, who enables us to participate in mysteries that our minds cannot possibly comprehend, and strengthens our faith so that in this meal Christ can be received.<sup>9</sup> And it is the Spirit who unites us as one people, one body, such that our communion with Christ is reflected in our unity with one another. This is all of the Spirit.

James Torrance observes that we fall into a less-than-subtle form of utilitarianism when we emphasis our work over against the work of Christ at the Lord' s Supper. T. F. Torrance echoes this noting that “ if our worship and witness are conspicuous for their lack of Holy Spirit, it is surely because we . . . have become

---

<sup>9</sup>Calvin, IV, 17:10.

engrossed in our own subjectivities and the development of our own inherent potentialities.”<sup>10</sup>

Yet, on the whole churches of the West tend to make no explicit reference to the ministry of the Spirit at the Lord’ s Supper. I am struck by the cry of Hans Urs Balthasar, when he bemoans the neglect of the ‘ epiklesis’ - the prayer for the coming of the Spirit – and the lack of emphasis on the ministry of the Spirit in the celebration of the Lord’ s Supper within the Roman Catholic church. He observes that “ there is in the Roman Mass a painful lack of this recalling of Pentecost and the Spirit’ s perfecting activity in the Church.” We echo this sentiment in our own settings where there is a similar neglect, a similar “ painful lack.”

We then rightly affirm those streams of our common history that have more intentionally sustained this awareness; I’ m thinking here, obviously, of the Eastern Orthodox church, and of Calvin’ s persistent references to the Spirit as the means of Christ’ s presence at the Holy Meal. And of course, as the Pentecostal and Charismatic movement comes into greater theological maturity, they will surely help all of us appreciate this dimension of participation in this meal. Each of these streams highlight for us that in our celebration we rightly, if not naturally, cry out for God to be among us and to strengthen us; and this cry is the cry for the Spirit – Oh Come, Lord and Giver of Life!

This then raises the ancient and recurring question: does the ‘ epiklesis’ belong in the rite – the words or rubrics spoken and the prayers offered -- when we celebrate the Lord’ s Supper? Is there a place for the prayer that asks that the Holy Spirit would be among us, and make Christ present, and unite us in our response to Christ, and enable us to know God’ s grace that would empower us to be God’ s people in the world? Do we need to be explicit on this, or can it be assumed? It has from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century been integral to the liturgical rubrics of the Eastern church. But should it be integral to all Christian celebration of the Lord’ s Supper?

---

<sup>10</sup>T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1965), p. 245.

BEM calls for an ‘ epiklesis’ .<sup>11</sup> Rightly so – if for no other reason than for purposes of catechism and instruction; that would be justification enough for it to be included in our liturgies. One of the great needs of the Western church is clear catechetical instruction about the character and meaning of the Holy Trinity; and one of the most effective ways to accomplish is through the liturgy, particularly in the celebration of the Sacraments – not that these are occasions for lectures or talks (God forbid!) but rather as opportunities in our rubrics to signal the movement and work of God in our midst. Christians of the Pentecostal and charismatic heritage as often as not need a good reminder that the work of the Spirit is but one of making the crucified, risen and ascended Christ present; they need a Christological pneumatology. Yet Christians of so many other traditions can go through the Lord’ s Supper with scant, if any, reference to the third person of the Trinity. And they need to be awakened to the pneumatological character of their Christology! And we teach and learn by demonstration, by living and worshiping with a growing consciousness of the character of God. Indeed, T.F.Torrance insists that without this kind of “ transparence,” (his word) baptism (and the same would apply to the Lord’ s Supper) become “ blind and meaningless.”<sup>12</sup>

And surely one of the most crucial ways by which we teach the Trinity and the Trinitarian character of the Lord’ s Supper is by incorporating the ‘ epiklesis’ in our liturgies and forms or rites. Participation in both Baptism and the Lord’ s Supper is a thoroughly pneumatological; thus the ‘ epiklesis’ is of utmost importance – for by it the church declares that we enter in to these symbolic actions or gestures by the grace known only through the Spirit. Any other participation is an affront – fraudulent – and thus for a growing number there is a sense that there cannot be a ‘ eucharistic celebration’ without an epiklesis; there cannot be a baptism without it – we are born again of water and the Spirit (John 3:5).

