

# THE NEW CREATION

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THE LITURGY of the paschal vigil sees the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in God's universe as constantly creative, from the first moment when the Spirit moved over the waters until the present moment when we pray: 'Open the font of baptism all over the world for the renewal of the nations'. It belongs to the vision of faith, rooted in God's word in the Old Testament as well as in the New, and expressed anew for our times in the Council's *Constitution on the Church*, that this efficacy of the creative Spirit should penetrate the lives of the people of God on every level. There will always be a need for a re-formation of attitudes, both in the heart of the individual and in the structures of the Church herself, the assembly of God's people: a pilgrim people who have not yet reached their destination, who are conscious of their imperfection, whose lives are set in history and must always be meeting the demands of history upon them. The life of the Church, as depicted, for example, in the Apocalypse, will always be marked with struggle, change and upheaval: 'Behold I make all things new'. The new creation, though already established in Christ, has not yet reached the full measure of its growth and accomplishment.

At the same time, it is not surprising that men should instinctively resist the laws of growth and development. What is more typical, for example, of middle age than that a man should become set in his ways, should settle down to a set pattern of thought and life with which he is well satisfied, which he has built up for himself at some cost and now wishes to hold on to for the years that remain to him. The attitude has its strengths. A certain stability of outlook distinguishes the adult from the adolescent. But it contains the seeds of its own destruction and decay. If a hardening of the arteries is typical of his physical life, it is not surprising that his mental and emotional life should manifest the same characteristics. But whereas he has built up a stable character in order to deal with the responsibilities life has thrust upon him, yet this very stability can harden to excess and become an obstacle to his meeting the needs of a changing situation.

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Like so many facets of christianity, what is contained primordially and radically in the first beginnings remains a permanent feature of christian life. The Lord's death and resurrection express a mystery of death and rebirth that goes on in every christian soul, both in the first instance at his baptism, and also in his living out his fuller share in the passover of Christ. There will always be for him, throughout his life, a dying and a rising just as there will always be for him a new creation, a putting on of the new man, begun in baptism, but lived out in the Church and reaching into every corner of his moral life. The new creation fundamentally undermines the old, insofar as it is subject to sin, turned in on itself, and closed to the influence of grace. It is to be expected that a man should constantly feel his foundations threatened, his roots disturbed, his stability questioned, for he will always have the tendency to set up his own creation. Like the apostles on Mount Tabor, he will wish to build his temple with what he sees now, to give it a permanent form within which he can retire from the struggles and uncertainties of building elsewhere. He forgets that the vision of faith, and likewise his sanctification on earth, is always and necessarily incomplete. The kingdom, as it finds expression in the structures of the Church, is also marked with permanence and impermanence, stability and instability, continuity and discontinuity. We cannot, like children, be forever holding on to a dream-world we once knew, setting up fairy castles where beauty and goodness lie asleep, where history passes us by and we can escape from the demands of our times.

It is fitting that the Church's most solemn liturgical celebration, the Easter celebration, should be preceded by the preparation of Lent. Here the people of God 'who persevere in hearing the word of God and in prayer'<sup>1</sup> reflect on their imperfection, their limitations, their personal and collective sin, and come to a renewal of baptism seeking a deeper conversion. Conversion is a mystery of change, a *metanoia*, a change of mind and heart. Our baptism, our acceptance of the gospel, our commitment in faith all involve this change: this work of God, his new creation, where man is born again of water and the Holy Spirit. But the new creation is not completely achieved in the individual by the first act of baptism, nor even by any decisive act of commitment as an adult. As his powers develop, so too must his faith develop and so continue throughout his life. The solemn renewal of baptism in the Easter liturgical assembly must acquire

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<sup>1</sup> *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 109.

the characteristics of an ever deeper adult commitment, consonant with his human and social maturity, and significant for the way he lives his life.

In the rite of baptism itself, the priest repeats the gesture of Christ when he cured the man who was deaf and dumb from birth. He places his finger on the ear of the child and says *Ephtheta*: be thou opened. Since, however, when the Church baptizes, it is Christ who baptizes,<sup>1</sup> there is here a true opening, a true giving of spiritual power to hear and understand the word of God that brings and develops faith. It is the touch of Christ in the sacrament that achieves this opening through the gift of the Spirit. When we gather to renew the promises of baptism, the virtue and power of the creative Spirit is still with us. We can enter even more fully into this mystery of the re-creating power of the Spirit, as long as our ears are still open to his word. In the liturgy, where Christ is especially present,<sup>2</sup> he still reaches out his hand to touch and to heal, and, if we have shut our ears, to say, *Ephtheta*: be thou opened.

