

# Making More Visible Our Invisible Baptismal Promises

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At the Easter Vigil in the Roman Catholic tradition, after any baptisms and confirmations have been completed, the assembly of the baptized stands. Worshipers pick up tapers previously lighted for the service of light that began the evening's liturgy. The presider or another liturgical minister lights a taper from the paschal candle and passes the light to some worshipers so they, in turn, can pass on the light to those around them. After everyone has stood and is holding a lighted taper, the presider turns to the assembly and says in these or similar words:

Dear friends, through the paschal mystery we have been buried with Christ in baptism, so that we may rise with him to newness of life. Now that we have completed our Lenten observance, let us renew the promises made in baptism, when we rejected Satan and all his works and promised to serve God faithfully in his holy catholic church.<sup>1</sup>

One would expect this invitation to be followed by some explicit promise-making on the part of the assembly. Since this is a "renewal," one would also expect to find actual promises made in the baptismal rite for children<sup>2</sup> and adults.<sup>3</sup> Surprisingly, this is not the case. Both the baptismal rite and the renewal rite consist of six interrogatories: three renunciations (of Satan, his works, and empty promises) and three affirmations of trinitarian faith corresponding to the three sections of the Apostles Creed. Indeed, the "I dos" of the believer do reflect faith in those propositions to which the mind now assents. But where are the "I wills," those future-oriented expressions of heart and will that reflect a commitment to live daily the Christian way of life, to be Christ's disciples, the very

vocation of all the baptized? Where are the promises to "serve God faithfully" that the presider, at the Easter Vigil, invites the faithful to renew?

The word for "promise" in Latin, *pro-missum*, means "before (or for)-mission." When the ritual for the congregation's renewal of baptismal promises, *De renovatione promissionum baptismatis*, was introduced in the restoration of the Easter Vigil<sup>4</sup> and officially accepted in the revision of Holy Week,<sup>5</sup> those who crafted the 1955 rite clearly recognized the connection between baptism and mission:

There is the blessing of the baptismal water, in which, "buried together with Christ" unto the death of sin, we rise again with the same Christ so that "we may walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4). Then, by the renewal of our baptismal vows we promise to bear witness before all by our lives and our conduct to this grace which Christ has merited for us and which he confers upon us in baptism.<sup>6</sup>

Oddly, in the liturgical innovation of *De renovatione promissionum baptismatis*, the promise that is theologically implicit—"to bear witness before all by our lives and our conduct to this grace"—is liturgically invisible in the rite that was actually promulgated. How, then, can the rite of renewal help Roman Catholics to make the intended connections between their baptism and their conduct in daily life? How might the implicit baptismal promises be made "visible" and inspire the baptized to "walk in newness of life" every day of their lives? What difference might that baptismal orientation make? As Anthony J. Gittens avers, "If more Christians were more aware of the unrealized potential of their baptism and encouraged to activate it, the world would be a very different place."<sup>7</sup>

## Making Our Promises More "Visible"

Some twenty-five years ago in an article in *America* magazine, "Baptismal Promises: Making the Words Bite," William E. Reiser, S.J., noted the problem of what I am calling the "invisible promises."<sup>8</sup> He called the renewal of baptismal promises "one of the less meaningful parts of the Holy Saturday vigil service."<sup>9</sup> In his own parish, he experimented with an expansion of the questions asked of the assembly. "Because baptismal spirituality is really the foundation for Christian living, might it not be a good idea to formulate promises that highlight this foundation?" he asks.<sup>10</sup> He offers seven examples of "promises that would help to make the underlying meaning of baptism clearer":

Do you accept Jesus as your teacher, as the example whom you will always imitate and as the one in whom the mystery of God's love for the world has been fully revealed?

Do you dedicate yourselves to seeking the kingdom of God and God's justice, to praying daily, to meditating on the Gospels and to celebrating the Eucharist faithfully and devoutly?

