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The Postconciliar Infant Baptism Debate In the American Catholic Church

The Second Vatican Council had no intention of abolishing the practice of infant baptism. While calling for revision in the rite of infant baptism, the Council clearly assumed that the practice would continue. The decision to restore the catechumenate for adults likewise gave no indication that the restored adult catechumenate would alter the practice of baptizing infants. These relatively innocent declarations of the Council did, however, give rise to a plethora of speculation about the advisability of infant baptism in the postconciliar Church. The phenomena of dechristianization and secularization in Western Europe prompted Catholic writers there to question seriously the custom of baptizing infants when the likelihood of the child ever being confirmed or receiving first Eucharist was minimal. Indeed, the pastoral situation of the European Church demanded that its baptismal policy be reevaluated.¹

Prior to and during the Council, the question of infant baptism had not been a major issue in the American Catholic Church. The years immediately after Vatican II witnessed a slight increase in American Catholic concern with the question, although it by no means rivaled the discussions in France. It was not until the late sixties that American Catholic literature on the question of infant

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¹ See, for example, J. C. Didier, *Faut-il baptiser les enfants?* (Paris 1967); C. Pape, "Problemática acerca del bautismo de párvulos," *Teología y vida* 8 (1967) 291-299; B. Roy, "L'Eglise et le baptême des enfants," *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 52 (1968) 677-697; *Christsein ohne Entscheidung, oder Soll die Kirche Kinder taufen?* ed. W. Kasper (Verlag 1970); K. Aland, *Taufe und Kindertaufe* (1971); D. Grasso, *Dobbiamo ancora battezzare i bambini?* (Assisi 1972); R.-M. Roberge, "Un tournant dans la pastorale du baptême," *Laval Théologique et Philosophique*, 31 (1975) 227-238 and 33 (1977) 3-22.

baptism even began to appear,² and it did not become a serious question of debate among Catholic writers in the United States until the early seventies.³ This seems to reflect the fact that the Church in the United States did not face the same pastoral dilemma that the Church in France, for instance, faced. Indeed, the United States did not undergo the radical dechristianization that European countries underwent.⁴

This essay will examine the major arguments and thoughts on the advisability of the practice of infant baptism in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, as expressed in the writings of American Catholics from 1965 to 1980. It will cover the fifteen year period from the end of the Second Vatican Council in 1965 to the publication of the instruction on infant baptism by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in late 1980.

It is evident from a review of American Catholic literature on infant baptism in this period that certain positions appeared repeatedly in the writings of different authors. This is not to say that individual presentations of these positions did not differ; indeed, authors tended to continually develop the arguments that had been previously presented. However, one can discern several key arguments that were basically constant throughout this period. Specifically, the important and unique contributions of the many writers involved in this debate can be reduced to four positions. Each one of these positions represents common perceptions of ecclesiology, faith and baptism, while individual adherents to each position suggest various solutions and recommendations for future practice.

The first two positions which will be discussed were the two most thoroughly developed in this time period, and will be classified (borrowing the terms assigned them by Nathan Mitchell⁵) as the "mature adulthood school" and the "environmentalist school." The

² The earliest postconciliar American Catholic writings I could find that dealt directly with the question of infant baptism were from 1968: C. Kiesling, "Infant Baptism," *Worship* 42, 617-626; P. Sherwood, "Introduction," *Resonance*, no. 6 (1968) 5-8; "Pastoral Problem of Infant Baptism," *Resonance*, no. 6, 122-127.

³ The sheer difference in numbers is representative of the relative seriousness of the issue: seven writings on the topic appeared in the seven years after the Council (1965-1971), whereas thirty-nine appeared in the nine subsequent years (1972-1980).

⁴ Cf. R. Redmond, "Infant Baptism: History and Pastoral Problems," *Theological Studies* 30 (1969) 83.

⁵ Cf. N. Mitchell, "The Once and Future Child: Towards A Theology of Childhood," *Living Light* 12 (1975) 428-430.

third position, which is less an argument for or against infant baptism than it is for rejoining the rites of initiation into one integral rite at whatever age, I shall call the "initiation unity school." The fourth position, which is the least developed since it appeared rather late in the period, recognized the importance of different initiatory practices to correspond with the different ways in which people come to Christianity. I shall refer to this fourth position as the "corresponding practice school."

The term "school" is used here not to imply a group of people involved in any formal exchange of ideas and strategy, but rather to classify various authors who shared similar viewpoints and positions. While proposing these categories, I acknowledge that there is a great amount of flexibility among individual representatives of each position. For example, some authors espoused the views of more than one school, as in the case of many from the mature adulthood and environmentalist schools who also argued for the reunification of the three now separated rites of initiation, a characteristic of the initiation unity school. Furthermore, some authors could not be considered in the "main line" of the school to which they were most closely associated. Recognizing these limitations, I propose these four categories as a summary of the most important positions developed in this period.

THE MATURE ADULTHOOD SCHOOL

The mature adulthood school⁶ was present in varying degrees throughout the postconciliar years. Its foundations lay in the concerns of the late sixties about the apparent incongruity of baptizing infants who were incapable of faith, and the proposals to delay confirmation to a later age when those receiving the sacrament could be responsible for a commitment to a more mature faith. In the very last months of 1980, tenets of this school drew official criticism from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, an action which indirectly served to acknowledge that this had become a serious position in Catholic baptismal thought.

