

NEW RITES: NEW UNDERSTANDING

By GERALD O'MAHONY

WE HAVE new rites in the sacraments of Baptism, Penance and Anointing of the Sick. We have a new understanding of the meaning, the richness and the potential of these three sacraments. How far has the new understanding dictated the new rites? How far do the new rites serve to disseminate the new understanding? Is full use being made of the potential of the new rites in these sacraments? To describe the old understanding, as well as the new, I propose to indicate how my own personal understanding changed over the years, and where it stands now.

Understanding of baptism was a key objective of my teachers in the infant grades of my first school years (1940-41). We began with creation. God made me. God made me to know him, love him and serve him in this life, and to be happy with him forever in the next. But the story started long before me. God wasn't lonely, but he wanted creatures to share his love and beauty. So he created the angels. The angels, unlike us human beings, make up their minds once and for all. Some of the angels whom God had created decided to rebel, led on by Lucifer; and Archangel Michael drove them down to hell. This left a 'gap' in heaven; so God decided to fill it with human creatures, who don't make up their minds so quickly.

Then came the Adam and Eve story, fully illustrated. I am quite sure that my teachers took it literally as a piece of history, exactly like the prologue to it — the story of the angels and devils. The net result of this history was that all of us infants were born into the world with a horrid and destructive black stain on our souls. Nobody with this black stain could ever enter heaven; so what was God to do about this tragic situation? What he did, of course, was to send his Son, Jesus. Somehow Jesus, by dying on the cross, opened the gates of heaven which had been shut since Adam and Eve's time, and gained a limitless supply of sanctifying grace. This

sanctifying grace was the antidote to the big black stain and its destructive power, and was to be given through seven sacraments. Baptism was the first and greatest of the seven, the gateway to the other six. So we were reassured that when we were baptized the big, horrid stain had been washed off our souls. We were now children of God again, but still weak and tainted; but there were the other sacraments, and prayer, to keep us healthy children as we faced the hazards of growing up, and of adult life. However, there were some associated questions, but these had their answers. What about adults who died unbaptized? The baptism of desire! And what about babies who died without baptism? Limbo!

If we bear in mind that any new understanding only began to reach infant schools about twenty years ago, so that young teachers and parents in their twenties were also brought up on a previous theory, we must also note that whereas teachers have had opportunities for further religious education, parents have not. What then, of the new rite of baptism? Let me offer a simple statement, my own understanding.

Jesus of Nazareth lived and died so that men would learn to call God 'Father'. A father (or a mother) loves his child, not because he is a good child, but because he is *his* child. So I do not have to 'save my soul' at all: God is my saviour. His love for me is what transforms me. His love for me is my security. Jesus announced this as the Good News. God loves sinners, and tax collectors, and the blind and the deaf and the lame and the paralysed and the lepers; he loves Jew and Gentile, our own people and foreigners, men and women, rich and poor. All of these can call God 'Father', and find in that way the truest approach to the mystery of God. Not everyone, however, welcomed Jesus as the One sent with Good News. The nationalists had their reasons, the scribes and pharisees theirs, and the rich and prosperous, for finding the message unacceptable, and generally irreconcilable with their own image of God and his righteousness. Jesus was left with the choice either of backing down and conforming his message to what was acceptable to the influential people, or of facing death.

He chose to face death, because to have backed down would have meant turning his face against you and me along with the sinners, the tax collectors, the blind, and all the rest. Had he changed his prophetic message under pressure, we might never have known what he was saying about God. This would have meant saying 'no' to his Father: to have projected an image of God as saying, 'I love

you all, so long as it does not cost me too much'. So he chose the death which his enemies combined to inflict on him.

Was his Good News true? The witnesses of his resurrection saw Jesus in such a manner that 'only God could have done this, raising Jesus from the dead'. This was in itself a vindication of what Jesus had taught about God. God would not have raised up one who had described him falsely.

In view of the above, what is to be said of original sin? Original sin is man's innate inability to believe that God is friendly, that God could be as truly intimate to a human being as a human father or mother is to the child. The gates of heaven were shut, not in the sense that God had shut them, but only in that no one, until Jesus spoke in human words, dared to believe that they were open, open as are a father's arms to welcome back his lost child. Here is the darkness, here is the slavery with which man has always lived. As the centuries rolled by, there were increasing glimmers of light and understanding. The old covenant was repeatedly broken, and repeatedly healed by God, so that some prophet would proclaim, almost inevitably: 'God is like an ever forgiving husband who cannot help loving his unfaithful wife'; 'God is like a mother with a child on her breast: will she ever forget the child? Even if she did, God will never forget you'. Jesus was the first human being to dare to call God 'Father' to his face, and teach his disciples to do the same. Baptism is the ceremony which Jesus chose to celebrate a human being's entry into this company of those who call God 'Father', and live accordingly. All people born into this world are in fact children of God, entitled to call God 'Father'. Christians are those who celebrate this event, countlessly repeated. Christian parents promise to try to surround their newly-baptized child with such love and forgiveness that he or she will grow up truly capable of believing this Good News: it is incarnate, there in the family.