It is significant that the great instructions on the sacramental rites of the fourth century Fathers took place after baptism and not before it, though there was a moral and doctrinal instruction beforehand. They considered it was more useful to instruct their neophytes after they had had experience of the sacramental rites. Cyril of Jerusalem refers to this delay as he begins his instructions on baptism: 'Knowing that one trusts more surely in what one sees with one's eyes than in what one merely hears, I waited for this moment when you would be more receptive to my words, after your experience [of the sacrament]. In this way I can guide you towards the more luminous and more sweet-smelling fields of this paradise'.<sup>3</sup>

We can draw two conclusions from this: the first is the importance of signs in the development of the christian life. This is not merely the application of a pedagogical principle that one should proceed from the concrete to the abstract, however valid and relevant the principle may be. Liturgical signs are not concerned simply with the communication of abstract knowledge through concrete gesture. They contain mystery. They express the faith of the Church, become a word of the Church, and reveal a hidden reality. Since in the liturgy the whole resources of the Church are gathered – 'no

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid* 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Five Instructions for the newly-baptised*, I, PG 33, 1065.

other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title or to the same degree'<sup>1</sup> – the word of the Church is the word of Christ. In the voice of the bride, we hear too the voice of the bridegroom: and not merely in the sense of words spoken. Gesture and rite express meaning in conjunction with spoken words, and the two together, given the right circumstances, constitute liturgical signs. These signs are important for the development of faith. As St Cyril says, we believe in them more easily. And if we ask why there is so much ignorance of faith today, why people go round asking questions, find no answers and become really disturbed, one of the reasons is that the liturgical signs, in which the faith of the Church is so richly expressed, have lost their significance for them. They have become no longer relevant to the real issues in their lives, they have ceased to be an apt medium for the expression of their christian commitment. Most would agree that the paschal vigil has not yet come to mean what it should: the people do not really know what it is all about. Or at least, the people have not found it relevant to what they consider christianity to be about. If we believe more easily in signs, it will go hard for those who do not understand the signs.

The second conclusion we may draw is that when Cyril says he will carry on the instruction of his neophytes, he understands this to be a growth in faith, a strict catechesis where the foundation is already laid. He is not merely informing the mind. For he speaks of leading his hearers on to the wider fields of paradise, where there is more light and the air is more sweet-smelling. The image of paradise recalls the first paradise, the first creation, and underlines the meaning of baptism as the new creation. He is speaking in images, in images of a fuller grace of the sacrament. St Ambrose, in the same context, speaks of the sweet odour of eternal life breathed into his neophytes by the gift of the sacrament; and he understands his instruction as a further savouring of that fragrance.

These two considerations should help to give meaning to the liturgical renewal of baptism as a special time of grace, a contact with the word of God, and a deeper share in the re-creative work of his Spirit. Our faith develops through our contact with the word of God, and among the many ways in which the word comes to us, the liturgical sign holds a privileged position. It is the prophetic voice of the Church, by which we mean a form of the preaching of

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<sup>1</sup> *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 7.

the gospel. St Ambrose uses the comparison of the water, the dove, and the wood of the ark to illustrate something of the mystery of baptism for his neophytes. In the water, as in the water of the deluge, all sin is buried. The wood is the material to which our Saviour was nailed for our salvation. The dove is a symbol of the Holy Spirit who breathes peace into our souls. But he goes on to show how all this is made relevant to baptism, passing beyond the realm of the preacher's imagery to a closer theological analysis. What connection is there between this water, this material element and the wood of the cross, and how does it become an instrument of salvation and regeneration? Here he appeals to another image. In the desert, at the waters of Mara, the israelites could not drink until Moses threw the wood into it. Then the water turned from bitter to sweet, and they could quench their thirst. So, too, says St Ambrose, water is by itself useless for salvation without the preaching of the cross. The priest 'throws' the preaching of the cross into the waters, just as Moses, the prophet, threw wood into the spring, and so the water becomes effective for everlasting life. It is in the context of the Church's preaching, prayer and blessing that the water of baptism becomes effective, *accedit verbum et fit sacramentum*. And in the same way, it is in the context of the Church's prayer, the Church's preaching, the Church's prophetic word, that the liturgical rites become effective for our further sanctification. Her preaching arouses our faith and is designed to bring us to a deeper commitment.

For so many christians, the mystery of baptism is a forgotten mystery. They recognize that it is the beginning of spiritual life, a necessary introduction to the life of the Church, but that it should remain as a source of grace and as a constant object of their prayer and contemplation is foreign to their minds. In restoring the paschal vigil, the Church desires to bring back the mystery of baptism to the familiar consciousness of her people. She would preach constantly to them the faith of their baptism, and she uses the rite itself, the things they can see, as the privileged medium of expression. It is in her liturgy that her preaching is effective. Here 'God speaks to his people, and Christ is still announcing his gospel',<sup>1</sup> and this reality extends to all her rites. In the mystery of her assembly, the special presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit assure the optimum conditions for their instruction and religious experience. In this sacred setting the word of God is preserved, and they

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*Ibid* 33.

are invited to meditate on their privileges as christians in the midst of this sacred assembly.