Essentially, the proposals of the mature adulthood school de-

⁶ I would list the following as representative of the mature adulthood school: Richard Guerrette, David Grege Perrey, Aidan Kavanagh, Ralph Keifer, Charles Gusmer, the recommendations of the 1973 meeting of the North American Academy of Liturgy, and the articles in *Resonance*, no. 6 (1968), and *Made, Not Born* (Notre Dame 1970).

veloped out of a dual concern with the quality of faith in communities and the manner of celebrating baptism. Thus, the question which the authors were ultimately trying to answer was how to improve the quality of faith and church life. Indiscriminate infant baptism was criticized as a factor contributing to the existing impoverishment of church life. Indeed, the criticisms of infant baptism and the value placed on adult initiation by this school were not concerned with the rituals themselves so much as with the kind of Church that such changes in the baptismal policy could create.

The initial impetus for this school was a view of faith and Church which was presented in the documents of Vatican II. The Church in the theology of Vatican II, as Richard Guerrette summarized it, is "a community of God's chosen people who, through their faith-response to his call in Christ, are making their way as a pilgrim people toward the kingdom."⁷ Baptism in this view was seen as a faith-commitment to Christian service (i.e., *diakonia*). This view caused some initial concern over baptizing infants at all, since infants could not make such a commitment,⁸ but it soon came to focus on the community into which one was baptized, following the shift in focus from the individual to the community in the revised rite of infant baptism of 1969. Viewed in light of the definition of Church given above, many parish communities were regarded as spiritually poor. Reflecting on this communal problem, Aidan Kavanagh said that "we are, perhaps, just beginning to realize that our problem is not primarily liturgical, but social. The problem is with ourselves as a community of faith shared. Liturgical problems are mere symptoms of this more radical malaise."⁹ Kavanagh's reference to "liturgical problems" also reflected a growing dissatisfaction with the existing private and often haphazard manner of celebrating the sacrament.

The apparent "shallowness" of faith in many Christians led most of the authors of this school to focus on an act of *mature* faith as the requisite for baptism. This not only ruled out infant baptism (as did any stress on the individual's prerequisite commitment to the faith), but it also emphasized that baptism implied much more than a simple verbal profession of faith. Evidence of Christian faith in one's life, arrived at through a process of conversion, was to be the hall-

⁷ R. Guerrette, "Ecclesiology and Infant Baptism," *Worship* 44 (1970) 434.

⁸ Cf. "Pastoral Problem of Infant Baptism," *Resonance*, no. 6 (1968) 122.

⁹ A. Kavanagh, "Initiation: Baptism and Confirmation," *Worship* 46 (1972) 264.

mark of a Christian. Often, advocates of this position were working out of a frustration with what they saw to be Catholics "who had no more idea of what it means to be a Christian than the pastor's cat."¹⁰ The perfunctory manner in which infants were baptized with little concern for their subsequent Christian formation was seen to be a major cause of this situation. The proposals to remedy the situation called for a far more discriminate practice of infant baptism (i.e., baptizing only the children of "mature, adult Christians") or a total abandonment of infant baptism in favor of baptism at the personal request of an adult.) The only American Catholic author in this period who called for a total abandonment of infant baptism (writing under the name of David Greye Perrey) based his recommendation on this very reasoning.¹¹

Another concern of the mature adulthood school involved the incongruity of infant baptism in the existing sociological situation. This concern had been voiced during the sixties by writers in Western European countries, with American writers reflecting it in the seventies. Such authors¹² felt that infant baptism was defensible when the cultural structures provided an environment for Christian development, and, conversely, indefensible when these structures no longer existed. In other words, Christianity and Western cultures had been essentially coterminous for centuries during the medieval and early modern eras in Europe, while the system of parochial schools and parish organizations provided a Catholic subculture in the United States. Such situations could be relied upon as developmental environments for those baptized in infancy. When these cultural situations began to degenerate and a plurality of values and customs abounded, this reliance was no longer feasible, thus calling infant baptism into question.)

As mentioned above, only David Greye Perrey recommended the total abolition of infant baptism, while other authors of the mature adulthood school criticized particular problems in the existing practice of infant baptism. For example, following the initial emphasis on

¹⁰ Cf. D. G. Perrey, *Baptism at 21* (New York 1973) 178-179.

¹¹ Cf. D. G. Perrey, *op. cit.*, and "Let's Stop Baptizing Babies," *U.S. Catholic* 37 (1972) 14-15.

¹² Cf. R. Keifer, "Christian Initiation: The State of the Question," *Worship* 47 (1974) 396-397; A. Kavanagh, "Christian Initiation in Post-Conciliar Roman Catholicism: A Brief Report," *Studia Liturgica*, 12 (1977) 110-111; "Editorial," in D. Power and L. Maldonado (eds.), *Liturgy and Human Passage, Concilium* 112 (New York 1978) vii-viii.

personal, mature faith after Vatican II, suggestions were made to delay confirmation to a more mature age.¹³ The awareness of the adult nature of Christian faith was soon extended to baptism, resulting in the first questions about baptizing infants.¹⁴ This discussion betrayed a problematic overemphasis on the individual being baptized, and subsequent discussions noted that the real focus is on the community into which one is baptized. This same focus was evident in the Rite of Baptism for Children. Thus, although Perrey maintained that only adults can make the response in faith demanded by God's call, the majority of the mature adulthood school respected the newly reinforced focus on community faith.

