

“*Ecclesia Semper Reformanda*’ – A Baptismal Principle *Par Excellence*”

Maxwell E. Johnson

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The overall theme of this General Chapter of the Society of the Holy Trinity, “*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*,” (“the Church reformed but always reforming”), a principle or slogan associated more with the Reformed tradition in the 1600’s than with Lutheranism and popularized in the 1940s by Karl Barth, certainly is a Lutheran, and even contemporary Roman Catholic, principle, owing perhaps to its alleged origins in St Augustine. In language clearly reminiscent of the Lutheran “*simul iustus et peccator*,” the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church from the Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* I.8, for example, defines the Church as “*sancta simul et semper purificanda, poenitentiam et renovationem continuo prosequitur*” (“at once holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal”).¹ I would like to submit to you that this principle or slogan, whether Reformed, Lutheran, or Roman Catholic, is less about the continuing reform of doctrine, church structure, practice, and polity, though, as we shall see, that may be a part, but it is more about continual conversion to Christ, the continual reformation of faith and life of those who are, indeed, “*simul iustus et peccator*,” those who are called to follow “constantly the path of penance and renewal.” In other words, I want to suggest that this principle may be viewed as a baptismal principle and, hence, it is about Baptism and the implications of Baptism for our ongoing life in Christ. As Luther put it in his *Small Catechism*:

¹ *Lumen gentium* I.8, *Sacrosanctum Oecumenicum Concilium Vaticanum II: Constitutiones Decreta Declarationes* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1966), 106. ET from Austin Flannery, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, New Revised Edition (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1975, 1984), 358.

What does Baptism mean for daily living? It means that our sinful self, with all its evil deeds and desires, should be drowned through daily repentance; and that day after day a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever. St. Paul writes in Romans 6: We were buried therefore with him by Baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.²

That is Ecclesia semper reformanda in a nut shell, daily baptismal dying and rising in Christ in repentance, in returning to our Baptism, putting to death the old Adam and Eve daily so that a “new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever.” Liturgically and theologically, we Lutherans have been most fortunate in recovering this baptismal basis of life in Christ in recent years. While this has not been articulated as strongly or explicitly in the recent *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, although the rites themselves continue to affirm this, of course, there is no question but that the 1978 *Lutheran Book of Worship* embraced the clear and central goal of restoring “to Holy Baptism the liturgical rank and dignity implied by Lutheran theology, and to draw out the baptismal motifs in such acts as the confession of sin and the burial of the dead.”³ Similarly, In her book, *Continuing the Reformation: Re-Visioning Baptism in the Episcopal Church*, Ruth Meyers writes that the baptismal rite in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*:

...was consciously shaped by substantial theological discussion of twentieth-century biblical and liturgical scholarship. Thus the rite contains the seeds of a *baptismal ecclesiology*, a vision of baptism as foundational to Christian identity and, with the eucharist, central to the life and mission of the Church (p. 211).

Together with the understanding that the Sunday liturgical gathering will include regularly both proclamation of the Word and sharing of the Eucharistic Meal as the norm for Lutheran liturgy our modern worship books underscore the classic Lutheran baptismal or liturgical ecclesiology from *Confessio Augustana* VII that the Church is "the assembly of all

²Martin Luther, The Small Catechism, in

³ *Lutheran Book of Worship: Minister's Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1978), 12.

believers [or 'saints'] among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel." Indeed, on an ecumenical level I have often advocated for a baptismal ecclesiology, and by that I mean that our ecclesial identity as Church, as the corporate Body of Christ, as dead, buried, and risen in Christ, as clothed in Christ, as born anew and adopted through water and the Spirit, and as signed and sealed by the Holy Spirit for life, witness, and mission in the world is given to us freely in baptism. From baptism the various orders of ministry flow and it's the baptized these orders exist to serve. And back to baptism, to our freely-given baptismal identity, the Eucharist and other rites like corporate and private confession, the funeral rite with its use of the pall, paschal candle, and opening thanksgiving for baptism, lead and direct us. Indeed, while baptism happens personally to individuals, it is never a privatized, individualistic thing, but, rather, it is an ecclesial-corporate event, as that community called Church continues to be birthed and formed in the font. And it is an ecumenical, not a denominational or even only a parish event. We are not baptized Lutherans, Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, or any such denominational creatures. We are baptized into the one Body of Christ, the corporate Christ, into the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, constituting what Dietrich Bonhoeffer once referred to as "Christ existing as community."⁴ In his study of liturgical ecclesiology, *Holy People*, Gordon Lathrop asked: "If Baptism constitutes the assembly that is the church, ought not the Christians in a given locality enact that truth? Can we not do much of the process of Baptism together? Could a renewed catechumenate be undertaken by many or even all of the Christian assemblies in a given local place? Could we be present at each other's baptisms? Could we do baptisms on the great feasts and do them side by side? Could we even consider