Do you commit yourself to that spirit of poverty and detachment that Jesus enjoined on His disciples, and to resisting that spirit of consumerism and materialism that is so strong in our culture?

Do you accept your responsibility for building the community, for being people of compassion and reconciliation, for being mindful of those who are poor and oppressed, and for truly forgiving those who have offended you?

Will you try to thank and praise God by your works and by your actions, in times of prosperity as well as in moments of suffering, giving loyal witness to the risen Jesus by your faith, by your hope and by the style of your living?

Do you surrender your lives to God as disciples and companions of Jesus? Do you believe that God is Lord of history, sovereign over nations and peoples, and that God's promise to redeem all of creation from its bondage to death and decay will one day be accomplished?

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, and life everlasting?<sup>11</sup>

Reiser reported, "The congregation welcomed this little innovation."<sup>12</sup> He urged others to consider expansion of these questions, too:

Christian existence is a lifelong "Amen" and an "I do" to baptismal faith. We should do whatever we can, particularly in the context of our liturgies, to help one another to realize the meaning of faith. Questions such as "Do you reject sin?" or "Do you reject the glamour of evil?" need to be spelled out so that people have a firm idea about what exactly they are being asked to reject. And the profession of faith, at least on one night of the year, could be made to reflect those things that define us as disciples of Jesus in a practical way. Prayer, forgiveness, the Eucharist, the spirit of poverty, community, following Jesus—these are some of the living doctrines that bite into our lives.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, Reiser was not the first to recognize that something more was needed if people were to make connections between their baptism, their baptismal promises, and how they lived their daily lives. The Episcopal Church USA introduced The Baptismal Covenant in its 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*.<sup>14</sup> After baptisms at the Easter Vigil, the celebrant addresses the assembly in words very similar to those found in the Roman

Catholic Easter Vigil rite.<sup>15</sup> Unlike the Roman Rite, though, in the Episcopal service after the renunciation and the profession comes "The Renewal of Baptismal Vows" that includes a series of five questions to which the entire assembly responds: "I will, with God's help." These questions are also found as an integral part of every occasion when Episcopal communities celebrate baptism, confirmation, or reaffirmation of baptism as part of reception into the Episcopal Church.<sup>16</sup> These questions actually *do* call for promise-making with regard to living the Christian life:

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?<sup>17</sup>

The baptismal covenant has become a cornerstone of Episcopal theological reflection and action about what "baptismal living" means.<sup>18</sup> The language of its promises is often the theological basis for resolutions presented for vote at diocesan and national conventions. To varying degrees the promises have entered the consciousness of Episcopalians and have connected them with their daily lives, ministries, and missions. In a study of forty congregations regarding the degree to which the baptismal covenant ritual has made an impact upon congregants who are active in ministry, Nancy Ann McLaughlin concludes that

For the past twenty-five years the Episcopal Church has had a baptismal ritual that emphatically defines baptism as the initiation of the Christian's life of ministry, and its implications are beginning to take root. The official canons of the church, also, have progressively developed in this area and currently define the importance of all baptized persons by stating: "Each Diocese shall make provision for the affirmation and development of the ministry of all the baptized persons . . ." <sup>19</sup>

Having a ritual with explicit promises made does not automatically help people to make the connections between God's call in baptism and their service to others. But it can, over time, affect the very language people use in such discernment. In her interviews with non-ordained Episcopalians who were active in their congregations, twenty-five percent "*did* use the baptismal covenant language." Furthermore, "Some congregations as a

whole did make reference to the people living out their baptismal covenant . . . ”<sup>20</sup>

Given the lack of a baptismal covenant in their liturgy, what can Roman Catholics do, when they renew their baptismal vows, to make visible and concrete the invisible “promises” made in baptism to “serve God faithfully,” by bearing witness to God’s grace before all “by our lives and our conduct”? Following are some options to consider.