The shift in focus introduced a more fundamental concern with infant baptism, and that was indiscriminate baptism when the likelihood of the child's future formation in the faith was slim. Thus arose the question of the baptism of children of "*non satis credentes* parents."¹⁵ Most authors of this school allowed for the possibility of infant baptism when there was an assurance of a future upbringing in the faith, but held that baptism should be delayed in other cases. Without such assurances of future Christian formation, the notion of God's grace and *ex opere operato* efficacy was felt to be reduced to a type of magic requiring little if anything on the part of the parents and community. While not denying the effect of divine action in baptism, such authors placed a stronger emphasis on mature, personal faith in the parents and community, and ultimately in the one being baptized.¹⁶

The criticism of particular problems associated with infant baptism developed into a more general view of infant baptism as benign but abnormal after the publication of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in 1972. Quickly, authors of this school saw in this new rite the Church's desired norm of Christian initiation.¹⁷ Noting the historical precedence for the conversion journey of the catechumenate resulting in full initiation at the paschal vigil, this school proposed

¹³ Cf. F. J. Buckley, "What Age for Confirmation?" *Theological Studies* 27 (1966) 655-666.

¹⁴ Cf. "Pastoral Problem of Infant Baptism," *art. cit.* 122.

¹⁵ Cf. Guerrette, *art. cit.* 433-437 and P. Vanbergen, "Baptism of the Infants of *non satis credentes* Parents," *Studia Liturgica* 12 (1977) 195-200.

¹⁶ Cf. Kavanagh, "Initiation: Baptism . . .," *art. cit.* 262-276.

¹⁷ Cf. J. Gallen, "American Liturgy: A Theological Locus," *Theological Studies* 35 (1974) 307.

that this process must once again become normative. If this process were to be normative, then the initiates would normally be adults. The baptism of children, in which such a catechumenal process would follow the sacrament, would have to be considered "abnormal," though licit. Advocates of this position found further evidence to support it in the typographical placement of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults before the Rite of Baptism of Children and the Rite of Confirmation. The fact that the rite for adult initiation was the last of the three initiation rites to be published was also seen as an indication of its maturity and completeness. "This rite, emerging at the end of a long process of research, consultation and collating reactions to the previously issued rites of baptism for children and confirmation by bishops, was thus the last and most mature outcome of the postconciliar subcommission's work."¹⁸ The baptism of infants was further compared by Aidan Kavanagh to the low Mass — a permissible, yet unencouraged, option.¹⁹

The influence of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults cannot be overstated in discussing the mature adulthood school. Representative authors were not emphasizing the new rite simply for its ritual elements, although they certainly favored these. What they sought was the realization of the vision of the Church contained in the rite. The Church was seen as the communion of committed persons of faith. Thus, Aidan Kavanagh stated: ". . . a Christian is a person of faith in Jesus Christ dead and risen among his faithful people. This faith is no mere poetic thing but a way of living together: it is the bond which establishes that reciprocal mutuality of relationships we call communion, and it is this communion which constitutes the ecclesial presence of Jesus Christ in the world of grace, faith, hope, charity and character. This is what the eucharist celebrates, signifies and causes within the community of the faithful: it is the church. This is what initiation in the fullest sense disciplines one for: it is the church."²⁰

Working, as they were, out of the rite for adult initiation, these authors assumed the corresponding view of the Church and the faith quality of its members. Such a Church of high-caliber, deeply

committed persons required the "discipline" of the prerequisite catechumenate and this, in turn, implied a process adapted to adults. In other words, having assumed a vision of the Church, this school proposed as normative the initiatory policy that would produce such a Church.

Baptism in the mature adulthood school thus meant something very different than it did in the environmentalist school. As initiation into the full sacramental life of the Church, baptism was, in a sense, an accomplishment. Those interested in the faith would be admitted to the Church as catechumens to begin (or continue) their faith development. Only upon reaching a level of mature, adult faith, however, would these catechumenal Christians be baptized. Using the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults as the basis for their procedure, the advocates of this position envisioned this initiation as consisting of the full initiatory rites (baptism, confirmation and Eucharist at once). Thus, although catechumens would be considered members of the Church, baptism and its admittance to the full sacramental life of the Church would signify the attainment of a certain maturity of faith as reason for full initiation.

While different reasons can be discerned for favoring this approach (e.g., frustration with baptizing the children of nonpracticing Catholics, the desire to improve the quality of faith and church life, admiration for historical precedent of adult initiation following the catechumenate), the authors of this school did not seriously differ in their arguments or proposals. All viewed the process involved in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults as normative, and were interested in a Church of actively committed Christians with a high level of personal faith. The extent to which infant baptism would be "tolerated" in this policy differed: David Grege Perrey called for its abolition, while the recommendations of the 1973 meeting of the North American Academy of Liturgy viewed it as derived from the adult form and proper for the children of "responsible Christian parents."²¹ Either way, the emphasis on adult initiation was accompanied by a marked lack of enthusiasm for infant baptism, and Perrey's proposal could be seen as simply the logical conclusion of the school's main line of thought.