⁴Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*

constructing a single font for the local churches in our towns and cities?”⁵ And it was Walter Cardinal Kasper who suggested a few years back even that the time was ripe for the development of an ecumenical catechism among Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists and members of the Reformed churches, based on "an ecumenism of basics that identifies, reinforces and deepens the common foundation." of faith in Christ and belief in the tenets of the creed.”⁶

There is no question but that the “liturgical rank and dignity” of Baptism, at least as stated and expressed in LBW, is clearly in continuity with the overall theological focus of the New Testament. All four of the Gospels begin the narrative of Christ’s adult life at the Jordan with his baptism by John (Mark 1:9-11; Matthew 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-22; and John 1:29-34), a baptism that Christian initiation scholars interpret as reflecting Christian baptisms themselves in the late first century, with an emphasis on baptism as new birth in water and the Spirit, becoming sons and daughters of God in Christ the Son.⁷ Is this not done deliberately so that the meal fellowships, those banquet societies, of the early Christians themselves might see their own baptisms as constituting their foundational identity in Christ? Further, the Gospels themselves tend to be just as concerned about baptism as they are about Jesus’ meal practices. In Matthew’s “Great Commission” (Matthew 28) it is **baptism** and catechesis that is commanded by the risen Christ as the Matthean Church moves into the Gentile world. In Mark **baptism** is Jesus’ interpretative word about the cross and the meal in chapter 10:35ff where he asks James and John whether they are able to share his baptism and drink his cup. Baptism is so important in the Gospel of John that Jesus is presented three times as a baptizer himself (John 3:22, 26, and 4:1),

⁵Gordon Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), pp. 146-147.

⁶ “Cardinal Asks Dialogue Partners If an Ecumenical Catechism Might Work,” *Catholic News Service* (Feb. 8, 2010) at <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1000540.htm>.

⁷See my *Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation*, second, revised edition (Collegeville; The Liturgical Press, Pueblo,

and, if not Jesus himself, as John 4:2 says, there can be no question but that the Fourth Gospel certainly associates Jesus and his disciples as part of a baptizing movement akin to that of John the Baptist and his disciples. And on Pentecost in Acts 2, the only major festival that the New Testament ever associates with baptism, Peter says in response to the question, “what shall we do?” that they should “repent and be baptized,” and three thousand, we are told, took him up on his offer that day. It was only *after* their baptism, Luke tells us, that “they devoted themselves to” those liturgical activities of “the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). And, in spite of the fact that St. Paul had plenty to say about Eucharistic malpractice in Corinth, there is no question but that his own theology is baptismal to the core. The classic text illustrating this, of course, is Romans 6, quoted by Luther in his *Small Catechism*. For Paul, while he does not ignore other approaches, baptism is really about our participation in the death and burial of Christ in the *hope* of our ultimate resurrection in Him. Clearly for him, the profound reality of baptism means that whatever our life is now after baptism or whatever it will be at the resurrection, it is this death and burial, this participation in *Christ’s* crucifixion, death, and burial that marks our present, we might say cruciform, existence in the world as the cross of Christ itself continues to characterize and shape that existence. It is not surprising even that his theological statement on the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians 11, is about *death*, about the cross, “for as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 cor. 11:26). While this baptismal reality certainly gives rise to those powerful metaphors of conversion to Christ, of constant dying to sin and being raised up to walk in newness of life with and in Christ, of putting to death the “old Adam,” of being “clothed with Christ,” of being born anew, born from above through water and the Spirit, the washing of regeneration, and of a life of continual and ongoing conversion, repentance, and renewal, one

thing is most certainly clear. For St. Paul, the baptized are already “dead” and “buried.” Whatever the future holds in Christ, because of baptism, death itself is a reality and experience already *behind* us! And that has profound consequences for how the baptized face and embrace the post-baptismal life itself in their cruciform journey toward the resurrection. For, because of Baptism, Christians are formed and commissioned to be in the world as Christ was in the world, as one who came to serve others and not be served by others. The ethic of life then flowing from Baptism is nothing other than life lived in Christ, a life which is to be life lived for others! Is it any wonder Kevin Seasoltz, OSB once said, “if the early Church had used the terminology of ‘Blessed Sacrament’ it would have been in reference to Baptism and not to the Eucharist,” which, by the way, is how Luther entitles his 1519 Treatise on Baptism (“The Blessed Sacrament of Baptism”). Is there any doubt that for the Gospel writers and for St Paul baptism is foundational to life in Christ in the first place? This baptismal cruciform life in the world under the cross of Christ which continues to characterize and shape that life is what the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist – that ongoing proclamation of the Lord’s death -- are to nourish and sustain.