But it is not merely for catechetical purposes that we would include the ‘ epiklesis’ ; it just makes good

---

<sup>11</sup>BEM, p. 13, specifying that we pray this prayer, confident of the promise of Jesus, praying to the Father so that the faith community would be strengthened for its mission in the world

<sup>12</sup>T.F.Torrance, p. 258.

theological sense. All of our natural instincts lean us towards assuming that we are the actors, that we somehow make this happen. We therefore need to be reminded, week in and week out, that Christ is present by the Spirit – that the transformative power of this event resides not in a priest or a pastor or in the right words of institution, and that the quality of our response rests not on our sincerity or even our faith, but rather in the Spirit.

This work of the Spirit is necessarily in the church, as the church – for Pentecost is, at one and the same time, the inauguration of the church. As such, as Louis-Marie Chauvet notes:

“ . . . the Spirit, which makes the church, connects each member through the sacraments to the “ body of Christ” and thus counteracts the temptation to an individualist participation.”<sup>13</sup>

And Chauvet makes the intriguing point: the work of the Spirit is always simultaneously universal and particular: universal in that cannot be contained or constrained by the church or a building or an institution (it has no boundaries) and it is always particular, in Christ, and then in the church, and then in this particular celebration of baptism or the Lord’ s Supper.<sup>14</sup> And so we are learning together, coming together to know our God through God’ s self-revelation in the simple acts of Baptism and the Holy Meal.

The Holy Spirit makes this sacramental event one of true encounter with Christ. Indeed, Baptism and the Lord’ s Supper are precisely the means, crucial and vital means, as necessary complements to the Word, by which the Spirit does what we so long for the Spirit to do: to make us one with Christ, so that Christ abides in us even as we abide in Christ, so that the church knows the transforming grace of Christ. As a widening number of theologians – Orthodox, Catholic, to be sure, but also Protestant, Evangelical and Pentecostal -- are asking: Could it be said that all we long for from the Spirit is offered to us in these events, and that indeed, we cannot know the grace of God except through this remarkably simple yet extraordinary acts.

---

<sup>13</sup>Chauvet, p. 169

<sup>14</sup>Chauvet, p. 169.

And so we act – we baptize and we celebrate the Lord’ s Supper. But we do so in response to the Spirit and in the enabling of the Spirit. Neither baptism nor the Lord’ s Supper are, finally, pious creations for our own self-perfecting so that we might be “ worthy” ; rather, in these acts, however much we truly testify to our acts of response to God’ s gracious initiative, these are first and foremost acts by which we testify to Christ’ s work, even as we accept – yea more, submit to – the Spirit’ s work in our lives and in our midst. As such, it simply makes no sense to neglect an explicit and deliberate prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, come Lord and Giver of Life, come!

#### 4. The Three are One.

Using language that reflects the economy of God, BEM thus summarizes what occurs in the Lord’ s Supper with these words:

*. . . the Father . . . is the primary origin and final fulfillment of the eucharistic event. The incarnate Son of God by and in whom it is accomplished is its living centre. The Holy Spirit is the immeasurable strength of love which makes it possible and continues to make it effective.*<sup>15</sup>

The reference to the “ living centre” is noteworthy. Our participation in baptism and the Lord’ s Supper is not an act of encounter with three, but with one God. And thus we ask: how through our participation are we coached and formed in a deepening awareness of the unity of the Triune God?

Surely this is through an intentional and focused “ Christological concentration” (to use a phrase from Michael Wecker).<sup>16</sup> Christ Jesus is the dynamic centre and thus the unifying centre of both baptism and the Lord’ s Supper. This is our passion and focus; we are baptized into Christ, and in the holy meal we are in fellowship with Christ. At least the christomonists have the right bent, in their focus on the second person of the Trinity! The neglect of the fullness of the Triune God is a great and devastating loss; the

---

<sup>15</sup>BEM, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup>Michael Wecker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?*, trans. By John F. Hoffmeyer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 174.

sacrament is, in a sense, no longer a Christian event. Yet the focus is right. Through these events, to the glory and in thanks to the Father, and through the power of the Spirit, we are brought into fellowship – into realtime communion – with the crucified, risen and ascended Christ. All things begin and end with the Father, the Creator and source of all good gifts; and all things come to us by the Spirit, through whom, by the grace of God’ s love, we offer back to God these very gifts, and enter into the life of God that is extended to us in these events. But all of this is in and through and by the one who is before us, behind us, first in our hearts; thus the great liturgical line: “ through him, with him, in him” .