THE ENVIRONMENTALIST SCHOOL

The arguments and proposals of authors representing the environ-

²¹ Cf. Gallen, *art. cit.* 307.

¹⁸ A. Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (New York 1978) 105.

¹⁹ Cf. A. Kavanagh, "The New Roman Rites of Adult Initiation," *Studia Liturgica* 10 (1974) 35.

²⁰ A. Kavanagh, "Christian Initiation of Adults: The Rites," *Worship* 48 (1974) 333.

mentalist school²² of infant baptism were very similar. The number of concerns and suggested alternatives to practice was far less than in the mature adulthood school. Essentially, the arguments of this school were strongly ecclesiological in reaction to what was perceived to be a theological poverty and pastoral inadequacy in the preconciliar practice of indiscriminate and private infant baptism. It may be noted that some of the basic concerns of the environmentalist school were the same as those of the mature adulthood school. Other concerns differed, as did the proposals for future practice.

Arguments in favor of infant baptism were reoriented in the early postconciliar years. Whereas the Augustinian concept of original sin had been the standard argument for infant baptism before Vatican II, the arguments of the environmentalist school became prevalent after the Council. This is certainly attributable in part to the lack of reference to original sin and the emphasis on the role of faith in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. "The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify men, to build up the Body of Christ, and, finally, to give worship to God. Because they are signs they also instruct. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen, and express it."²³ The mature adulthood school interpreted this passage to mean that baptism presupposes faith on the part of the person being baptized. Certainly, this emphasis on faith could not be ignored, and the interpretation of it by this school presented a real challenge to the practice of infant baptism.

Early authors of the environmentalist school noted this problem and said that the social dimension must be taken into account more when discussing infant baptism. Christopher Kiesling stated: "The problem with infant baptism, I suggest, stems from our thinking of baptism too much in terms of the individual and his expression of faith. . . . Although there is much talk today about the Christian community and its necessity for the individual in the divine plan of salvation, we have not yet gone as far as possible in applying this talk to baptism. . . . We still think of baptism as offered by the church for the individual to express his subjective faith. The baptism of infants is still embarrassing, for although baptism of an infant

²² Representatives of this school would include Christopher Kiesling, William Allen, Norbert Rigali, Charles Keating, James Challancin, Eugene Maly and Francis Buckley.

²³ Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy 59; ed. A. Flannery, *Vatican Council II* (Collegeville, Minn. 1975) 20.

expresses the subjective faith of the Christian community, this is no help to the infant for his salvation through *his* faith, as long as the subjective faith of the baptized person is of primary importance in baptism."²⁴

Indeed, it was difficult, if not impossible, to explain original sin and the positive effects of baptism if attention were focused exclusively on the infant. Kiesling also noted that postconciliar thinking about original sin stressed its interpersonal nature. "That condition of mankind which is referred to by the term 'original sin' has been analyzed in terms of interpersonal relationships which are essential to human nature. Man is not an isolated being; he is essentially a social being. Man becomes a person through encounter with other persons."²⁵ The grace that is imparted in baptism is not some kind of magic metaphysical change in the infant, but the acceptance into a community of people living in reversal of the sinful orientation which constitutes original sin.

This understanding of infant baptism and the important role of the Christian community were reflected in the Rite of Baptism for Children issued in 1969. The introduction to the rite stated that the true meaning of infant baptism was fulfilled only if the child were later formed in the faith in which he or she was baptized.²⁶ In addition, the role of the parents in the preparation of the baptismal celebration was stressed. Parents were encouraged to contact the parish priest even before the child was born so that they might be given suitable instruction and "for planning the actual celebration to bring out its paschal character."²⁷ When parents were not prepared to undertake the Christian formation of their child or to profess the faith themselves, the time of baptism could be delayed beyond the normal time, which was stated to be a few weeks after birth.

Citing the Rite of Baptism for Children which recognized that children cannot have or profess personal faith, but instead are baptized "in the faith of the Church,"²⁸ advocates of the environmentalist school distinguished three dimensions of the faith involved in infant baptism: "the incipient faith of the child, the matured faith of the

²⁴ Kiesling, *art. cit.* 617-619.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 619.

²⁶ Rite of Baptism for Children 3; in *The Rites* (New York 1976) 188.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 8, p. 190.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, nos. 1-4, pp. 188-189.

parent, and the corporate faith of the community."²⁹ All three aspects of the faith were seen as essential to the meaning of infant baptism. Indeed, such authors³⁰ justified infant baptism on the premise of an environment of Christian faith in which the child would be raised. Baptism thus implied a commitment by the parents and community to form the children in the faith in which they were baptized, the goal of this formation being ultimately the personal acceptance of the faith by those baptized in infancy.

