

## NOTES

### THE BLESSING OF THE BAPTISMAL FONT IN THE SYRIAN RITE OF THE FOURTH CENTURY

In his *De Baptismo* Tertullian remarks:

Igitur omnes aquae de pristina originis praerogativa sacramentum sanctificationis consecuntur invocato deo: supervenit enim statim spiritus de caelis et aquis superest sanctificans eas de semetipso, et ita sanctificatae vim sanctificandi conbibunt.<sup>1</sup>

This passage proves that the blessing of the baptismal font was known in the West at the end of the second century. For the East, a similar development is indicated by the *Excerpta ex Theodoto*, which must be attributed to the second half of the second century.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, in the Syrian rite we do not hear of this ceremony before the middle of the fourth century. There is no doubt that Cyril of Jerusalem knew of the blessing of the baptismal font in the form of an epiklesis. In order to explain the effectiveness and power of this epiklesis to the candidates for baptism he refers to pagan parallels:

For just as what is offered on the altars, though simple by nature, becomes defiled by the invocation [ἐπικλήσει] of the idols, so contrariwise, the simple water having received the invocation of the Holy Ghost and of Christ and of the Father acquires a new power of holiness.<sup>3</sup>

According to this passage, the form of the blessing contained an epiklesis of the Holy Trinity. It is surprising that the three persons are mentioned in the reverse order. In his *Procatechesis* Cyril speaks of the baptismal font as of the "Christ-bearing waters."<sup>4</sup> What he means by this expression he indicates in his third *Mystagogical Catechesis*: Christ "imparted of the fragrance of His divinity to the waters when He was washed in the river

<sup>1</sup> Tertullian, *De Baptismo*, 3, 5 (ed. Borleffs, 18, 6).

<sup>2</sup> *Excerpta ex Theodoto*, 82 (ed. Stählin, GCS, *Clem. Alex.*, 3, 132): Καὶ ὁ ἄρτος καὶ τὸ ἔλαιον ἀγιάζεται τῇ δυνάμει τοῦ δυνάματος θεοῦ τὰ αὐτὰ ὄντα κατὰ τὸ φαινόμενον ὅσα ἐλήφθη, ἀλλὰ δυνάμει εἰς δνάμιν πνευματικὴν μεταβέβληται. οὕτως καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ καὶ τὸ ἐξορκιζόμενον καὶ τὸ βάπτισμα γινόμενον οὐ μόνον χωρίζει τὸ χεῖρον, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀγιασμόν προσλαμβάνει.

<sup>3</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis*, 3, 3 (ed. Reischl, 66): "Ὡσπερ γὰρ τὰ τοῖς βωμοῖς προσφερόμενα, τῇ φώσει ὄντα λιτὰ, μεμολύσμενα γίγνεται τῇ ἐπικλήσει τῶν εἰδώλων" οὕτως ἀπεναντίας τὸ λιτὸν ὕδωρ Πνεύματος ἀγίου καὶ Χριστοῦ καὶ Πατρὸς τὴν ἐπικλήσιν λαβόν, δνάμιν ἀγιώτητος ἐπικτᾶται.

<sup>4</sup> Cyril, *Procatechesis*, 15 (ed. Reischl, 20): Τότε ὑδάτων ἀπολαύσητε Χριστοφόρων ἐχόντων εἰκόδιαν.

Jordan."<sup>5</sup> These remarks remind us of the epiklesis in the blessing of the baptismal font which is contained in Bishop Serapion's prayer-book, an Egyptian sacramentary composed at Cyril's time, where we have the following formula:

King and Lord of all things and Artificer of the world, who gavest salvation freely to all created nature by the descent of thy only-begotten Jesus Christ, thou who didst redeem the creation that thou didst create by the coming of thy ineffable Word: see now from heaven and look upon these waters and fill them with holy Spirit. Let thine ineffable Word come to be in them and transform their energy and cause them to be generative (as) being filled with thy grace, in order that the mystery which is now being celebrated may not be found in vain in those that are being regenerated, but may fill all those that descend (into them) and are baptized (herein) with the divine grace . . . And as thy only-begotten Word coming down upon the waters of the Jordan rendered them holy, so now also may he descend on these and make them holy and spiritual, to the end that those who are being baptized may be no longer flesh and blood, but spiritual and able to worship thee the uncreated father through Jesus Christ in holy Spirit, through whom to thee (is) the glory and the strength both now and to all the ages of the ages. Amen.<sup>6</sup>

Here God is called upon to let His Logos come down into the waters of the baptismal font in the same way as He descended into the waters of the Jordan and sanctified them.<sup>7</sup> It is clear that the same school of thought is reflected by Cyril as by Serapion's epiklesis, which is the oldest formula of this kind that we possess. There is reason to believe that Cyril knew the same or a very similar epiklesis which was addressed to the Trinity but asked God to send down the Logos into the baptismal water. That would explain why he used the expression "Christ-bearing waters" although he speaks of an invocation of the three divine persons.