One advantage of such an understanding of baptism and salvation, over against the old view which was part of my upbringing, is that it can be taught to young children without cluttering up their minds with a whole paraphernalia of unhelpful furniture. 'God loves me the way my Mum does' is a much more helpful approach for infants. Or for a ten-year-old child, the Good News can be summed up as saying: 'God loves the naughty child, the slow child and the child who fails and the good child: all of them and for ever. He loves them because they are God's children and not because they are good children'. The news can be seen and welcomed as liberating

the child from fear of his own weakness or ignorance or lack of talent or abundance of talent. Competition can be a real slave-driver for children; the home and the school should be freeing the child from slavery, not reinforcing the slave-driver's power. Good homes, good teachers and good schools always did try to convey this message; but they had to dress it up with the paraphernalia of angels and devils, Adam and Eve, souls, and channels of grace. Now they can say what they mean directly, through religious 'education', and not in spite of it.

Certainly, then, there has been progress in understanding over the past forty years. Just how closely is the new understanding related to the new rite for the baptism of infants? Is the new rite helping to disseminate a better understanding? What are the positive benefits of the new rite compared to the old?

Probably the most powerful new elements in the ceremony are: the generally acknowledged need for preparation, prayer and thought by the parents; the simpler words and actions, making it easier for the minister to be welcoming, and to look like the Good News he is celebrating; the frequent opportunities for baptism to be celebrated at Sunday Mass, with the whole community or a fairly representative section, there to welcome the new child; the special prominence now given to the parents, rather than to the godparents of the child. Outside the rite itself, but a powerful factor nonetheless, is the effect produced by the lapse of time between birth and baptism, to be used for meeting and instructing the parents. There is all the difference in the world between the situation where the mother, still in hospital or in bed at home, sends the child round with the godparents to be baptized as soon as possible (lest it should die with the stain on its soul and only go to limbo instead of heaven), and the situation where time is given for the mother to feel well again. Then both parents can be shown the beauty and importance of what they are about to celebrate; and there is time for the family to gather together for the celebration. Before the new rite, limbo was a reality in the minds of nearly all Catholics. Since the new rite, all but the most traditional are more than happy to forget about limbo.

Another outside factor is the opportunity taken by many schools, particularly on the occasion of the child's first communion, first confession and confirmation, to show the parents, brought up on the old understanding of baptism, what the new understanding of baptism and the other sacraments is all about. Gradually, of course, one hopes that the children of today will become parents with a

better understanding of what they are celebrating, and how best they can fulfil the promise and reality contained in the sacrament. In most dioceses, the religious education syllabus approaches the study of baptism three times over, in infant, junior and secondary (or first, middle and upper) school, each time with a different emphasis. Often children are given the opportunity of celebrating a baptism in the school, or with just the one class present, having first seen the ceremony piece by piece, symbol by symbol, in the preceding lessons. Such a syllabus also makes full use of the rich scriptural symbolism available in the new rite, as compared with the old. There seems to be time in today's liturgy to dwell more on the symbolism of light and life, parenthood and whiteness, the Flood, the Red Sea and the Jordan, creation and re-creation, new clothing and charism. Remote but very real influences have been the restored Easter Vigil ceremonies, the richer fare of scripture in the new Sunday and week-day readings, and the encouragement given to the clergy to give a daily homily. All these factors have led to the clergy themselves appreciating more deeply the symbolism of baptism.

There is one apparent division among the clergy on the matter of baptism: should it be refused or delayed in the case of parents who seem to take no active interest in the practice of their religion? There are many shades of answer to the problem. Through visiting a large cross-section of catholic schools, I have come across most of the current answers being given locally. Teachers and clergy can become very dissatisfied in areas where the majority of the children never go near the church if they can help it, and where the majority of their parents never go to church, except for weddings, baptisms, funerals and first communions. There is general agreement that the parents are the root of the problem. One fairly radical solution is not to baptize the children of those who do not appear in church fairly regularly, nor to make preparations for the Eucharist and Penance in the primary school. In such cases, the preparations are made entirely among and through those who attend the church; nor is the Eucharist nor the other sacraments celebrated in the school at all. The other extreme is to baptize without question any child brought to the font, troop all the children into first and subsequent confessions from the school, bring them all in to first communion, to weekly Mass and to confirmation, the sooner the better: and all in the hope that 'something is bound to stick'. The latter practice is dwindling but it is by no means dead yet.