The term "environmentalist" should not be confused with a mere sociological meaning. The tenets of this school were fundamentally theological, stressing the work of the Spirit in the actions of the Christian community, the corporate nature of sin and grace, and a "high" sense of ecclesiology in which the Church or Christian community was seen as the environment in and through which an individual is formed in the Christian faith. Participation and membership in this community were the means to eventually making a mature commitment to the faith. "The community assumes the responsibility to provide both the instruction and the environment which will make [a later act of personal faith] a real possibility for this child."³¹ Authors of this school argued that this was not really a new aspect of baptism, but a facet of the Church's baptismal policy that had been understressed in the past, while the emphasis was placed on the *quam primum* aspect.³²

As in the mature adulthood school, some authors in the environmentalist school suggested that catechesis be revised to stress Christian formation, development in the faith, and service (i.e., *diakonia*). Infant baptism was not seen as preventing such catechesis; those baptized in infancy could indeed be expected to pursue a catechumenal-type journey of conversion as they grew up.³³ The Directory on Children's Masses of 1973 stressed the Church's continuing responsibility to those baptized in infancy, to "make sure

²⁹ Cf. J. A. Upton, "A Solution to the Infant Baptism Problem," *Living Light* 16 (1979) 487.

³⁰ Cf. A. Leystan, "New Rite of Infant Baptism," *The Priest* 26 (1970) 52-57; C. J. Keating, "Baptism Sets Our Boundaries," *New Catholic World*, 217 (1974) 100-104; J. Challancin, "Infant Baptism: More Difficult Requirements?" *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 77 (1977) 61-68.

³¹ F. Krause, "Infant Baptism and the Domestic Church," *The Priest* 33 (1977) 26-27.

³² Cf. Challancin, *art. cit.* 63.

³³ Cf. M. Hellwig, *The Meaning of the Sacraments* (Dayton, Ohio 1972) 12.

that they grow in communion with Christ and with the Christian community."³⁴ A format for such growth was perceived by many parishes in the seventies to be an adaptation of the formation process of the catechumenate for those already baptized.³⁵

In addition to the emphasis on the child's future formation and the environment for such formation, some authors stressed the importance of a child born into a Christian marriage. For example, William Allen noted that in infant baptism the child is perceived as already somebody vis-à-vis the People of God. "The child is not just any creature but a *special* creature, antecedently intended by God to be within the redemptive sphere of Christ Jesus."³⁶ Norbert Rigali expressed this same sentiment in an ecclesiological perspective. Since the marital union of Christians is a Christian community in its relation to the universal Church, Rigali explained that a child born to such a marital union is born into the Christian community.³⁷ Yet, even these explanations revealed an underlying concern with the most important unit of the Christian community in infant baptism: the family. It was the parents' commitment to the faith that was seen to justify the baptism of a child, and this commitment was perceived as a sign from God. "The Church can only baptize those who are sent to her by the Spirit. If the parents are living a life marked by obedience to the Spirit of God, then the Church will unhesitatingly and joyfully embrace the child as, literally, a God-send."³⁸

The arguments of the environmentalist school were applied in varying degrees. Some authors used the arguments simply as a justification of infant baptism while still regarding the practice as an exception to the rule of adult initiation.³⁹ Others believed that, for children of practicing Catholics, infant baptism was the more natural and effective practice. "Adherents to this position stress the principle that people learn how to think, judge and behave most effectively as Christians through regular participation in the life of the com-

³⁴ Directory on Children's Masses 8; Flannery, *op. cit.* 256.

³⁵ Cf. T. Randolph, "The American Catechumenate: A Preliminary Report," Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, *Newsletter* 14 (1978) 121-122.

³⁶ W. F. Allen, "Baptism of Infants," *The Priest* 29 (1973) 21.

³⁷ Cf. N. Rigali, "New Theology and Infant Baptism," *The Priest* 30 (1974) 16.

³⁸ M. Searle, *Christening. The Making of Christians* (Collegeville, Minn. 1980) 49.

³⁹ Cf. J. Gallen, "The Pastoral Celebration of Initiation," *New Catholic World* 222 (1979) 150.

munity during all the stages of development between infancy and mature adulthood. To withhold access to the church's worship from children is to deny them the most effective and most widely available means for becoming convinced adult believers."⁴⁰ Essentially, this position advocated *discriminate* infant baptism, followed by a process of faith development culminating in the person's adult commitment to the faith. One can see that many authors of both the mature adulthood and environmentalist schools were in agreement here: the basic problem was indiscriminate infant baptism. Where they differed, of course, was in the mature adulthood school's view that adult initiation was the norm, and the view of many in the environmentalist school that infant baptism was by no means "abnormal" (i.e., a deviation from the norm) in the proper circumstances.)