The Council, in the *Constitution on the Liturgy*, insists several times on the importance of the people knowing and appreciating the significance of the liturgical rites. Pastors are urged to ensure that 'the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects'.<sup>1</sup> The reason is that 'The visible signs used by the liturgy to signify invisible divine things have been chosen by Christ or his Church. Thus not only when things are read which were written for our instruction, but also when the Church prays or sings or acts, the faith of those taking part is nourished and their minds raised to God, so that they may offer their rational service and more abundantly receive his grace'.<sup>2</sup>

But the special power of the liturgical rites for our instruction and faith is not simply dependent on the Church's preaching alone. She has her reasons for using them in the way she does, because the rites usually take their inspiration from the scriptures and so from the history of salvation, the history of God's dealing with man, and the ways he has chosen to reveal himself. When people accept on faith that baptism is necessary for our salvation, they may also think that the rite itself is arbitrary, and of little importance in comparison with its effects. But the rite of baptism is no accident. Indeed it is chosen by God and he could have chosen otherwise; but the fact remains that he has chosen this way, and what is more he has prepared the way for our understanding of it by a long education in the history of Israel and in the New Testament. And so it is not surprising that the great teachers of the Church have always loved to linger on the significance of the rites, to try to penetrate the mysterious connection between the material action of the rites and their spiritual effects. On the connection between baptism and the Holy Spirit, Fr Guillet writes:

That baptism is associated with the Spirit is a fact which first of all depends on God's freely chosen plan; but it is also a fact for which we can find reasons, not only in the created world, which God has given us, but even more in the history of salvation, as God has patiently led it to fulfilment in his Son, and also, we might even say, in the Person of the Holy Spirit himself. Through the rites of baptism, which the Church repeats over her children, and which are described

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid* 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* 33.

for us in the writings of the New Testament, the Holy Spirit reveals himself to us, and opens his mystery to our gaze.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, when the priest takes the paschal candle and plunges it into the baptismal water, he says: 'May the power of the Holy Spirit descend into all the waters of this font'. This extended symbol, elaborated by the Church, speaks to our faith, 'opens the mystery' to our gaze. It is itself a prophetic word, inspired by the Spirit himself, and of itself creative of new life. St Peter, in his instructions to the newly baptized, tells them they are to live as new creatures since they themselves have come to life by the prophetic word of the Church:

Purify your souls with the discipline of charity . . . since you have all been born anew with an immortal and imperishable birth, through the word of God who lives and abides forever. Yes, all mortal things are like grass, and all their glory like the bloom of grass; the grass withers and its bloom falls, but the word of the Lord lasts forever. And this word is none other than the gospel which has been preached to you.<sup>2</sup>

If the word of God is capable of bringing men to first conversion, to that faith that leads to baptism, it is also capable of continuing that creative work. And these two realities, the word of God and the Spirit that inspires the prophets to speak the word of God, are closely joined in the work of the new creation. When our Lord stepped into the waters of the Jordan, the heavens opened and John the Baptist saw the Spirit descend upon him. Through him the water is given its power and the Spirit will act through it. But before men could come to baptism, he preached the word, his gospel, in fact himself, and St Luke shows us this preaching as also inspired by the Spirit: 'And Jesus came back to Galilee with the power of the Spirit upon him . . . and he began to preach in their synagogues'. Then, when he goes to the synagogue at Capharnaum, he begins his preaching there with the words: 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me; he has anointed me and sent me out to preach the gospel to the poor . . .'.<sup>3</sup>

On Easter night, the Church rejoices that she is one with her risen Lord, and the high point of her celebration is her Easter

<sup>1</sup> *Baptism in the New Testament* (London, 1965), p 89.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Pet 1, 22-25. <sup>3</sup> Lk 4, 14 ff.

communion. But she chooses to make this also the occasion for another climax, the renewal of baptism. If this rite is not to remain a piece of archaic ritual, hurriedly gone through before a small but puzzled remnant of a congregation, it must begin to make an impact as a real sign for our faith, a real word of God to our spirit. The people must begin to catch in it something of that fragrance, that fulness of light, of which St Cyril speaks, and come to experience that paradise to which we belong as new creatures of God. It is a word that should make demands on our people. 'Put to death, therefore what is earthly in you: impurity, immorality, passion, evil desire . . . You have put off the old man and its practices and you have put on the new man, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator'.<sup>1</sup>

In order to be 'renewed in knowledge', the people do not have to become theologians. The Holy Spirit himself 'will lead them into all truth',<sup>2</sup> and he who descended in the form of tongues on the apostles and made them speak out the word of God, will continue to speak through the ministry of the Church in her prophetic office. He will give them his wisdom, renewing them in knowledge, not in the manner necessarily of intellectuals, but with the knowledge that will restore in them the image of their creator. 'One trusts more surely in what one sees with one's eyes'. Here is a task for teachers, for priests, for all who share in the prophetic office in the Church; to open people's eyes, to enable them to see in the Church's liturgy a divine instrument for their continual sanctification.

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<sup>1</sup> Col 3, 5-11.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 16, 13.