Thus to be truly Trinitarian, we are radically Christocentric. And this becomes dramatically apparent through our participation in baptism and the Lord’ s Supper. God comes to us, and through Christ we come into communion with God. The pivot point is the person and work of Christ. Christ is the Sacrament of God – the one who offers himself to the world in obedience to the Father, and then also the one through whom the church responds in love, thanksgiving, and obedience to the Father. The sacramental right is without doubt a human act – we take and eat; we enter the water of baptism. But what is critical is that this is an act of response to the gracious initiative God in Christ, and of course, our act of response is one that is enabled by the Spirit.

Further, in our participation, we are also reminded that we are looking forward to the day of Christ’ s appearing. In baptism, we are initiated into a new life and yet we are aware of how far we have still to go; and in the Lord’ s Supper we are so keenly aware of the disconnect between the beauty and simplicity of the Meal and the fragmentation around us and in our world – the whole creation groans as in childbirth awaiting the day of our redemption (Rom 8:19-21). We know that we are on the way, and eagerly celebrate this event in anticipation, in hope, and as God enables, in confidence that one day all will be made well, and justice and peace will embrace.

What we look forward to us the day of Christ’ s appearing when the entire created order will again be brought under the authority of its rightful ruler. And now, through Word and Sacrament, we live in

dynamic union with our Living Head.

5. And Baptism Initiates the Church into the life of the Triune God.

The life that is celebrated and nurtured through the celebration of the Lord' s Supper finds its initiation in water baptism. Baptism initiates the Christian, and indeed the church, into the life of the Triune God.

Baptism is an act of the church; and it is an act of self-offering by the one who is coming to faith in Christ. Yet, is it in Christ that we do this. As Alexander Schmemmann puts it: " We offer . . . ourselves to God. But we do it *in Christ and in remembrance of Him*.<sup>17</sup> For Christ is the offering to God; we are but participants in his high priestly sacrifice, performed once and for all, and now opened for us through the sacramental actions of the church. Through baptism we enter into and participate in the death and resurrection of Christ. And so we become included in the offering of Christ to the Father, and thus we enter into the life that is there between the Father and the Son. That life becomes ours! And in the extraordinary language of St. Paul, our " life is now hidden with Christ in God." (Col 3:3). Baptism is, then, integral to conversion and Christian initiation.

Yet, what has so frequently happened in the history of the church is that here too, as with the Lord' s Supper, there is minimal reference to the ministry of the Spirit – sometimes the Father and Spirit are only mentioned as part of the three-fold baptismal formula! Without the formula, it could easily sound like its an event of " me and Jesus." No more. And here, too, what a loss! We need to make explicit that through baptism we are entering into the work of Christ, offered to the Father, and that we enter into this fellowship through the ministry of the Spirit.

Surely this means that we acknowledge that it is by the Spirit that we have come to this day: drawn and wooed to this moment, seeing truth that we would not see apart from the Spirit, coming into a faith that is

---

<sup>17</sup>Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir' s Seminary Press, 1998), p. 35.

nurtured and sustained within us by the Spirit. Do we not need to go further and affirm that on this day we enter into union with Christ in his death and resurrection, and that in this union we find the very life of God that is given to us in the Spirit? This union with Christ that draws us into fellowship with the Father is ultimately evident in the very life of God, given to us by the Spirit – that, indeed, the Spirit is given to us?

On the Day of Pentecost, in reply to the question, “ what then shall we do?” , Peter called for repentance and baptism: the interior and exterior dimensions of Christian initiation. But his words on that day also included, “ and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” And the question naturally arises: what is the connection between the reception of the gift of the Spirit and water baptism? The Roman Church has historically separated baptism from confirmation; and many contemporary traditions, especially those that are heirs to the holiness movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the Pentecostal and charismatic movements of the past century, have almost insisted on separating them: there is the act of repentance and baptism into Christ – this is the first “ act” – and then later, subsequent to baptism, as a distinct experience, there is “ act” 2, the reception of the gift of the Spirit. Separate and distinct.

Then the host of other Western protestant and evangelical traditions tend to be silent on these matters, just as they are silent about the Spirit at the Lord’ s Supper. When pressed, they insist that one can count on receiving the gift of the Spirit at baptism; it is taken for granted as integral to the experience of baptism, even if no explicit reference is made to receiving this gift.

Is this acceptable: either the split – with the Spirit presumed to be a gift to come later – or the silence, the assumption that this gift is integral to baptism? Or do we need to find ways to be explicit in bringing the two together and, indeed, in demonstrating in tangible ways that in conversion-initiation we are entering into fellowship with the Triune God. And the extraordinary wonder is that the very life of God is given to us, the Trinitarian life of God; the life of God evident in this: that in coming to faith in Christ we receive the gift of the Spirit, of God’ s very self. Why would we not make this explicit?