### A. *Modify the Renewal of Baptismal Promises: A Local Catholic Experiment*

Six years ago at a Roman Catholic church known for its parishioners’ commitment to social justice and liturgy, I joined the community for its Easter Vigil. I was startled and quite moved by being asked to make promises that, among other things, dealt with how I would live my life, how I would proclaim the Gospel by my life, how I would respect and serve my neighbor, how I would care for the poor and marginalized, and how I would support and work for social justice. The language was powerful and provocative. How had those promises come into that liturgy, I wondered? This past year I asked one of my students who was a member of that parish to find out. He discovered that a former pastor had, in fact, taken to heart William Reiser’s *America* challenge of making the baptismal promises “bite.”<sup>21</sup> Even though that pastor has since retired, the community still adds explicit promises to its Easter Vigil renewal of baptismal promises. An examination of the Easter Vigil promises made in 2010 (in English and Spanish) reveals they are very similar to the ones made in the Episcopal Church, The Baptismal Covenant, but with local variations that are reminiscent of Reiser’s suggestions:

. . . let us renew the promises we made in baptism, when we rejected Satan and his works and promised to serve God faithfully in his holy catholic church. *Please respond vigorously, por favor, responde con fuerza . . .*<sup>22</sup>

Do you renounce injustice, war, selfishness and all sins of materialism, power and pleasure? *I do! (Sí, renuncio!)* . . .

Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching, in companionship, in the breaking of the bread, and in prayer? *I will!*

¿Comprometen proclamar el evangelio de Cristo por hecho y ejemplo, y amar a los prójimos como Cristo nos ha amado? *¡Sí, prometo!*

[*Translation: Will you undertake to proclaim the gospel of Christ, in fact and example, and to love our neighbors as Christ loved us?*]

Will you persevere in opposing injustice, striving for peace among all people, reverencing the holiness of the earth and its creatures, and respecting the dignity of every human being? *I will!*<sup>23</sup>

While it is unlikely that an official Roman Catholic liturgical reform will take up the question of revising the rite of renewal of baptismal promises any time soon, expansion of the existing rite is not out of the question, as this local example indicates. A local parish considering expanding upon its promises might look for inspiration not only at the Episcopal baptismal covenant, but also at the model provided by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in its last two ritual books, both versions of which reflect dialogue with ecumenical liturgical reformers, including those involved in the innovation of the Episcopal baptismal covenant.<sup>24</sup> In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s rite of “Holy Baptism” and the rite of “Affirmation of Baptism,” this denomination provides another model of how to make more explicit one’s baptismal promises:

*The presiding minister addresses those making public affirmation of baptism.*

You have made public profession of your faith. Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism:

to live among God’s faithful people,

to hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s supper,

to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,

to serve all people, following the example of Jesus,

and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.<sup>25</sup>

### B. *Pay Greater Attention to Liturgical Action*

The lighting of the new fire and the sharing of the light at the beginning of the Easter Vigil is a powerful communal experience. Worshipers often remark about the impact of witnessing the growing of the light in a darkened worship space as worshipers pass the new light from person to person. The restored Easter Vigil, when it was introduced on an experimental basis in 1951, also included among its new congregational actions the re-lighting of tapers for the liturgical moment of the renewal of baptismal promises.<sup>26</sup> This awesome but simple ritual communicates at a fundamental, primal sensory level that all the baptized members of this congregation, both individually and collectively, are called to carry the light of Christ into the world. How the second lighting of people’s tapers for the renewal of baptismal promises is executed matters. Unless lights

in a church are dimmed first, that encore candle-lighting ritual simply does not have the same sensory impact on the assembly. That may be why, in some churches where I have worshiped, the liturgical leaders forget or do not think it important to ask people to re-light their candles for the renunciation and profession. This is unfortunate, since the re-lighting of candles was one of the new features of the restored Easter Vigil that, along with the innovation of the renewal of baptismal promises being in the vernacular, was especially designed to foster the fuller, more active participation of the people as they recall and renew their baptisms.<sup>27</sup> After the Vigil, it is not uncommon for ushers to collect these tapers. Why? Could not the carrying of the taper back home be a reminder of the promises made and potentially visually connect liturgy and life? Perhaps, to add another layer of intentionality to their preparation and participation, people might even be encouraged to bring their own candles to the service. A more substantial candle might more likely find a place in a home at the Easter Sunday table or in a home shrine.

