



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

Catholic Faith and Local Practice

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A reflection paper written for the ELCA Conference of Bishops' structured conversation on the question of whether or not to welcome to the table people who are not baptized.

The question

As I understand it, the question that lies behind this reflection paper arises out of a particular context: The experience of people who gather for the Eucharist in communities where there are frequently some in the assembly who are not baptized. I believe it is fair to say that the question is being raised by pastors presiding in such contexts, and by the baptized communicants, as well as by those who are not baptized and who may or may not be communing.

It also seems that the question is typically framed in such a way as to ask whether or not baptism *must be* the gate to communion. Put this way, the question naturally calls on those in authority to determine whether to open the gate as a sign of hospitality or tend to the gate as a matter of orthodoxy. I do not think this is a helpful frame in which to ask the question or a helpful response to use because both the frame and the resulting response have the tendency to set the authority of the institutional church over against the practice of the local community of faith in a relationship that is either adversarial or disconnected.

It does not serve the church well to place the institutional authority of the church and the local practice of the faith in contention with each other as though they were alternative and competing claims on authenticity, or to separate them from each other as though they can exist apart from each other. Instead, we may seek to frame the question in such way that these two expressions of the church are affirmed as poles of a kind of paradox. If we can do this, we may provide a response from that classic

Lutheran place of tension within the paradox that blesses the life of the church with a helpful and authentic answer to a genuine question.

To say this compactly: catholicity and contextuality are both necessary for the church's faith to be authentic. The church must teach the catholic and apostolic faith. She can do no other and remain the church. And also, the church must practice the faith contextually. After all, the faith cannot be practiced in the abstract. When the values of catholicity and contextuality are held together in creative tension, the Body of Christ may be built up rather than be further divided over questions like this. It is the goal of this paper to engage that possibility.

I would first like to demonstrate that the catholic faith has within it both the clear expectation that those who come to the table are first baptized, *but also* a strong tradition of accommodation for those who are in unique life situations. And I would like to demonstrate that the local practice of the faith has within it both the contextual and personal dimension of pastoral discernment and discretion *but also* a strong tradition of leaning on or appealing to an authority wider or older than its own on which its ministry is based.

The catholic faith

It is far beyond the scope of this short paper to provide a comprehensive review of the catholic faith and its teaching on baptism as preparation for receiving the sacrament of the altar. Instead I will assume that those reading will be able to test for themselves whether these few examples seem enough to represent fairly that expression of the church that is the wider, older, received tradition.

- At the Last Supper our Lord Jesus said to Peter, "Unless I wash you, you have no share in me." The Last Supper seems clearly to have been a meal for those joined to Christ, and not a public event.
But also, the thief on the cross (presumably never baptized) was promised his share in paradise.
- Similarly, in the parable of the wedding banquet, the one without a garment was abruptly removed from the meal.
But also, the faith of the (uncredentialed) Canaanite woman was enough to give her access to "the children's bread."
- We are aware of the ancient practice of dismissing the catechumens from the liturgy before the Eucharist.
But also, the one leper who returned to give thanks was a Samaritan.
- The apostles' first and spontaneous direction to those who heard the gospel and responded in faith was that they be baptized.

But also, the “mixed crowd” that went with the children of Israel through the sea into the wilderness shared in the gift of manna.

A hundred more examples could be given. The last captures my interest. In their case, the mixed crowd did clearly experience along with the bona fide heirs the walk through the sea, a *kind* of baptism, but without the prescribed formal marks of the covenant (child of Abraham, circumcision, etc.) I will come back to this point.

Local practice of the faith

In the local practice of the faith, we are certainly aware of the great variety of life experiences that pertain to those who come to the table. Some are baptized and consciously live out their baptism. Some are baptized but seem to have no evidence of or interest in a sanctified life. Others may have participated fully in the life of the congregation for years only to discover later that they had never been baptized.

