

WE ARE A BAPTIZED PEOPLE

As the first of the sacraments of initiation, baptism is central to the liturgical life of a parish community united in Jesus Christ. The design and placement of the baptismal font is a key element in the renovation or construction of any sacred space. To fully understand the central importance of baptism and the font design, we need to look at Christ's baptism, baptism in the early church, and current church practice and norms.

HISTORY

When we read the Gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River, we hear how he went down into the water and had abundant water poured over him by John. At his baptism Jesus consciously chose and publicly accepted his mission and was anointed with the Spirit to carry out that mission.

In the early church it was adults who made the choice to become Christian, who went through an intense period of preparation, and who were received into the church at the Easter Vigil. To become a Christian was a life-threatening decision and one that was not made lightly given the potential consequences.

The excavated remains of the earliest known house church at Dura-Europas have a separate room for the baptistery which included a large font indicating the importance of baptism in the early church. It was important for the baptism ritual that there be an abundance of water so that the one to be baptized could "go down into the water" – the waters of death in order to be cleansed and reborn into the life of Christ. To strengthen this image, early fonts were often in the shape of a tomb to emphasize the dying to self and one's former way of life and to then rise as a new person in Christ. Historically fonts have also been in the shape of a cross, a hexagon or an octagon. A hexagonal font symbolizes Christ's death on the sixth day. The octagonal font indicates the "eighth day" of eternity.

When Christianity became the state religion of the Empire in 380 AD, baptism became the "politically correct" thing to do and people were often baptized with little preparation or conscious choice. Without the depth of preparation, it was more difficult for the baptized to understand the full meaning and responsibility of what it meant to be a baptized Christian.

In later centuries when the concept of "original sin" developed, the practice of infant baptism became more common until eventually it was the norm and the catechumenate as practiced by the early church was dramatically shortened or abandoned.

VATICAN II - PRESENT

The documents of Vatican II call for a return to the early church practice of the catechumenate and adult baptism. The 1972 revision of the rites of baptism restored the ancient catechumenate in what we now call the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). It is a time of inquiry, evangelization, illumination and purification. The RCIA has become an important facet of the life of every parish community and has moved baptism from a private family ritual to a public, parish celebration. The parish as a whole journeys with the catechumens and at the Easter Vigil welcomes them into full membership in the faith community.

In the case of an infant, it is the parents and godparents who speak for the child, but it is the parish community who welcomes the child to membership and rejoices with the family. With both adults and children who are baptized, the parish accepts the responsibility to help the individual grow in their faith. While many of us were baptized as infants at a time separate from a Eucharistic celebration, the church now strongly encourages the baptism of infants as part of the Eucharistic liturgy.

CHURCH NORMS FOR THE BAPTISTRY

The bishops' document, Built of Living Stones, states that "66. The rites of baptism, the first of the sacraments of initiation, require a prominent place for celebration . . . Because the rites of initiation of the Church begin with baptism and are completed by the reception of the Eucharist, the baptismal font and its location reflects the Christian's journey *through* the waters of baptism *to* the altar. This integral relationship between the baptismal font and the altar can be demonstrated in a variety of ways, such as placing the font and altar on the same architectural axis, using natural or artificial lighting, using the same floor patterns, and using common or similar materials and elements of design.

67. The location of the baptismal font, its design, and the materials used for its construction are important considerations in the planning and design of the building. It is customary to locate the baptismal font either in a special area within the main body of the church or in a separate baptistry. Through the waters of baptism the faithful enter the life of Christ. For this reason the font should be visible and accessible to all who enter the church building.

68. Water is the key symbol of baptism and the focal point of the font. In this water believers die to sin and are reborn to new life in Christ. In designing the font and the iconography in the baptismal area, the parish will want to consider the traditional symbolism that has been the inspiration for the font's design throughout history. The font is a symbol of both tomb and womb; its power is the power of the triumphant cross; and baptism sets the Christian on the path to the life that will never end, the "eighth day" of eternity where Christ's reign of peace and justice is celebrated."

In paragraph 69 the documents goes on to say that there should be one font that will accommodate the baptism of both infants and adults, and which is large enough to supply ample water for the baptism of both adults and infants. Based on this paragraph, the Archdiocese of Dubuque requires that "New church buildings and worship space will be designed with a baptismal font which allows for immersion of adults and infants." The archdiocesan policy goes on to state "In new churches a room suitable for vesting for the newly baptized should be provided in close proximity to the font."

As the plans are refined for the worship space at St. Cecilia's, the design and placement of the font will be a key element of that process.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

How can the baptismal font at St. Cecilia's be a key focus in the liturgical life of the parish? Have I witnessed both the baptism of adults and infants? How were the rites the same and how were they different, and what was my experience of each?