I have spent time on this, trying to articulate a rather traditional Lutheran baptismal theology as expressive of our principle of “*Ecclesia semper reformanda*,” for the simple reason that it appears increasingly that we cannot take this for granted any longer even among Lutherans. Make no mistake. Our Lutheran baptismal theology is being challenged at its roots by those who believe that with regard to baptism what “*Ecclesia semper reformanda*” might actually mean for today is that it is time to “reform” our baptismal theology and practice so that it is no longer viewed as foundational and primary, as the inception of our common life in Christ, but that it is the culmination of conversion, even *after* having received the Eucharist on an

occasional or regular basis, based often on questionable assumptions about the meal practices of the historical Jesus. In fact, The House of Bishops of The Episcopal Church, originally deciding to affirm the classic catholic tradition in this regard, voted in 2015 *by only two votes* not to re-open the conversation.⁸ You can bet it will come up again. Further, 70% of the parishes in the Episcopal Diocese of New York, for example, invite all to the table, baptized or not.⁹ The ELCA decided in 2015 as well not to pursue this further.¹⁰ But conversations in the ELCA, under the terminology of “radical hospitality,” are also continuing, and both communions, including other ELCA partner churches, find a number of adherents not only arguing for significant change in this regard but already putting this into liturgical practice. This affects all of us Lutherans and, hence, underscores our need to attend to our classic and confessional baptismal theology.

I have spoken on this issue frequently elsewhere, both at the 2018 Institute of Liturgical Studies at Valparaiso and, later that fall, at the 2018 meeting of the Anglican Society of Catholic Priests in New York City. Permit me to summarize a bit what I said about this in those two addresses. First, with regard to the so-called inclusive meal practices of the so-called historical Jesus, in response to those “who,” in Frank Senn’s word, “are intent on doing what they think Jesus would have done” in their “radical hospitality,” it needs to be said that we don’t really know *what* Jesus did or would have done and that speculation about whether the historical Jesus invited “everybody” to the table and that this should then serve as a model for contemporary Eucharistic practice is precisely that, *speculation*. In fact, as Gordon Lathrop has noted, we really have no idea at all about the meals of the Christian communities before 1 Corinthians 11.¹¹

⁸ See <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2012/07/25/baptism-before-communion-is-still-churchs-norm/>

⁹ Church of St. Mary the Virgin, *The Angelus* 19, 43 (September 17, 2017). Available at: <http://www.stmvin.org/the-angelus-our-newsletter/2017/9/15/volume-19-number-43>.

¹⁰ See Kevin Strickland, “Table and Font: Who is Welcome?” Report to the ELCA Church Council (November 2015).

¹¹ Lathrop, *The Four Gospels on Sunday*, 55.

And while the meal described therein is certainly inclusive of rich and poor (or was supposed to be, at least), it is the rich and poor who, in the wider context of 1 Corinthians, are clearly part of the baptized and, in fact, Paul assumes he is writing to the baptized Christians of Corinth at the beginning of his letter.

Further, even those several meal settings in the Gospels that many want to take as evidence of Jesus' own inclusive, egalitarian table fellowship, as Andrew McGowan has demonstrated, show Jesus generally not as *host* but rather as *guest* at the meals of others.¹² And even with regard to those meal contexts where Jesus does assume the role of host (e.g., his feeding miracles and the Emmaus account in Luke 24), Michael Tuck has written that:

[I]n all of these stories, *before we have the feeding*, we have responses to Jesus on the part of those who later become the participants in the meal. The response could be curiosity, as it was among the crowds. It could be repentance.... or it could be divine inspiration and love as it was in the story of the road to Emmaus. It could be any of these reactions and more, but the stories indicate that some sort of reaction or response to the person of Jesus comes before the invitation to the messianic banquet.... Meals also appear prominently in Jesus' teaching, most notably in the image of the wedding feast.... Again, these stories seem to tell us about a radical invitation offered to those who ordinarily would not be invited. But this invitation is not without some qualifications; we must respond appropriately to the invitation."¹³

And, again it is McGowan who underscores the fact that one must be *very* cautious about basing current sacramental and liturgical practice on a reconstruction of what the historical Jesus may or

¹² Andrew McGowan, "The Meals of Jesus and the Meals of the Church: Eucharistic Origins and Admission to Communion," in Maxwell E. Johnson and L. Edward Phillips (eds.), *Studia Liturgica Diversa: Essays in Honor of Paul F. Bradshaw* (Portland: The Pastoral Press, 2004), 101-116. See also the helpful essay by Jan Michael Joncas, "Tasting the Kingdom of God: The Meal Ministry of Jesus and Its Implications for Contemporary Worship and Life," *Worship* 74, 4 (2000), 329-65.

¹³ Michael Tuck, "Who is Invited to the Feast? A Critique of the Practice of Communion without Baptism," *Worship* 86, 6 (2012): 505-27, here at 520-21. [Emphasis added].

may not have done,¹⁴ especially since the very communities which have preserved these meal stories of Jesus do not express that emphasis many want them to today.