The *Peregrinatio Aethiopiae*, a very valuable source of information regarding the Syrian rite of the fourth century, does not mention the blessing of the baptismal font. However, the *Apostolic Constitutions*, which originated in Syria about the same time as, or not long after, the nun from southern Gaul visited Palestine, contains a description of the baptismal rite with a special prayer for the consecration of the font:

<sup>5</sup> Cyril, *Catechesis mystagog.*, 3, 1 (ed. Quasten, 87-88): Κἀκεῖνος μὲν ἐν Ἰορδάνῃ λουσάμενος ποταμῷ καὶ τῶν χρώτων τῆς θεότητος μεταδοὺς τοῖς ὕδασι ἀνέβαιεν ἐκ τούτων.

<sup>6</sup> J. Wordsworth, *Bishop Serapion's Prayer-Book* (London, 1923), p. 68-69.

<sup>7</sup> *Euchologium Serapionis*, 19, 4 (ed. Funk, 181): Καὶ ὡς κατελθὼν ὁ μονογενὴς σου λόγος ἐπὶ τὰ ὕδατα τοῦ Ἰορδάνου ἅγια ἀπέδειξεν, οὕτω καὶ νῦν ἐν τούτοις κατερχέσθω καὶ ἅγια καὶ πνευματικὰ ποιησάτω.

Look down from heaven, and sanctify this water, and give it grace and power, that so he who is to be baptized according to the command of thy Christ may be crucified with Him, and die with Him, and be buried with Him, and rise with Him to the adoption which is in Him, that he may be dead to sin and live to righteousness.<sup>8</sup>

In this prayer there is no indication of an epiklesis as Cyril of Jerusalem knew it.

The discovery of the *Catecheses* of Theodore of Mopsuestia has given us a new source of information regarding the liturgy of Syria.<sup>9</sup> In his description of baptism we find the following passage:

After these things have happened to you, at the time which we have indicated, you descend into the water, which has been consecrated by the benediction of the priest, as you are not baptized only with ordinary water, but with the water of the second birth, which cannot become so except through the coming of the Holy Spirit (on it). For this it is necessary that the priest should have beforehand made use of clear words, according to the rite of the priestly service, and asked God that the grace of the Holy Spirit might come on the water and impart to it the power both of conceiving that awe-inspiring child and becoming a womb to the sacramental birth. . . .

It is owing to the fact that the nature of the water does not possess all these attributes, which are implanted in it at our immersion by the working of the Holy Spirit, that the priest makes use beforehand of his priestly service and of clear words and benedictions, written for the purpose, and prays that the grace of the Holy Spirit come upon the water and prepare it with His holy and awe-inspiring presence for the task of performing all these things, so that it may become a reverential womb for the second birth, and so that those who descend into it may be fashioned afresh by the grace of the Holy Spirit and be born again into a new and virtuous human nature.

<sup>8</sup> *Constitutiones Apostolorum*, 7, 43, 5 (ed. Quasten, 194): Κάτιδε ἐξ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ἀγλασον τὸ ὕδωρ τοῦτο, ὁὸς δὲ χάριν καὶ δύναμιν, ὥστε τὸν βαπτιζόμενον κατ' ἐντολὴν τοῦ Χριστοῦ σου ἀδῶ συσταυρηθῆναι καὶ συναποθανεῖν καὶ συνταφῆναι καὶ συναναστῆναι εἰς υἰοθεσίαν τὴν ἐν ἀδῶ, τῷ νεκρωθῆναι μὲν τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ, ζῆσαι δὲ δικαιοσύνη.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. A. Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord's Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist* (*Woodbrooke Studies*, VI [Cambridge, 1933]); A. Rucker, *Ritus baptismi et missae quem descripsit Theodorus ep. Mopsuestenus in sermonibus catecheticis e versione syriaca ab A. Mingana nuper reperta in linguam latinam translatus* (Münster, 1933); R. Devresse, "Les instructions catéchétiques de Théodore de Mopsueste," *Revue des sc. religieuses*, XIII (1933), 425-36; H. Lietzmann, "Die Liturgie des Theodor von Mopsuestia," *Sitzungsberichte der Preuss. Akademie der Wissenschaften, phil.-hist. Klasse*, XXIII (1933), 915-36; R. Abramowski, "Neue Schriften Theodors von Mopsuestia (†428)" *Zeitschrift f. die neutest. Wissenschaft*, XXXIII (1934), 66-68; F. R. Reine, *The Eucharistic Doctrine and Liturgy of the Mystagogical Catecheses of Theodore of Mopsuestia* (*Studies in Christian Antiquity*, II [ed. J. Quasten, Washington, 1942]).