The reality of the local practice of the faith teaches us that there is still a “mixed crowd” among the children of our Heavenly Father, and some “Canaanite women” whose grasp of the gospel seems to trump their lack of credentials. It is this group of people, whom every parish pastor knows, that gives rise to the question before us, *precisely because* these pastors understand that the ministry of their congregations must be part of the larger, older catholic and apostolic church to be authentic. If there is a positive shadow to the habitual cry, “We’ve always done it this way,” it is the sense that the local congregation’s practice is authenticated by some relationship to the received tradition. It is the presence of this “mixed crowd” within the local practice of the catholic faith that captures my interest in thinking about how best to respond to the question.

Proposal

Let me propose a way of putting the question that reaches for the creative tension within catholicity and contextuality:

Is it authentic to the catholic faith and to the local practice of our church to say that we welcome to the table those whom we know to have been joined to Christ in a death like his?

The catholic and apostolic faith teaches that people are joined to Christ in a death like his through the sacrament of Holy Baptism, and that the result of this union is salvation, resurrection, a new life. Romans 6:1-11 is a foundational scriptural passage in this regard. In Philippians 3 Paul writes, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection by becoming like him in his death.” Similarly, the Lutheran Confessions claim that baptism is necessary for salvation. It is authentic to the catholic faith to

welcome to the table in the local context those who have been joined to Christ through Holy Baptism, because we recognize as a matter of catholic faith that baptism confers a death like his.

But the catholic faith counts among its "mixed crowd" of saints the Holy Innocents and the thief on the cross. Clearly there are other ways to be joined to Christ in a death like his besides the normative sacrament of baptism. It may then also be authentic to the catholic faith to welcome to the table in the local context those who are known locally to have been joined to Christ in a death like his.

Living in the paradox

How do we live in this paradox? We understand baptism to provide a sacramental death for those who have not yet died. This sacramental death is necessary because only the dead can be raised with Christ. Baptism is the church's normative authority of recognizing those who have been joined to Christ in a death like his. The catholic faith also teaches us that some have died with Christ in other ways. By what authority do we recognize them? The pastoral office may bear within it the necessary discretionary authority to answer this question faithfully.

If so, it is because the pastoral authority is grounded in the efficacy of the spoken word of Christ. I think of the thief on the cross to whom Jesus spoke a direct word of promise, and of the Canaanite woman, to whom Jesus also spoke a direct and efficacious word affirming her faith. There is in the pastoral office a trust given by the whole church to speak the words of Christ in the local context. May not this authority be practiced in such a way as to recognize in an individual who is not yet baptized one who has nevertheless been joined to Christ in a death like his? If so, then it would be authentic to the catholic faith to welcome to the table in the local context an unbaptized person who is known to the pastor there to have been joined to Christ in a death like his.

The other side of this office of authentic declaration is the spoken word of rebuke to those who spurn the gift of baptism that is available to them. The witness of scripture includes the one who would follow Jesus but asked first to go and bury his father, and those who say, "Lord, Lord," but whom the Lord says he does not know. If union with Christ is obtained by joining him in a death like his, it cannot be appropriate to welcome to the table those who are unwilling to be joined to Christ in his death.

The sacrament of the altar is not the private possession of the local community of faith or of its pastor, and the meal is not appropriately extended to those who have not died with Christ. The pastoral office bears within it both the contextual responsibility to care for the local community in all its specific reality, and the catholic responsibility to teach

the faith of the whole church. It is not authentic to the catholic faith to set aside in local practice Christ's invitation to be united with him in a death like his.

Summary

I believe the question before us is best approached from within the tension of the catholicity and contextuality of the Church. Baptism is the church's normative recognition of those who have been joined with Christ in a death like his. The church's narrative includes those who have been joined to Christ in a death like his by other means. The pastoral office exercises the authority of the catholic church's faith in the local community, perhaps including recognition of those who have been joined to Christ's death by other means than baptism. If so, it would be authentic to the faith of the catholic church and the practice of the local community to welcome to the table "those who are known to have been joined to Christ in a death like his."

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