Of course, a powerful reminder of baptism in any worship space would be a prominent baptismal pool or font with running water that worshipers regularly encounter as they enter and depart from a worship space. In many churches that have a permanent baptismal pool and upper font, the Easter Vigil presider invites the community to actually “come to the water” to bless themselves with it or in other ways physically encounter it. This non-verbal congregational liturgical action, performed while the drenched neophytes are changing into dry baptismal garments, makes a deep impression on those young and old who participate.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, by blessing themselves every Sunday with living water flowing from baptismal fonts as they enter and depart from liturgy, the baptized may regularly re-connect the waters of their baptism with the Body and Blood of Christ which they receive and are called to become as participants in the Eucharist.

### C. Consider the Contribution of Visual Images

Around the time William Reiser was making his suggestions about modifying the words of the renewal of baptismal promises, Robert Hovda took up the topic of adding another nonverbal layer to this liturgical moment through the introduction of imagery:<sup>29</sup>

While it would involve exceptional talents and a lot of work to do it beautifully and appropriately, perhaps nonverbals could come to our aid at the point of renunciation. Some kind of visual representation of our contemporary idols—e.g., money, property, coercive power, “dog eat dog” competition, “putting down” sex, color, class, social

status groups different from one’s own—might be used effectively. A picture is worth a thousand words.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to visual representations of the evils that we are called by our baptism to renounce, images that help people to reflect on that which baptism calls them *do* in their daily lives could be effective. For example, images of social injustices that Hovda alludes to could be followed by images of people working to transform the systems that perpetuate these injustices or by images of the victimized with those people who care for them or who are fighting alongside them.

Hovda suggested that that “picture” might include “brief dramatic forms, in posters or placards or projected slides, in mime” but cautioned that the “pictures” in whatever medium would need to be “simply and boldly represented, and easily recognizable,” a determination made only upon sufficient experimentation beforehand. With the ready availability and portability of video projectors today, including low-priced handheld pocket micro-projectors the size of cell phones, communities might experiment with projection of media art in various parts of a worship space on multiple surfaces, such as suspended fabric, walls, and even on ceilings. Regardless of the medium or combinations of media or performance arts, though, great care must be taken so that projection of images does not compete with but rather contributes to and adds depth to the meaning of the baptismal faith and commitments that are being renewed. The timing and sequence of images, as well as the subject matter, need to layer and to enhance the experience and not in any way to take away from the people’s active engagement in saying their “I do” and their “I will.”

### D. Expand Appointed Times for Renewal or Affirmation of Baptism

For Roman Catholics, the practice of renewing one’s baptismal promises on a more-than-once-a-year basis might make a difference. At least that was the thinking behind Joseph Feeney’s exhortation to participants at the 1952 Liturgical Week in Cleveland. He wanted the renewal of baptismal promises to have a long-term impact on the actions and imaginations of the baptized. He addressed this ongoing pastoral challenge by suggesting that the baptized encounter their baptismal promises more frequently: “Surely it is not too early to expect our bishops and heads of religious communities to prescribe a more frequent renewal of baptismal vows. On retreats, during days of recollection, in missions given in parishes, at times when sermons are preached on Baptism, could we do better than have all gathered renounce evil and openly profess their faith?”<sup>31</sup>

