

Rites of Initiation – Baptism and Chrismation

Baptism, including chrismation, is of course fundamental to the Christian life, both as to its beginning and its ongoing character within the Church. Happily, the Antiochian Archdiocese in America has just completed a thoroughgoing review of all the liturgical texts from birth through the pre-baptismal prayers to the conclusion of the Baptism itself. I shall refer to this book from time to time in the following analysis.

First it is necessary to understand some basic elements of the services of initiation from a liturgical and pastoral point of view in accordance with their historical development. In the early Church, baptism together with chrismation, invariably took place on the eve of Pascha, initially in a darkened church, whence the neophyte was taken straightway from the baptismal washing and anointing to the Holy Mysteries of the Divine Liturgy. This practice presupposed adult baptism. In later times, with infants mainly being baptised in Christian families, this connection to the Easter Liturgy diminished with baptisms being performed outside of the Paschal period. Eventually, and especially during times of persecution, it was not always possible (for example in the Soviet period in Russia) to baptise in the temple itself. In various places, this also weakened the connection between Baptism and the Eucharist. However, the context of the Liturgy and Pascha was always preserved in the liturgical texts themselves, and especially for baptisms during the Vespereal Divine Liturgy of Great and Holy Saturday.

In current practice it is vitally important to maintain and make more explicit the link between Baptism and the Eucharist. This is true whether children or adults are being baptised. For adults, there is no reason why the ancient practice of baptising and chrismating should not be primarily reserved for the Paschal celebration, perhaps also on the feast of Theophany and Pentecost. There will, of course, be good reason for baptising both infants and adults on other occasions, but this should not be at the expense of neglecting normative practice and the primary context. When Baptism does take place in the context of the Liturgy, the American Archdiocesan book instructs that the Great Litany and subsequent Antiphons are to be replaced by the baptismal material. After the Baptism, the Divine Liturgy continues with the Little Entrance and from the nave.

What is commonly celebrated today as the service of Baptism and Chrismation is in fact the fusion of two originally separate services: the Liturgy of the Catechumens and the Liturgy of Baptism properly speaking. With adult candidates there is no reason why the prayers of the first section should not take place successively at the time of the enrolment of the catechumens and then later at his or her more immediate preparation for Baptism. In all these cases the instruction and blessing of the bishop should be sought.

Concerning the Liturgy of Baptism itself, the American Archdiocesan book makes provision for a suggested reordering of the prayers and the actions when baptising infants. These mainly concern what happens immediately after the Baptism in respect the chrismation, ablutions, robing and tonsure. In the Archdiocese of the British Isles and Ireland this reordering is not blessed for use. Instead we have our own reordering which can be accessed in the file / document "Order of Baptism and Chrismation." (PDF)

There are two other matters that the book makes clear in respect of good pastoral and canonical practice and this concerns the pre-baptismal rites, specifically the 40 day prayers, commonly called "Churching." First it is gratifying to see that the American Archdiocesan book, in conformity with Antiochian practice and recent decisions at the Holy Synod, provides for the possibility and option of removing references to the mother's alleged ritual uncleanness in the prayers of this small service. These references were introduced into the text very late in the 15th century and some, perhaps many, would hold that, in the modern day context, these are not desirable. Here, pastoral discretion, as always, is necessary. Women who expect such references to be included and who refrain from receiving Holy Communion during either their confinement or menstruation should always be respected in their practice. Nonetheless, I at least, welcome these modest reforms. Others may not of course! Second, the book makes it clear that the taking of the child into the altar at the end of the Churching service, both males and females, happens at this conclusion of the 40 Day Prayers, before and not after baptism. The only difference in this presentation of a girl (in thanksgiving for a safe birth) is that the child is not, as with the boy, presented at the west side of the Holy Table.

The American Archdiocesan Book also renders an excellent service by gathering together other prayers and rites connected with initiation and among them: the reception of converts from heterodoxy and what one should do in the case of an emergency baptism or if the child dies before or shortly after birth.