Underlying these arguments in favor of the baptism of children of Christian parents was a view of the Church as a community of people at different levels of faith. This community provided the environment in which all members could come to a mature, adult faith. It was thus not expected that every Christian would be of a high spiritual caliber. "The church, this school contends, is more than a community of transformed adults. It is also a nurturing environment that encourages gradual growth in faith for individuals and groups of all conditions, including children."⁴¹

Baptism in the environmentalist school was thus not regarded as an accomplishment upon reaching adult faith (as it was in the mature adulthood school), but rather as "a valid and complete sign of the *beginnings*, the initiation of a Christian life which *ultimately begins to be fulfilled* in the sacraments of Confirmation, Matrimony, and Holy Orders."⁴² These authors did not feel that adult faith subsequent to a conversion experience was a prerequisite to full sacramental life in the Church, but assumed that such faith could follow admittance to the Church's sacramental life in the case of children of practicing Catholics. Thus, while some proposed enrolling infants into a catechumenate as an option for children of nonpracticing Catholics,⁴³ advocates of this school were predominantly in

⁴⁰ Mitchell, *art. cit.* 429-430.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 430.

⁴² R. Peterson, "Let's Baptize Babies of Non-Practicing Catholics," *U.S. Catholic* 42 (1977) 15.

⁴³ Cf. Gallen, "American Liturgy . . .," *art. cit.* 307.

favor of initiating children into the Church's full sacramental and worship life as the most effective environment.)

As mentioned above, authors of the environmentalist school were basically defending infant baptism as a normal practice. We saw that some, however, continued to view adult initiation as the norm. At the other extreme, two authors during this period also argued for essentially indiscriminate infant baptism as the Church's norm. The arguments of Paul Donlan and Rockford Peterson⁴⁴ can be seen to be quite different from the standard environmentalist school arguments. Their understanding of baptism was that it is basically the means by which to remove original sin and through which God saves individuals. Stating that the Church has always taught that "all who die in original sin will not see God after death,"⁴⁵ these authors bemoaned the fact that current practice often delayed baptism "for the sake of everyone but the infant — who has to wait to become a child of God until everyone else is accommodated: priests, parents, godparents and the 'faith community.'"⁴⁶ These authors represented the only resurgence of such baptismal mentality in the American Catholic literature of this period. They are included in the discussion of the environmentalist school only by extension of the school's principles. In other words, Donlan's view that salvation is attainable only in the Church and Peterson's stress on the future formation of the child baptized in infancy are related to the arguments of this school, although their main points are presented in a radically different way and their understanding of baptism is unlike that of the other authors of this school. These two authors represent an extreme of pro-infant baptism literature in this debate, just as David Greye Perrey represents an extreme of anti-infant baptism literature.

Finally, I would note that the arguments of this school are essentially concerned with justifying infant baptism as an ecclesial act. In so doing, they suggest improvements in both the understanding of baptism and its sacramental celebration by emphasizing the role of the community, especially the parents. Faith is stressed in relation to the community of faith and the subsequent personal faith of the child.)

⁴⁴ P. A. Donlan, "Second Thoughts on Delaying the Baptism of Infants," *The Priest* 33 (1977) 31-33+; Peterson, *art. cit.* 14-15.

⁴⁵ Donlan, *art. cit.* 37.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 38, note 5.

As noted above, the third position or school that was operative in the postconciliar debate on infant baptism was not primarily an argument for or against the practice. It was, rather, a position which advocated the celebration of the three now separated rites of initiation (baptism, confirmation, Eucharist) in one unified rite. Many authors from both the mature adulthood and environmentalist schools also espoused the positions of this school.

The question of the proper age for confirmation seems to have been the initial impetus for this line of thought. Proposals to delay confirmation to a more mature age, as represented by Francis Buckley in the early postconciliar years,⁴⁷ quickly led to questions of the meaning of confirmation. Richard Ling, for example, observed that there had been two very different meanings of confirmation in the Church's history. Up until A.D. 1300, Ling said, confirmation was seen as a part and completion of baptism, whereas the practice since then had viewed it as a rite of its own, signifying the completion of an individual's spiritual growth.⁴⁸ Concurrently, confirmation had become a rite of adolescence and social majority, imparting strength for the challenges of adulthood. In this light, the further delay of confirmation to a later age only reenforced this trend. Acting on these observations, Ling advanced the first proposal by an American Catholic author in this period to confirm infants.⁴⁹ It should be noted, however, that this early proposal saw such confirmation of infants as a rite separate from baptism.)

The publication of the revised Rite of Confirmation in 1971 was clear evidence that the Roman Church's norm for those baptized in infancy would continue to be confirmation at later age of maturity. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, however, which was published in the following year, set forth the baptism, confirmation and first Eucharist of adult initiands in the same ceremony. The introduction to the rite noted that the ancient practice of the Roman liturgy maintained that "an adult is not to be baptized unless he receives confirmation immediately afterward."⁵⁰

The unification of the three initiatory rites in adult initiation was

⁴⁷ Cf. Buckley, *art. cit.* 655-666.

⁴⁸ Cf. R. Ling, "A Catechist's Vote for Infant Confirmation," *Living Light* 7 (1970)

49.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 42-56.