He recommended that the renewal be part of Easter Sunday morning Masses, of confessions “especially of those sinners of the more hardened consciences,” and as part of the faithful’s preparation for death.<sup>32</sup> He suggested printing the texts on prayer card book markers, locating a copy of the promises near the holy water fonts at the doors of every church, and celebrating one’s baptismal day annually with their recitation.<sup>33</sup> He appealed to church leaders to add significant-sized baptismal fonts or baptisteries to their worship spaces. He urged clergy to do catechesis about the promises at every baptism, so that these vows might “no longer be words to regard lightly, but that in the most solemn manner they may become what they signify.”<sup>34</sup> Sixty years later, Feeney’s concern and his advice remain relevant for the Roman Catholic church.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Episcopal Church USA have attended to the felt need for congregations’ regular encounter with baptism and their baptismal promises. Both churches have prescribed specific occasions throughout the liturgical year (in addition to Easter Vigil) when baptism and congregational affirmation of baptismal promises—done in the context of Sunday worship—are appropriate. In the ELCA ritual book, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, the preface to the rite of affirmation of baptism states.

Affirmation of Baptism may be used at many times in the life of a baptized Christian. It is especially appropriate as part of a process of formation of faith in youth or adulthood (confirmation), at the time of beginning one’s participation in a community of faith, as a sign of renewed participation in the life of the church, or at the time of a significant life passage. The order may be adapted for use by the whole assembly. Appropriate times for use include the Baptism of the Lord, the Vigil of Easter, the Day of Pentecost, All Saints Day, and significant occasions in the life of a congregation, such as an anniversary.<sup>35</sup>

Besides Easter Vigil, *The Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church USA also prescribes multiple occasions for celebrating baptism and for renewing the baptismal covenant. They include Sundays and feasts, especially the feasts of The Baptism of the Lord (the First Sunday after the Epiphany), Pentecost, All Saints, and any other Sunday on which the bishop is present. Even when no baptisms are celebrated on these days, the assembly still renews its baptismal covenant.<sup>36</sup> Baptisms and renewals of baptismal promises are particularly appropriate on these liturgical occasions when the Scripture proclaimed, the prayers pronounced, the preaching offered, and the music heard and sung emphasize themes associated with baptism: sharing in the priestly, prophetic, and messianic ministry of Christ; living the Spirit-filled life; and following in the example of the saints.

This larger vision of how an affirmation or renewal of baptismal promises might fit into the ongoing liturgical life of any faith community deserves serious consideration in Roman Catholic quarters. Why not highlight baptism and its implications more regularly?

### E. Celebrate Baptisms at Sunday Eucharist

Potentially, any Sunday Eucharist when a baptism takes place can be an occasion for the members of the assembly to recall their own baptisms. In the early church, the integration of baptisms into the Sunday liturgy was the norm. This communal element of baptismal practice and its connection to Eucharist was lost when, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, concern about infant mortality and individual original sin led to the practice of baptizing infants as soon as possible, often in private. Despite what we now know about the unity of baptism and Eucharist in early church initiation, Roman Catholic parish leaders often schedule the baptism of infants on Saturdays or Sunday afternoons for the convenience of families and priests or out of concern about lengthening the Sunday liturgy. The *praenotanda* of the Rite of Baptism for Children unfortunately supports this decision by suggesting, without offering any theological rationale, that baptism during Eucharist ought to be the exception, rather than the norm:

9. To bring out the paschal character of baptism, it is recommended that the sacrament be celebrated during the Easter Vigil or on Sunday, when the Church commemorates the Lord’s resurrection. On Sunday, baptism may be celebrated *even during Mass*, so that the entire community may be present and the relationship between baptism and eucharist may be clearly seen; but this should not be done too often.<sup>37</sup>

Since Thomas Cranmer revised the baptismal rite for the Church of England in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Anglicans have had a strong sense that baptism belongs in the midst of the worshipping Sunday assembly. The 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* directed that baptisms be held at Sunday worship, “when the most people are present,” so that worshipers would be put in mind of their own baptism.<sup>38</sup> In most Roman Catholic parishes, that priority has yet to be reclaimed, although some parishes have taken the option to celebrate baptism during Sunday Eucharist to good effect. In the Catholic Community of Christ the King in Las Vegas, Nevada, every baptism is performed in the course of Sunday liturgy—more than 250 baptisms per year.<sup>39</sup> For this congregation, frequent baptisms at Sunday Eucharist bring great joy to the assembly and help to form them as a baptized people called and sent to be light for the world.