Second, Mennonite author Alan Kreider has drawn attention to the following characteristic of liturgy in early Christianity, demonstrating, in fact, that the unbaptized were not even part of the Eucharistic assembly:

Christian worship was designed to enable *Christians* to worship God. *It was not designed to attract non-Christians*; it was *not “seeker-sensitive.”* For seekers were not allowed in...Christian worship...assisted in the outreach of the churches indirectly, as a by-product, by shaping the lives and character of individual Christians and their communities so that they would be intriguing.¹⁵

And there is a decided logic to this. For, as ELCA liturgical theologian Thomas Schattauer at Wartburg Seminary has written:

When we are committed to the baptismal logic of participation at Holy Communion, we are not committed to enforcing a rule about who is qualified to receive but to communicating persuasively the deep relation between welcome to the table and the welcome to baptism. When we understand that participation in the supper involves a person in a costly discipleship in the way of Jesus, we are committed to inviting people into the baptismal community that shares that life.¹⁶

Hence, a focus on Baptism as a pre-requisite to Eucharistic participation is hardly exclusionary as many are suggesting today; *au contraire*, it is radically inclusionary, the most radical hospitality leading to the Eucharistic table that can be imagined, since, according to St Paul, it is *Baptism* that constitutes the Church in which “there is no longer Jew or Greek...slave or free...male or female” (Galatians 3:28). The unbaptized are not excluded; Baptism is the way

¹⁴See Andrew McGowan, “The Meals of Jesus and the Meals of the Church: Eucharistic Origins and Admission to Communion,” in Maxwell E. Johnson and L. Edward Phillips (eds.), *Studia Liturgica Diversa: Essays in Honor of Paul F. Bradshaw* (Portland: The Pastoral Press, 2004), 101-116.

¹⁵Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 14. [emphasis added]

¹⁶Thomas Schattauer, “Table and font: Who is welcome? An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion,” available at: http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Schattauer_Thomas.pdf

they are included, unless we refuse to accept our biblical and confessional normative theology and practice here.

So, if we apply our principle “*Ecclesia semper reformanda*” to the question of baptism, what then needs to be reformed today? Certainly not the rites themselves, other than perhaps some cosmetic changes here and there. No! The Lutheran baptismal rites in all of our books, including rites for the catechumenate, are alive and well, thank you very much. What needs to be reformed today is what appears to be a reluctance to embrace Baptism as foundational to our existence and, so, what is needed is a radical re-commitment to our classic Lutheran baptismal theology. If the 1978 *Lutheran Book of Worship*, embraced the clear and central goal of restoring “to Holy Baptism the liturgical rank and dignity implied by Lutheran theology, and to draw out the baptismal motifs in such acts as the confession of sin and the burial of the dead,” then, it is now time for the *lex orandi* of those baptismal rites and motifs to re-shape and reform our appropriation of the rank and dignity of baptism in our theology and ministries. Clearly this means attending carefully to how those rites are employed and celebrated among us. Here I can indicate only a few ways to do this, and none of these will surprise you I suspect.

First, let us commit ourselves to use the baptismal rites of the Church in their fullness. Why would we want to create local adaptations of baptism and not want to use the Flood Prayer, the chrism, the garment, and the baptismal candle lighted from the Easter candle with their rich symbolism? How could Lutherans possibly not use the baptismal garment, when it was so near and dear to Luther’s own heart as the sign of being clothed in Christ’s own righteousness in baptism? If you don’t know how to use chrism, or don’t want to pour it on the heads of the newly baptized, go get an oil stock from a church supply store marked SC (for “sacred chrism,” not OI, for “oil of the infirm”), and ask a local Roman Catholic or Episcopal priest how to set it

up. I was ordained in 1978, the same year that LBW was published and in my first call in a rural parish in southern MN, when the congregation purchased and began using it. I had a pretty good sense of what I was doing liturgically, with a solid background at Wartburg seminary and from the Dominicans down the road at Aquinas Institute, but I still needed help on a couple of things. So I bought an oil stock from St Patrick's Guild in St Paul, MN, as I suggested, and then I called up my friend, Father Jim, and asked something which in retrospect seems to me rather forward and presumptuous now, but it didn't to him apparently. I said, "Jim, do you have any chrism I can have?" His immediate response was "Yes, come on in to town with your oil stock and I'll get you fixed up." So I did. He showed me how to fill it with both cotton and chrism and basically how to apply it with my thumb. Now, neither of us ever had a theological conversation about this and I never told my congregation the source of the baptismal oil I used. But, everyone I baptized in that parish was anointed with chrism that had been consecrated by the bishop of the local Roman Catholic diocese at the previous Chrism Mass, the same oil that was being used in both baptisms and confirmations in every Roman Catholic parish in that diocese. And since the formula for that anointing in LBW and ELW is "N., child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit, and marked with the cross of Christ forever," parallel to the Roman Catholic confirmation formula, "N. be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit," later in life I've often wondered if in the baptisms I administered I had actually confirmed the newly baptized as Roman Catholics. Nevertheless, we must attend to the rites of the Church and their rubrics or all kinds of strange things can happen, e.g., Baptism administered by using a rose to sprinkle the candidate; Baptism administered by the use of a single finger dipped into the font and onto the forehead of the candidate three times, without a danger of anyone actually getting wet. Even the trinitarian formula of baptism has become a subject for debate or local revision in the name of