⁵⁰ Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults 34; *The Rites*, *op. cit.* 30.

quickly followed by numerous theological and historical examinations of the relation of the three sacraments of initiation. Aidan Kavanagh's first contribution to the infant baptism debate suggested that "if infant baptism is proper then there seems no compelling reason why its immediate completion in confirmation should be improper."⁵¹ After recalling Richard Ling's observation that physical age became significant for confirmation only in the Middle Ages,⁵² Kavanagh went on to say that "although no person has a *ius* or right to baptism, the baptized *do* possess rights to confirmation and the eucharist."⁵³

Later in the decade, Tad Guzie espoused similar sentiments in arguing that "Confirmation does not have a separate meaning from Baptism,"⁵⁴ but is simply the completion of the baptismal action, and therefore has no theological reason to stand alone as a sacrament unto itself. In fact, its separation from baptism causes it to lose — not gain — theological significance. Furthermore, initiation into the Christian community loses its significance if the new initiand is not allowed to share in the Eucharist until a later time. In the same year, Julia Ann Upton noted, as one of the five main pastoral problems associated with the current understanding of infant baptism, that "a separation of the sacraments of initiation implies that there are different degrees of membership in the community."⁵⁵

Liturgical research into the evolution of Christian initiatory practices revealed that what came to be three individual sacraments was originally celebrated in the early Church as one rite of initiation. While the revised rite of adult initiation had reunited these sacraments in one rite, it was argued that such a reunification should be effected for infant initiation, since this, too, had been the practice of the early Church. In addition, the connection that had been drawn between the separated sacraments of initiation and life-cycle events was seen as untenable in a "post-Christian" era.⁵⁶ Indeed, it was generally recognized that the popular understanding of confirmation as a rite of maturity and adulthood overshadowed the sacrament's relation to baptism. The continued separation of the sacraments of

⁵¹ Kavanagh, "Initiation: Baptism . . .," *art. cit.* 274.

⁵² Cf. Ling, *art. cit.* 49.

⁵³ Kavanagh, "Initiation: Baptism . . .," *art. cit.* 274.

⁵⁴ T. Guzie, "Should We Cancel Confirmation?" *U.S. Catholic* 44 (1979) 19.

⁵⁵ Upton, *art. cit.* 489.

⁵⁶ Cf. "Editorial," in D. Power and L. Maldonado (eds.), *op. cit.* vii-viii.

initiation was seen to reenforce this misunderstanding. The general agreement among professional liturgists to reuniting the rites of initiation can be discerned from the recommendations of the 1973 meeting of the North American Academy of Liturgy. The very first of these recommendations stated that "the rite of Christian initiation should normally consist of the unified sacramental event in which the three now separated moments (baptism, confirmation, Eucharist) are integrated. The full rite is to be used at any age when a person is initiated."⁵⁷

After 1972, advocates of the mature adulthood school were able to note that, in addition to all its other advantages, the rite of adult initiation had realized the reunification of the three initiatory rites. Adult initiation was thus further argued to be normative since it resulted in initiation to the full life of the Church, whereas infant baptism had to be completed later in confirmation and Eucharist. Only later in the debate did authors of the environmentalist school argue that the unification of the initiatory rites did not necessarily rule out infant baptism. The practice of the Orthodox Churches provided an example of initiating children using the integrated rite of baptism, confirmation and Eucharist. A consensus then began to develop in relation to reintegrating the rites of initiation. Just as authors of the mature adulthood and environmentalist schools agreed on the fundamental problem of indiscriminate baptism, so they also came to agree on reintegrating the rites of initiation. In fact, no direct opposition to this point appeared during this period.)

THE CORRESPONDING PRACTICE SCHOOL

The fourth major position in the postconciliar American Catholic debate on infant baptism appeared relatively late in this period and remains the least developed. Thus, the rather brief treatment of it in this essay is not an indication of its being unimportant, but simply a result of the fact that the theory and some initial arguments for it appear only rather late in the literature of this period. It may be presumed that this school will further develop in the coming years, especially since the practices suggested by this position do not conflict in any serious manner with the directives of the Vatican's instruction on infant baptism of late 1980.

[This fourth position, which I have called the corresponding prac-

⁵⁷ Gallen, "American Liturgy . . .," art. cit. 307.

tice school, essentially holds that individuals come to Christian faith in different ways, depending on various circumstances, and that correspondingly different practices of initiation should be employed. In other words, such authors argued that the three new rites of Christian initiation *together* represent Catholic initiatory policy, and that the rite which corresponds to the initiand's circumstances is the one that is "normal" for him or her. This would take into consideration not only family circumstances (such as practicing or nonpracticing parents), but also the sociological situation: that is, if Christians were such a minority in a certain culture that the Christian upbringing of children might be very difficult, adult initiation might be the more appropriate practice in that context.

The first indication of such reasoning in American Catholic literature accompanied the speculations about the revised initiatory rites in the years immediately following the Second Vatican Council. Noting that there was a general consensus among theologians and church leaders of the relation between baptism and faith, Polycarp Sherwood went on to explain that such consensus did not imply any single practice of initiation. ". . . baptismal practice must vary both liturgically and pastorally. Liturgically, in that appropriate rites must be devised for the baptism of infants, recognizing their true condition, that the unseparated sequence, baptism-confirmation-eucharist, be preserved or restored where possible, that the catechumenate be restored; pastorally, in that flexibility of rite be allowed according to needs of persons, places, and times."⁵⁸

Even though such a varied policy did come into effect in the following years with the publication of the revised rites of infant baptism and adult initiation, the acknowledgement of such variety of practice did not play a major part in the infant baptism debate until the late seventies. Instead, the debate was primarily concerned with justifying or advocating one of the two practices.