According to Justin the Martyr writing in the second century, those newly baptized at Sunday Eucharist would begin sharing in the ministry of the church by participating in the prayers for the church and the world.

But after we have washed those who have believed and have joined us, we bring them to where those who are called brethren have assembled. In this way we may offer prayer in common both for ourselves and for those who have received illumination and for people everywhere, doing so with all our hearts so that we may be deemed worthy, now that we have learned the truth, and by our works be found to be good citizens and keepers of the commandments.<sup>40</sup>

Today, intercessions in the prayers of the faithful could serve as a reminder to the entire assembly of the connection between baptism and daily life. To highlight the significance of their everyday callings as being part of their baptismal call “to serve with joy and courage,”<sup>41</sup> the petitions could invite the community to pray for people engaged in specific daily occupations, life situations, and vocations that are ones normally not mentioned. Might worshipers take notice if there were prayers for plumbers, garbage collectors, hotel maids, engineers, kitchen dishwashers, small business owners, therapists, or struggling writers? How might the community’s vision of themselves as doing God’s work change if they were to hear petitions for accountants, hair stylists, architects, medical technicians, cafeteria workers, welders, construction workers, assembly line workers, insurance agents, fast-food servers, administrative assistants, or corporate executives? The Roman Catholic Church teaches that whether people are engaged in “teaching, cosmetology, medicine, the arts, house painting, real estate,” or in social services, government, research, manufacturing, media, social justice, and ecological activism, or in care for loved ones or anyone in need, how they live their lives is a response to that original call to new life in Christ.<sup>42</sup> Intercessory prayer for people whose daily lives usually go unmentioned in the prayers of the faithful could spark deeper reflection on the many ways the baptized can and do respond to God’s call, especially when such prayers are included during a baptismal Sunday Eucharist.

#### *F. Offer Mystagogy and Ongoing Faith Formation Opportunities*

After the reform of Holy Week in 1956, Clifford Howell was worried: “In practically every church where the restored Vigil has been carried out, its reception has been enthusiastic. But this fact alone is no proof that it has been truly effective of its *intrinsic* purpose.”<sup>43</sup> He expressed concern

about what would happen when the novelty of the restored Easter Vigil and its innovative vernacular renewal of baptismal promises had worn off:

It may well be that the people have been delighted with the novelty, with its picturesqueness, with the thrill of having something interesting to watch and to do, with the impressiveness of the gradual spread of the candle flames in the darkened church.

They have been captivated, indeed: but perhaps, as yet, only with the externals. . . . It is imperative, therefore, that the appreciation which the faithful now have of this ceremony should be deepened; they must be helped to penetrate through these externals, and to achieve that renewal of mind and heart and will which alone constitutes the genuine good of their souls.<sup>44</sup>

If Roman Catholics are to “penetrate through these externals” of their baptismal promises renewed at Easter Vigil, or at any other time, they need to bring to that ritual more than a candle. The rite is not magic. “Renewal of mind and heart and will” requires daily ongoing conversion, prayer, and meaning-making. The rite is a point in time after which people go on making choices about how they will live their lives. In what directions should they go? To what is God calling them? The rite can be a moment of affirmation, an “I do” to living out the ordinary callings of their daily lives in light of their baptismal vocation, to be disciples of Christ called to transform the world they encounter every day. For that “I do” to reverberate beyond the rite into daily life, Roman Catholics need year-round “contexting” opportunities in communal catechesis, theological reflection, and mystagogy that provide a background against which the baptized can examine their lives as disciples. Communal wrestling with the implications of baptism would allow the baptized to proclaim their “I do” with more intentionality and authenticity.