Unitarian inclusivity (e.g., "I baptize you in the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier," or "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, the God who is *Mother* of us all"), both of which challenge the Trinitarian focus of baptism. As it says on a mug once given me by the late Sister Eleanor Bernstein of the Center for Pastoral Liturgy at Notre Dame, "Stand up for your Rites (R I T E S)." Or, as I have seen elsewhere, "join the revolution: Support the Liturgy." Indeed, we must stand up for the baptismal rites in their fullness and not tinker with their theology in the name of some ideology of inclusivity rather than catholicity.

Second, and I hope I am wrong about this, but my assumption is that the Paschal Triduum has yet to be even *experienced* by the majority of Lutheran clergy much less instituted as the annual center of parish life gathered around the Light of Christ risen from death, the watery stories of salvation history, the font, and the Altar, after a Lent of baptismal-oriented renewal and with the Easter Vigil as prime time for both infant and adult baptisms and for the affirmation of baptism by the whole assembly. Increasingly, I hear liturgically-minded Lutherans speaking of "The Three Days," but it is not always clear to me what they mean, whether Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday, or, as is at least officially made clear, the three days extending from the eve of Maundy Thursday until the eve of Easter Sunday, with the Easter Vigil itself becoming the celebration of Easter *par excellence*, so central, in fact, that it makes any liturgy on Easter Sunday morning rather redundant and unnecessary. Come back Easter Sunday evening at the close of the Triduum for Solemn Easter Vespers.

EASTER -- PASCHA

1. PASCHAL MYSTERY - JESUS' DEATH, RESURRECTION, GIFT OF THE SPIRIT - CENTER OF LIFE IN CHRIST

2. EASTER - PASCHA: CENTER OF LITURGICAL YEAR

3. BEGINS ON HOLY ("MAUNDY") THURSDAY NIGHT AND ENDS ON EASTER SUNDAY NIGHT

4. ONE CONTINUOUS LITURGY FOR THESE THREE DAYS CALLED EASTER OR PASCHAL "TRIDUUM"

5. HOLY OR MAUNDY THURSDAY - ABSOLUTION, FOOTWASHING (LORD'S SUPPER is secondary addition)

6. GOOD FRIDAY - LITURGY OF THE LORD'S PASSION IS CENTRAL - PASSION ACCORDING TO JOHN, SOLEMN PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION, VENERATION OF THE CROSS (Communion Service from Reserved Sacrament is secondary)

7. EASTER/PASCHAL VIGIL ON HOLY SATURDAY NIGHT - SERVICE OF LIGHT, SERVICE OF OLD TESTAMENT READINGS, SERVICE OF BAPTISM AND AFFIRMATION OF BAPTISM, EUCHARIST. THIS IS EASTER!!! THE CHRISTIAN PASSOVER!!!

8. EASTER SUNDAY AS THE "FIRST" OF "FIFTY" DAYS CULMINATING IN "PENTECOST," THE 50th DAY; ONE GREAT BIG SUNDAY THAT LASTS FOR FIFTY DAYS

9. SIGNIFICANT MOMENTS IN THE 50 DAYS:

- Doubting Thomas on Easter 2
- Good Shepherd on Easter 4
- Ascension Thursday on the 40th Day
- Gift of the Spirit, the very fruit of Jesus' death and resurrection for us on the 50th Day

We still need experiential workshops on all this for clergy and parish worship committees, sponsored and funded by Synods and Districts with competent and trained people leading them, or, perhaps better, if you can afford the time, maybe on some kind of sabbatical), at least once in your life, go spend the Paschal Triduum in a Benedictine monastery somewhere. After all, it was the Benedictine-led Liturgical movement in Europe and then in the United States that actually led the way toward the restoration of all of this. And to this day there is no place I would rather be for the Triduum than at Saint John's Abbey, Collegeville, MN.