The first American references to the positions of the corresponding practice school after the publication of the revised rites were in relation to remarks by European authors. Pierre-Marie Gy, for example, was quoted: ". . . if we look at the Roman ritual for baptism, it has two parts: infant baptism and adult baptism. These two sections of ritual were prepared by the same people and they build together one unity. Adult baptism, I think, should by no means be thought

⁵⁸ P. Sherwood, "Introduction," *Resonance*, no. 6 (1968) 5.

of as a kind of abolition of infant baptism or something that would have to take its place. . . . the importance of adult baptism in the various Western, civilized countries will depend on the present crisis of faith in our countries. If this crisis develops, probably the number of infant baptisms will not be so great as now and it would become more difficult for Christian parents to raise their children to mature Christian faith.⁵⁹ An American Episcopalian representative of this school, Daniel Stevick, observed that an exclusive focus on one type of baptismal spirituality or practice would result in a defective initiatory policy.⁶⁰

Among American Catholic authors, it seems that the proposals to delay the baptism of children of nonpracticing parents and the concerns with baptizing infants in a sociological and cultural situation that was not conducive to their future faith development were two factors that led to a greater awareness of the different ways in which people come to the Christian faith. A statement by the American Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy in 1978, for example, noted the uniqueness of God's call and its context in a particular situation or circumstance.⁶¹

At the same time, it was becoming generally recognized that an exclusive use of either adult initiation or infant baptism would result in inadequacies and oversights. Aidan Kavanagh observed that the present situation of the Church required the existence of two sets of initiatory theory and practice.⁶² He further remarked that "the diversity of initiatory practices in the various churches remained the rule for centuries,"⁶³ and that a single normative practice probably never existed. The 1979 liturgy issue of *Concilium* was more explicit in indicating suggestions for the future direction of this school. "It is highly important to look to the varied ways in which belonging to a community can be expressed, and to the meaning of rituals as practised, rather than to their theoretical meanings. . . . the question of the age at which to celebrate them, may be solved in several

⁵⁹ P.-M. Gy, quoted in R. Reichert, "A Catechist's Response to the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults," *Living Light* 14 (1977) 142; cf. also P. A. Liégé, "Le baptême des enfants dans le débat pastoral et théologique," *La Maison-Dieu*, no. 107 (1971) 27.

⁶⁰ Cf. D. B. Stevick, "Types of Baptismal Spirituality," *Worship* 47 (1973) 24.

⁶¹ Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, "Christian Commitment," *Newsletter* 14 (1978) 109.

⁶² Cf. Kavanagh, "Christian Initiation in Post-Conciliar . . .," *art. cit.* 109.

⁶³ Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism* . . . 115-116.

ways. It could be argued that not one of these ways has of necessity to be preferred to the others. In other words, different and differing pastoral approaches can be simultaneously theologically sound. . . . in face of any proposal to celebrate the sacraments of initiation in any particular way, the important question is that of the meaning which such a celebration might have, given all the individual, community and social factors involved."⁶⁴

Thus, this school would propose that no one initiatory practice is *normative*, but that different practices corresponding to the circumstances are *normal* in the respective situation. The Church's provision of rites for infant baptism, adult initiation and various other circumstances is seen as further indication that this school is essentially presenting a valid interpretation of the Church's revised baptismal policy. ". . . the fact that we now have a rite of infant baptism as well as accommodated versions of the rite for the Christian initiation of adults for use with other children does point to the inescapable fact that God works with people as they are; or, in the language of the theologians, grace builds on nature. Being baptized at six days or six weeks is not the same as being baptized at six years or sixteen years of age."⁶⁵

What, then, does the examination of these four positions reveal about the postconciliar infant baptism debate in the American Catholic Church? Essentially, I would say, it reveals that the debate has progressed from a basically unquestioned acceptance of the practice of infant baptism, through pastoral and theological concerns about the practice, to a new and reoriented understanding of the place of infant baptism in the Church's total initiatory praxis. Major influences in the debate seem to have been Vatican documents, literature from non-American/non-Catholic sources, theological reflection (especially varying ecclesiologies and perceptions of faith), historical evidence, and pastoral experience.

Recognizing just what was influencing the thoughts and recommendations of the authors contributing to this discussion can now reveal the assumptions that were operative and which often led to disagreement with other authors. In other words, we now have the chronological and critical distance to see that agreement was virtual-

⁶⁴ Editorial in L. Maldonado and D. Power (eds.), *Structures of Initiation in Crisis*, *Concilium* 122 (New York 1979) viii-ix.

⁶⁵ Searle, *op. cit.* 50.

ly impossible between certain authors because they were operating under different meanings of baptism or faith, or were reacting to different influences. [For example, the idea that adult initiation is normative developed out of a view of the Church as a community of converted, convinced believers, while those who defended infant baptism assumed that the Church is made up of convinced believers as well as those whose faith is still undeveloped. The former view would obviously hold infant baptism to be a deviation, while the latter would find infant baptism quite normal. Indeed, the question of infant baptism merely scratched the surface of far more fundamental attitudes to initiation, faith and the Church.]

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