The Apostle Peter made it explicit in the words spoken on the day of Pentecost. And surely this is the



very least we could do: speak of the gift of the Spirit, even if the non sacramentalists among us insist that it is not causal or instrumental – even if, in other words, we are not prepared to link the water directly with the gift of the Spirit. But whether or not we are sacramental, we need to declare at baptism that the life of God is known through the gift of the Spirit – and that, at the very least, it is anticipated by our baptism and that the baptized one can expect to receive the gift of God’ s very self, the gift of the Spirit. Surely we can at least go this far.

But should we go further and *re-present* this more vividly, in our sacramental *actions* and not merely in the words spoken? For the early church the link was made verbally, but it was also re-presented in the acts of those who preside and participate. Up until the 4<sup>th</sup> century or so the primary reference for baptism/initiation was the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan – such that it was assumed that the “ the baptism of Jesus orders, structures, Christian baptism” and that his baptism was the event of his anointing by the Spirit, and thus baptism for the early church was the “ locus of the imparting of the Spirit”<sup>18</sup> And so, typically, it was explicit for the early church – both in the words spoken and in their gestures and rituals. The early liturgies, the rites of initiation of Tertullian, Hilary and others include both the imposition of hands and the anointing, and an explicit call for the gift of the Spirit. Indeed, all initiation rites, east and west, included this in some form or another.<sup>19</sup> Does the contemporary church need to recover this practice – the act of ‘ chrismation’ ? Do we need to include the imposition of hands and the anointing with oil and the prayer fo the Spirit in our rites or practices of baptism?

Interestingly enough, this is included in the Roman Catholic Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults (the RCIA), and it was for me an wonder-filled experience to see the demonstration of this at St. Paul the Apostle Church in Manhattan at the Easter vigil (2007) as those baptized as adults along with those

---

<sup>18</sup>Kilian McDonnell and George T. Montague *Christian Initiation and Baptism in the Holy Spirit: Evidence from the First Eight Centuries* (2<sup>nd</sup> rev edition), Collegeville, Minn: The Liturgical Press, 1994. p. 340.

<sup>19</sup>McDonnell and Montague, 341-342.

already baptized as infants were confirmed through a remarkable act of chrismation: their heads bathed in oil, the minister breathing on them and announcing the gift of the Spirit, the very life of God, given to them! They' re doing something right – making this explicit in word and deed, in both the words spoken and the prayers offered and in deed, in the gestures by which the Trinitarian character of our faith is embodied.

#### 6. The Signs of our Sacramental Encounter with the Triune God.

We baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Spirit; and then, in the Lord' s Supper, we give thanks to the Father, as we come into real-time fellowship with the Ascended Christ, through the gracious ministry of the Spirit. Of course, we need to ask what difference this all makes or, better, what indications or signs would assure us that through baptism and the Lord' s Supper, we are being drawn into fellowship with the Triune God. At the very least, they would be two: Trinitarian joy and Trinitarian fellowship.

First, most notably from the Eastern church, we are reminded that when we enter into the triune life of the Living God we enter into the joy of God – a joy that is found in the exquisite communion of Father, Son and Spirit; and this joy is now ours, a joy that is made complete in us, yes, but made complete precisely because we are in fellowship with God. Yet it is not only Eastern theologians who profile this; Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, the “ preacher” to the Pope, in a recent publication on the Trinity as object of contemplation, quotes Pius XII who observed that because God is triune, we are able “ to rejoice with happiness like to that with which the holy and undivided Trinity is happy.”<sup>20</sup> Christ came that our joy might be made complete, and it is made complete as by the Spirit we are drawn into the Trinitarian joy of God. This is resting place; this is our true home – re-presented to us in water and in a festive meal. We have come home to the Father and received the grace that is so poignantly longed for in the words of Philip when he says to Jesus (John 14): “ Show us the Father and that will be enough!” Baptism and the Lord' s Supper are ultimately all about bringing us back into fellowship with the Creator, the source of life and of all good gifts, the Lord who is good and whose mercies endure forever. We enter into God' s

---

<sup>20</sup>Raniero Cantalamessa, *Contemplating the Trinity*, trans. By Marsha Daigle-Williamson (Ijamsille, Maryland: The Word Among Us Press, 2007), 35.

gates with thanksgiving, and then return to the world with joy and thanksgiving.