When the water has been prepared for this and has received such a power by the coming of the Holy Spirit, you plunge into it hoping to receive from it benefits such as those (described above) and an awe-inspiring salvation.<sup>10</sup>

If we compare this text with that of Cyril of Jerusalem we find an interesting development. Theodore's words leave no doubt that the formula used for the blessing of the baptismal font consisted in an epiclesis of the Holy Spirit. However, Cyril's words suggest that Christ was thought of as being present in the baptismal font, because he calls its water the "Christ-bearing waters." As we have seen, Cyril of Jerusalem and Serapion have the same idea that the Logos dwells in the baptismal waters. The description found in the newly discovered *Catechesis* of Theodore, however, leaves no doubt that it was the Holy Spirit who was invoked to come down upon the water.

This difference between Cyril and Theodore is typical of the theological development of the fourth century. After the First Council of Constantinople (381), the controversies regarding the divinity and personality of the Holy Spirit led to a stressing of the important role of the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Trinity. The writings of the Cappadocian Fathers are proof of this fact. Following the old axiom—*lex credendi legem statui supplicandi*—this development is also clear in the liturgical prayers. The divergence between Cyril and Theodore indicates this trend in the Syrian liturgy. Here as elsewhere the third person of the Trinity becomes more and more prominent. The theology of the Logos, which attributed the Incarnation, the inspiration of the prophets, and the consecration of the Eucharistic bread, as well as the sanctification of the baptismal font, to Christ, now gives way to the theology of the Holy Spirit.

We witness the same development in the West. Optatus of Milevis shares Cyril's view when he says: "Hic Christus est piscis qui in baptisate per invocationem fundalibus undis inseritur."<sup>11</sup> A few decades later Ambrose of Milan declares: "Aliud est elementum, aliud consecratio: aliud opus, aliud operatio. Aqua opus est, operatio Spiritus Sancti est. Non sanat aqua, nisi Spiritus descenderit et aquam illam consecraverit."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Theodore, *On Baptism*, 4 (ed. Mingana, 54-56).

<sup>11</sup> Optatus Milev, 3, 2 (ed. Ziwsa, *CSEL*, 26, 69).

<sup>12</sup> Ambrose, *De sacramentis*, 1, 5, 15 (ed. Quasten, 142); cf. Jerome, *Contra Luciferianos*, 6 (*PL*, 23, 169): "Neque enim aqua lavat animam, sed prius lavatur ipsa a Spiritu, ut alios lavare spiritualiter possit. Spiritus, inquit Moyses, Domini ferebatur super aquas. Ex quo apparet baptismum non esse sine Spiritu Sancto." For the history of the consecration of the baptismal font, cf. B. Neunheuser, "De benedictione aquae baptismalis," *Ephemerides Liturgicae*, IV (1930), 194-207, 258-81, 369-412, 455-92; F. Atchley, *On the Epiclesis of the Eucharistic Liturgy and the Consecration of the Font*, (1935); H. Scheidt, *Die Taufwasserweihegebete im Sinne vergleichender Liturgieforschung untersucht* (Münster, 1945).

This is the same theology as that of the inscription with which Pope Sixtus III decorated the Lateran baptistry in the first half of the fifth century. The inscription is still visible in its original place. The first four verses read as follows:

GENS SACRANDA POLIS HIC SEMINE NASCITUR ALMO  
 QUAM FECUNDATIS SPIRITUS EDIT AQUIS  
 VIRGINEO FAETU GENETRIX ECCLESIA NATOS  
 QUOS SPIRANTE DEO CONCIPIIT AMNE PARIT<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. the *Carmen in baptisterium* found in Paulinus of Nola, *Epistula* 32, 5 (ed. Hartel, *CSEL*, 29, 279):

Hic reparandarum generator fons animarum  
 Vium diuino lumine flumen agit.  
 Sanctus in hunc caelo descendit spiritus amnem  
 Caelestique sacras fonte maritat aquas;  
 Concipit unda Deum sanctamque liquoribus almis  
 Edit ab aeterno semine progeniem.

For the inscription of the Lateran baptistry, see F. J. Dölger, "Die Inschrift im Baptisterium S. Giovanni in Fonte an der Lateranensischen Basilika aus der Zeit Xystus' III (432-440) und die Symbolik des Taufbrunnens bei Leo dem Grossen," *Antike und Christentum*, II (1930), 252-257.