Third, and closely related to the Triduum, especially the Paschal Vigil, of course, is how we keep and celebrate the forty days of Lent. Instead of turning Lent into an elongated Passion narrative with a Wednesday night sermon series on the Seven Last Words of Jesus singing over and over again “Oh Sacred Head,” “Go to Dark Gethsemane,” or “Were You There?” (to which, by the way, the only correct answer is “No, I wasn’t”), we need to recover the baptismal orientation of the forty days, which actually extend from the first Sunday in Lent, *Quadragesima*, until the evening of Maundy Thursday. And, yes, Sundays *are* counted as part of the 40, but since Sundays were never fast days, four days were added before Lent properly began on the Sunday. Patrick Regan summarizes the baptismal focus of Lent in the following manner:

The purpose and character of Lent are entirely derived from the great festival for which it prepares. The Pasch is not only an annual celebration of the passion and passage of Christ, but it is for Christians...the yearly reminder of their own incorporation into the paschal event through baptism. Consequently, the approach of the Pasch renews in the memory of all the faithful their commitment to live the new life of him who for their sake was crucified, buried, and raised.¹⁷

Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that the very origins of what comes to be the pre-paschal Lent are to be found in distinct baptismal preparation periods in early Christianity – three weeks in several places either before Easter or other feasts, and 40 days in Alexandria Egypt associated with the feast of the Epiphany or Theophany – which become synthesized after the Council of Nicea. That is, if Holy Week developed in relationship to Pascha, what we know as Lent developed because of its relationship to baptismal preparation. When Easter became the preferred day for Baptism in the late fourth century, Lent developed as a pre-Paschal period. If the character of Lent is baptismal in orientation then part of our recovery of Baptism as central to

¹⁷ Regan, “The Three Days and The Forty Days,” 129.

our focus, "*Ecclesia semper reformanda*" must include our attention to the season of Lent as a time both for the preparation of catechumens and for the annual affirmation of baptism for all of the faithful.

"LENT" IS NOT AND IS:

IS NOT:	IS:
A 40-Day Good Friday The 7 Last Words of Jesus from the cross	BAPTISMAL in FOCUS A Time of Baptismal Preparation for catechumens
A Continual Reading of the Passion of Jesus	A Time of Preparation for Baptismal Renewal for All
A Time to Focus on the suffering of Jesus	A Time to be Reconciled with God and Others
A Dramatic Re-enactment of Jesus' Last Days	A Time to Reflect on OUR death and Resurrection in Christ through Baptism
	A Time for Prayer, Fasting, and Works of Love (alms)

I can do no better here than to draw your attention to the Sunday Lenten Lectionary for Year A in the Revised Common Lectionary. We read the text of the Temptation of Jesus in the desert on Lent I for the simple reason that this is the day in the Roman Rite that candidates were elected for Easter Baptism and that the next forty days would be given over to their final preparation and testing. On Lent II we hear expressed to Nicodemus the Johannine theology of

baptism as rebirth or “birth from above through water and the Holy Spirit,” and on Lent III, IV, and V we hear of the “living water” promised to the Samaritan woman at the well, the washing of the man born blind in Siloam, and the raising to life of Lazarus, in relationship to the historic scrutinies and the giving over of the Creed and the Lord’s prayer to those preparing for Easter baptism. This is all about baptism and baptism is thus the homiletic focus of this entire season.

**SUNDAYS OF LENT -
YEAR A GOSPELS FROM THE
REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY (RCL)**

LENT I: Matthew 4:1-11 (Temptation of Jesus)

LENT II: John 3:1-17 ("New Birth" Through Water and the Spirit)

LENT III: John 4:5-42 (Samaritan Woman - "Living Water")

LENT IV: John 9:1-41 (Man Born Blind - "Go to Siloam and Wash")

LENT V: John 11:1-45 (Raising of Lazarus - "Death and Resurrection")

OVERALL FOCUS: Preparation of "Catechumens" for Baptism/ Confirmation and First Communion at the Great Vigil of Easter and Preparation of the "Faithful" for Renewing their Baptisms at the Easter Vigil

With regard to preaching, let me draw attention to the recent and excellent book of my colleague, Michael Connors, CSC, *Preaching for Discipleship: Preparing Homilies for Christian Initiation*, published by Liturgy Training Publications.

Fourth, attending to the baptismal focus and orientation of Lent, of course, means also attending to the baptismal catechumenate itself. Our own inter-Lutheran resource, *Welcome to Christ*, together with other ecumenical resources, including the *Roman Catholic Rites of Initiation of Adults* (hereafter, RCIA), provide us with a way to do what one might certainly call a liturgical evangelism which is rooted in Word and Sacrament and leads to Word and Sacrament. Hospitality to strangers and seekers is *not* inviting everyone to share in the Eucharist as part of a “radical hospitality,” nor is it exchanging the liturgy of the Church for “seeker services,” or what might be called “entertainment evangelism.” And, indeed, a steady diet of entertainment liturgy can so easily degenerate into entertainment based Christianity (a talk-show or variety show form of Christian worship) so much so that no catholic substance of the faith – Creed, confession, and cult – remains. How we pray shapes how we believe. *Ut legem credendi statuatur lex supplicandi*. The way we pray and supplicate God shapes how – and what – we believe. And when we lose that connection between our worship and our faith our so-called faith is in danger of being disconnected from that very Word and Sacrament sources of Christian faith. In the conclusion of his magisterial *Christian Liturgy: Evangelical and Catholic*, Frank Senn noted several years ago that:

...the church must provide what people lack in order to offer meaning for their lives: a narratable world - a worldview that provides coherent meaning and a way of enacting it. If the world has come apart in postmodern nihilism, the church must redo the world. It must provide an aimless present with a usable past and a hope-filled future....And if we face in our society's religiosity a gnostic tendency to seek to escape from the threats of natural decay, temporal limitations, and political responsibility, *this can be at least countered with attention to the sacramental life, the historic liturgy, and traditional ecclesiastical polity*.¹⁸

My former student, Tim O'Malley, in his recent book, *Divine Blessing: Liturgical Formation in the RCIA*, has said on this issue: “If we want evangelizing liturgies, the ones that will attract

¹⁸ F. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis 1997), p. 698 [emphasis added].

seekers off the street, celebrating good, ‘provocative’ liturgies are key – liturgies that place at the center God’s salvific activity rather than the priest, the choir, or the assembly. It is precisely this kind of liturgy that will lead seekers to take a second look at the church.”¹⁹ Along similar lines, the great British Methodist liturgical theologian Geoffrey Wainwright has said that “without the heartbeat of the sacraments at its center, a church will lack confidence about the gospel message and about its own ability to proclaim that message in evangelism, to live it out in its own internal fellowship, and to embody it in service to the needy.”²⁰ And, elsewhere he writes that: “[a] deeper replunging into its own tradition will...be necessary if the church is to survive in recognizable form, particularly in our western culture.”²¹ Attending to the catechumenate is a powerful way of making the “heartbeat of the sacraments at the center” of the Church’s life., of inviting those who, attracted to the Church, might want to take that second look at what this is all about. As several of our Roman Catholic colleagues, based on their experience with the RCIA, can testify, in those places where the adult catechumenate leading to full Christian initiation in water, chrism, and eucharistic table at Easter has been restored, and along with it the immense variety of lay ministries needed (e.g., catechists, sponsors, and the role of the entire faith community in general) to lead and assist in such a process of conversion, parishes themselves have experienced a renewal in faith and life, the recovery of the dignity of their Baptism, and a renewed sense of their own identity as Church, as the Body of Christ on mission in the world. In reference specifically to the restored Roman Catholic RCIA, Aidan Kavanagh wrote that What the

¹⁹ Timothy O’Malley, *Divine Blessing: Liturgical Formation in the RCIA* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2019), 24.

²⁰ G. Wainwright, "The Sacraments in Wesleyan Perspective," in Idem, *Worship with One Accord: Where Liturgy & Ecumenism Embrace* (New York: Oxford, 1998), 106.

²¹ G. Wainwright, "Renewing Worship: The Recovery of Classical Patterns," in Idem, *Worship with One Accord: Where Liturgy & Ecumenism Embrace*, (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 138.

Roman documents contain are not merely specific changes in liturgical rubrics, but a restored and unified vision of the Church." He continues:

One may turn an altar around and leave *reform* at that. But one cannot set an adult catechumenate in motion without becoming necessarily involved with *renewal* in the ways a local church lives its faith from top to bottom. For members of an adult catechumenate must be secured through evangelization; they must be formed to maturity in ecclesial faith through catechesis both prior to baptism and after it; and there must be something to initiate them into that will be correlative to the expectations built up in them throughout their whole initiatory process. This last means a community of lively faith in Jesus Christ dead, risen, and present actually among his People. In this area, when one change occurs, all changes.²²

That possibility awaits us as Lutherans as well, if, in the words of George Lindbeck, "rather than present *experience* being allowed to hold sway over the inherited tradition," we allow "the inherited *tradition* to shape and govern present experience." Even if rooted in the answers of the Church in a much older historical context, the modern recovery of this patristic-based baptismal process can not be written off today as mere "Golden Age Romanticism" on the part of modern "High Church" armchair liturgists who might like to dress up in ancient costumes and "play Church." [And let's be honest here. Some of us really like to do that don't we, and I include myself here?] But the increasing numbers of unbaptized and/or "unchurched" adults today would seem, just as it did in the context of the fourth and fifth centuries, to call the Church to assist in the evangelization and formation of new Christians with authenticity and integrity... The need for an adult catechumenal process of formation should become increasingly obvious to us. The issue is evangelism and formation in Christ and the Church. And the great gift of our classic liturgical tradition is that we don't have to invent a new process for this but can receive it from our ancestors in the faith most gratefully. And here let me bring to your attention the important work on the catechumenate in various Missouri Synod parishes being undertaken today by Kent

²²Aidan Kavanagh, "Christian Initiation in Post-Conciliar Catholicism: A Brief Report," LWSS, 8-9.

Burreson at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., and Rhoda Schuler of Concordia College, St. Paul, MN, both of whom are former students of mine I am proud to say.