One of the shades of opinion in between these extremes is to delay the baptism: to force the parents to think and express what they are looking for in having the child baptized; but in the last resort to baptize the child if the parents continue to ask for it. At each of the focal points — marriage, baptism, the child's entry into catholic school, first communion, first confession, entry to secondary school and confirmation — there is the opportunity to remind the couple what they have celebrated at their child's baptism, and what they have promised in having their child baptized. The reason for not refusing baptism in the last resort is that the parents can see refusal as a rejection by God or in the name of God. They are, as often as not, the very people whom life has already rejected many times: indeed the sort of people whom Jesus, far from rejecting, seemed to have a lot of time for.

Penance

The old understanding of the rite of Penance, again as seen from my own personal angle of thirty to forty years ago, was that non-Catholics had freer access to God's forgiveness. All they had to do was to tell God that they were sorry. We Catholics, however, had to steel ourselves to tell our sins to a priest, and we had to make a clean breast of each and every mortal sin. Mortal sin was a real nightmare for the sensitive, since the sins that were mortal were listed as such in our instructions. Lateness for Mass, breaking the fast before communion, failing to keep the laws of abstinence from meat on Fridays: all these and dozens more caused endless anxiety. 'Impure thoughts', and any words or actions that could be construed as being against the sixth or ninth commandments, were automatically mortal sins; and mortal sin meant that you might as well not have been baptized. It was hell for you if you died before getting to confession, because the only other way of being forgiven was by an act of perfect contrition; and you could never be sure that your contrition was perfect. No wonder, if that was the kind of God we served! I am not exaggerating; I and many of my generation daily walked on the brink of eternal damnation. The only saving grace was the kindness, helpfulness and forgiveness of the people who taught these strange doctrines, so much at variance with their own behaviour.

Somewhere in my adult history, God saw to it that I heard his Good News and realized what my baptism had proclaimed. He loved me in spite of all my fears and anxieties; he had always loved

me and always would love me. I had spent twenty-odd years like a baby in its mother's arms expecting to be dropped by the minute: but now I knew God would never drop me. 'You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased', was the message: not because I had kept my slate clean, because I hadn't; simply because I was his child. That was the new and everlasting covenant. So then the way was clear to understanding the sacrament of penance afresh. Just as baptism celebrates something which is already a fact as far as God is concerned (our sonship), so penance celebrates the fact that God has already forgiven us. He is like the father of the prodigal son, on the look-out for his son before ever the prodigal thought about coming home. The son who is in more danger is the elder brother, on the brink of refusing to share in the reconciliation between father and prodigal, on the brink of shutting himself out. Suddenly, the most important commandment of all came to be: 'Judge not, and you shall not be judged'.

Sanctifying grace

What about sacraments giving grace? Do celebrations give grace? Of course they do. A birthday celebrated does so much more for any of us than one that goes by unmarked. Sonship of God seems far less of a reality when the fact is merely acknowledged, but never celebrated, never recalled. A celebration of God's forgiveness of my sins, our sins, can and should bring home to us with greater force the wonder of his love. The love that matters is God's love for me. Heaven is my inheritance, unless I refuse it, or refuse to share it with brothers and sisters whom I judge unworthy, but to whom God nonetheless grants their inheritance. Morality and the keeping of rules is not a passport to heaven; the keeping of rules is neither here nor there, so far as heaven is concerned. Heaven, and God's love is free, *gratis* like grace. Morality and the keeping of commandments is my free response to a God who will love me anyway.

How far has the new rite of penance incorporated such a new spirit, and how far can the new rite be made a vehicle of new understanding? There are many factors at work, some connected more closely than others with the rites themselves, as was the case with baptism. One of the background factors in Europe and North America has been the marked decline in the numbers going to confession frequently. By and large, the faithful seem to have felt a new spirit abroad in the Church; they have begun to concentrate on the kind of people their teachers, mentors and parents *were*,

rather than listen to what they *said*. When sufficient numbers of good, loving catholic people all suddenly start voting with their feet, one is inclined to wonder whether the Holy Spirit is not behind their joint decision.