And this is so, of course, because God is love, which then highlights a second critical indicator of our encounter with and communion with the Triune God – Trinitarian fellowship. Our Christian heritage affirms that in baptism and the Lord' s Supper we are drawn into the unity of God, a oneness that both exemplifies the character of true unity, and positions us in turn live in community, most notably the communion we have in the fellowship of the Spirit as sisters and brothers in Christ.<sup>21</sup>

There is one body, one Spirit, one hope; one Lord, one faith and one baptism; one God and Father of all (Ephesians 4:4-6). But what is clear is that this unity is one that incorporates dynamic diversity – a mutuality of giving and receiving, reflecting indeed the very dynamic that is found in God. This is reinforced for us each time we break bread together, with the single loaf reminding us of our common identity in Christ. And thus these sacramental actions are formative, embodying the life of the Triune God, the life of love and community, within and among us. For the Trinity is not three who become one, as best they can; rather the Trinity is three who *are* one. And in similar fashion, we who are many are one; that is, as amazing as it might seem, as much a fact of the cosmos as the Trinity. There is one body, one church, one people of God; and by the grace we know through baptism and the Lord' s Supper, we are increasingly enabled to maintain this unity through the bond of peace (Eph 4:3). In other words, what enables us to keep the unity of the Spirit is not so much that we mimic a mental picture of the Trinity. Rather, through baptism and the Lord' s Supper we actually enter into the living dynamic of the fellowship of the Trinity. In the Lord' s Supper, we all partake of one loaf and as such, we who are many are one body (1 Cor 10:16-17).<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup>BEM puts it this way: “ Through baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the Church of every time and place . . . . The union with Christ which we share through baptism has important implications for Christian unity.” (p. 3).

<sup>22</sup>See further on this in John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir' s Seminary Press), pp. 145-149 where for Zizioulas it is precisely this vision of the Eucharist that establishes that the church has a eucharistic identity where in the whole church is united in Christ as the body of Christ.

And in this joy and in this fellowship we are bought into the mission of God, the purposes of God in the world. We return to the world in joy and peace. Baptism marks our identity, and the Lord' s Supper confirms this identity as those who are in the world as participants in the kingdom purposes of God. As Schmemmann puts it: the Eucharist is both the end and the beginning of Christian mission – representing both the goal of mission but also the point of departure for the church, for we go into the world as those who have met and encountered the living ascended Christ.<sup>23</sup> And the gift of the Spirit then rests upon us as we depart.

This identity in the world – marked by joy and Christian fellowship – is truly a Trinitarian identity; and it is formed in us, slowly and incrementally, as through these actions we experience the mystery of God that is embodied within us. Wayne L. Roosa speaks of the arts in a way that would be equally pertinent to baptism and the Lord' s Supper. He notes that:

“ It is the office of the arts to thus bear witness to the terms and dynamics of being, more through the analog of form and sign than through the proving of logic and analysis. This is part of the *distancing* needed by self-conscious beings to finally perceive themselves; it is the predicate require to establish the properties of existing, so that the subject – our selves – might be enabled to determine their *relation* to it. (his emphasis).<sup>24</sup>

Slowly, incrementally but surely, we “ get it.” We find our true joy; we get the meaning of true community – of what it means that our identity is one of participation in the lives of others. We come to know and feel that we live our lives in radical dependence on God, and not as autonomous beings. We “ get it” that our deep joy is found in God and in God alone, and we walk into and live in the reality of unity with diversity

---

<sup>23</sup>Schmemmann, p. 45.

<sup>24</sup>Wayne L. Roosa, “ A Meditation on the Joint and Its Holy Ornaments,” *Books and Culture* 14/1, January/February 2008, pp. 16 - 23.

and how, indeed, this is the life. We come increasingly to appreciate, deep within our beings, that our salvation comes from God and is not self-constructed. And it all comes, of course, not so much by thinking about these things – this mystery – but by enactment, by gesture, by sharing together in these ordained means of grace.

How does one respond to the extraordinary wonder and mystery of Triunity? Abraham the patriarch, was confronted with the three-fold angelic visitation (Genesis 18:1-15), which the church has consistently viewed as a vision of what would yet be revealed more fully in the Incarnation and Pentecost. His response is an interesting one, is it not? He did not mount a theological conference to understand this amazing phenomena – three, who are one. Rather, he set out a meal!