But let me say here that the restoration of the catechumenate is not some kind of parish renewal program for the sake of those already baptized who want to make a renewed commitment to the faith as it is being used and promoted in some Lutheran places today by those who refer to themselves even as “catechumenate junkies,” both promoters and graduates of these new parish programs. Nor was the restored catechumenate designed for what Mark Searle called “switchers,” rather than “joiners,” that is, for those who want to make a switch from one Christian denomination to another turning the Easter Vigil into what I have called an “Ecclesial Musical Chairs Night,” or “New Members Night.” No, both the Easter Vigil and the adult catechumenate are about Baptism! It must not be forgotten that the origins of the restoration of the adult catechumenate in Roman Catholicism and by extension for the rest of us, are to be found within the various attempts of missionaries in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, especially in Africa, to prepare adult converts for the full rites of Christian initiation. Similarly, with regard to the RCIA itself, the intent of this restored catechumenate is also for the conversion of the unbaptized. In other words, the adult catechumenate as envisioned by the RCIA is *pre-baptismal* in nature and orientation and *not* designed with the reception or transfer of Christians from one ecclesial tradition to another in mind, although this is frequently abused. We do well, therefore, to attend carefully to the following words of Aidan Kavanagh in this context: “The RCIA is *not* directed to the already baptized as its objects. *The RCIA is directed basically to the never baptized...* The never baptized are our fundamental evangelical and catechetical challenge to be faithful to God’s grace in them. Hold on to that thought.” As part of our goal of ongoing reform and renewal, “*Ecclesia semper reformanda*,” restore the

catechumenate but restore it and employ it as intended, as the process leading to baptism and Eucharist.

Fifth and finally, there are several other baptismal-related rites and ceremonies in our contemporary liturgy books that I believe should be used in as full a way as possible in our liturgies. ELW can be criticized in various ways (and I have done so repeatedly), but why would we not use the Thanksgiving for Baptism with its accompanying Sprinkling Rite as the opening rite for all 7 Sundays of Easter, Pentecost, and Trinity Sunday? Use a bowl of water and pine branches for this or purchase an honest to goodness aspergillum set for this and other events, like sprinkling the casket at funerals. If you do purchase one, make sure before using it you unscrew the top, put in a small sponge to soak up as much water as possible, and screw it back on tightly so as to avoid knocking anyone out during the rite. BTW, I am told that loosening the top was an old trick by Catholic altar boys so that someone would indeed get hit on the head. Together with this why would we not use a funeral pall on the casket to make the associations with the baptismal garment unmistakably clear? Why would we not place the font at the entrance to our worship spaces, rather than in its Calvinist position in the front, complete with water in it at all times, so that one cannot get into church without passing the font, and from where the Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness is led? Indeed, our liturgy books are filled with baptismal images and opportunities. Our only task is to let them speak clearly and fully.

Conclusion

“Ecclesia semper reformanda,” can be viewed, I have suggested, as a “baptismal principle *par excellence*, directing our attention back to the font where true life in Christ always begins. But there is nothing in our baptismal rites that really needs ongoing reform. Rather, as I

have argued repeatedly, our baptismal and related rites, to quote again LBW, were consciously formed so as to restore “to Holy Baptism the liturgical rank and dignity implied by Lutheran theology.” What needs reform, in light of the fact that today our Lutheran baptismal theology is being challenged at its roots even by Lutherans, is our full, active, and conscious reclaiming of our baptismal identity in Christ as formative of who we are in Christ. It is baptism that makes us Christians. Episcopal liturgical scholar Lizette Larson-Miller in her provocative essay, “Baptismal Ecclesiology without Baptism? Conflicting Trends in Contemporary Sacramental Theology,” strongly underscores our common tradition here saying:

Inclusion in the waters of Baptism and *then* joining in the breaking of bread and pouring of wine into the breaking of body and pouring of blood is *radical* hospitality: to be this for the world, to do this for the world, and to dare to enter the liturgy of the world, having known Christ in the breaking of bread, in order to be broken and poured out for the good of the world. It is *generous* hospitality, catholic, not tribal, to be this for the whole church and for the whole world and to have the wisdom to discern the difference between necessary inculturation and cultural practices antithetical to the gospel. It is *efficacious* hospitality: to invite the non-baptized to come and see, to listen as strangers tell their stories and to weave those stories together with the stories of the gospel, and to show catechumens the way in which the church opens our eyes to the presence of God who is always before us. This is *hospitality*: to return to a graceful and gracious catechumenate, not to react to some of the more insidious cultural assumptions regarding instant gratification. Discipleship, Baptism, Eucharist – in this time between the Ascension and the Parousia – are something we strive toward, but strive with cost, supputing one another as we together move deeper into the mystery of God’s *oikonomia*.²³

I can think of no better way to end this talk than with her words.

Thank you.

²³Larson-Miller, 91.