Another major factor was the sudden decision in seminaries and among catechists to stop labelling this or that action 'a mortal sin': another mysterious decision that no one theologian can be said to have initiated, but one that most Catholics were ready for; except perhaps those teachers who still cling to it as a threat to ensure conformity amongst their pupils. A further dissatisfaction, expressed by Catholics of all ages, has concerned the personal 'laundry list' type of frequent confession. These and other more remote factors have been an integral part of the background to the introduction of the new rite. Even those priests who have been 'minimalists' in implementing the new rite — that is, changing the words of absolution to the new formula, but nothing else at all — cannot stop the changes in attitude among their flock. Throughout one diocese in Great Britain, preparatory talks, in which I was involved, were given to teachers of primary and secondary schools to explain the new rite, prior to its introduction. Significantly, the teachers in the most religiously conservative of the various towns in which the instructions were given, were precisely those most disappointed by the restrictions hedging round the permission for general absolution.

It must be right to leave people to grow accustomed to and eventually to welcome a new style of confession in their own good time. Children can be trained better than their parents were, new churches can be built with proper facilities for a more extended and leisurely private confession, new priests can be trained, and the older ones retrained, to discover for themselves the values of the new rite — a veritable quarry of rich and varied alternatives. Compared with the whole length of the Church's life, one must realize that the new rite is scarcely born, not yet a squalling infant; and the places where the ordinary Catholic and the new rite of private confession were ready for each other have, predictably, proved to be retreat houses, religious communities and 'basic communities'. Here there is time and space for choosing an appropriate scripture passage for each penitent, for talking over matters of conscience in some depth, for choosing the prayer of sorrow that most fits the occasion. My limited experience of parish confessions in the last few years indicates that the scripture reading which may precede private confession is the alternative most quickly dropped. If this is generally the case, then

serious efforts should be made to give the scriptures fresh emphasis, since Jesus's attitude to sinners is the one certain way to ensure the vigorous life of the whole ceremony.

The scripture readings have come into their own in services of reconciliation. Again, this form of the new rite is only in its infancy, and must be allowed many years, even decades, to become part of our lives. My own experience is that currently, when a service is followed by sacramental private confession, the shared examination of conscience by the congregation, and the private confessions that follow, bear little or no relation to each other, even when the congregation has drawn up the 'script' of the general examination. We seem to keep our communal conscience and private consciences in separate compartments. This is doubtless better than having one without the other; but it certainly calls for a gradual, if unhurried integration in our minds.

One regular and powerful service of reconciliation has proved to be in some cases the penitential rite at the beginning of Mass. The words 'in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do' in the confession prayer have had a particularly strong impact; and many priests make excellent use of the opportunities for variety in this rite. More and more ordinary Catholics are coming to feel that a communal service of reconciliation is all the celebration they need for personal and mutual forgiveness in the Lord's compassion. Local experience indicates that nearly everyone goes to communion at nearly every Mass in the country districts, in the towns, and in the more prosperous suburbs. In the inner city, however, and in other areas of cultural deprivation, there are many still too frightened to approach the Eucharist without previous confession, no matter how much encouragement they receive from the pulpit. Here, perhaps, an insistence on the text, 'judge not, and you will not be judged', and on the fact that Jesus himself said, 'Your sins are forgiven', not 'I absolve you from your sins' (which popular imagination equiparates with 'I forgive your sins'), would prove helpful. Moreover, those who have experienced forgiveness can 'pass it on', even though they are not ordained priests.

So much has been written and said on the rite for reconciliation of several penitents with general confession and absolution that there is little need to stress it here, except that, in my travels round the diocese preparing teachers for the new rite, I found that this was the form everyone was most interested in and eager for. That in itself must indicate a new understanding.

The anointing of the sick

Finally, a word about the Sacrament of the Sick. Of the three sacraments, the new rite for the anointing of the sick has been most successful in changing the understanding of ordinary people regarding God's love and forgiveness. The very change of title from 'Extreme Unction' has had an extraordinary effect. In churches and cathedrals, there have been opportunities to celebrate the sacrament when death was by no means imminent. In old age or sickness or weakness, in private homes, hospitals, nursing homes or old people's homes, more and more people have been able to celebrate the sacrament surrounded by loving care and attention, with plenty of time to listen to the scripture reading and to the prayers which can be chosen to suit individual cases and deficiencies. Those celebrating this sacrament never seem to worry unduly about making a private confession first. If they want to, well and good. But all seem to report a vivid sense of the presence of Christ, and all come through the celebration strengthened and more at peace. Normally, they appear more ready for death when the sacrament does turn out to be the last anointing, because a deepening understanding of the unconditional nature of God's love for us in Christ seems to stay with them after the anointing. Nobody has awakened any guilt by questioning them, or demanded a 'firm purpose of amendment'. It is to be regretted that so many have had to wait so long to understand the depth of God's mercy. If they had understood as children, or as young adults, how much more they might have dared for the glory of God in return. Let us hope and pray that we are all learning.