In terms of catechesis, simply introducing Roman Catholics to some of the many, many documents from Vatican II and since that reflect upon the vocation of the baptized could help.<sup>45</sup> Roman Catholic popes, bishops, and theologians have written eloquently about the laity and about God’s call to them. Sometimes those ordained authors writing the documents have even consulted and welcomed the help of the lay subjects of their teaching. The words are wonderful, inspirational, and provocative. However, they are light buried under the proverbial bushel basket. Most Roman Catholics have yet to hear that they

. . . are marvellously called and prepared so that ever richer fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them. For all their works, if accomplished in the Spirit, become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God

through Jesus Christ: their prayers and apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, realization of mind and body, even the hardships of life if patiently borne (see Pet 2:5).<sup>46</sup>

Opportunities for communal theological reflection are also essential. To discern their individual and communal callings, Christians need the help of the “The Gifted We.” Theologians Matthias Scharer and Bernd Jochen Hilbereth coined this term. In leading group theological reflection in workshops and seminars, they have watched with gratitude and awe as the “We” emerges among a group of individuals who may never have known each other before. “‘Successful’ communication is not something ‘made’ but something ‘given’; it is a gift given by the Other, who is relationship and who spiritually indwells in each of us.”<sup>47</sup> Of course, the dynamics and outcome of the sharing within a gathered circle of participants depends upon the vivifying Spirit of God:

. . . group experience is something that belongs to the core of our faith, the experience of God’s gift calling so many different people to the discipleship of Jesus Christ and giving them life in his Spirit. Precisely because this gift is not of our making, because we can’t control it, it liberates and enriches us. We are gift for one another; therein is rooted the free character of the We that constitutes church.<sup>48</sup>

The baptized need multiple opportunities and contexts in which to contemplate together—in the midst of the “Gifted We”—what difference being baptized makes. The renewal of baptismal promises at the Easter Vigil, however well performed, is but one moment that needs to be part of a larger matrix of opportunities for meaning making. How can the baptized daily “bear witness before all by our lives and our conduct” of the grace of Christ? Only with God’s help . . . and each other’s.

Finally, mystagogical reflection on liturgical experience is a resource too often overlooked. One potentially fruitful topic for communal mystagogy might be the co-missioning implicit and explicit in the dismissal rite at the end of Eucharist. By baptism we are called to discipleship, and by Eucharist we are nourished for responding, again and again, to that call. In the forthcoming English translation of the Third Edition of the Roman Missal are two new dismissal options worth contemplation: “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord” and “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.”<sup>49</sup> As Pope Benedict XVI has noted, “These few words succinctly express the missionary nature of the Church. The People of God might be helped to understand more clearly this essential dimension of the Church’s life, taking the dismissal as a starting-point.”<sup>50</sup>

Concludes Gregory F. Augustine Pierce in *The Mass Is Never Ended*: “[T]he Dismissal from Mass originally meant that we were being ‘shot

like out of a cannon’ back into the world to carry out a ‘mission’ that was central to why we had come together to celebrate Mass in the first place . . . to transform the world into a place much more like the way God would have things.”<sup>51</sup> On the face of it, it is a “mission impossible”: “Not only is it obvious that we, the ‘people of God,’ have not succeeded the entire time we have been on this mission, but it is also obvious that we will not succeed in accomplishing it in the future. So why even try?...because Jesus asked us to try.”<sup>52</sup> The Spirit of God sent Jesus forth on mission and continues to en-spirit the baptized whom Christ sends forth on mission today. Writes Anthony J. Gittens: “If we believe we are baptized with the same baptism, by the same Spirit, and in the very name of Jesus, then we too are to be sent, co-missioned in Jesus’ name, as the disciples who continue the ‘good newsing’—not through our own power or initiative but by becoming instruments of God’s power and responders to God’s call through Jesus.”<sup>53</sup>

If Roman Catholics (and other Christians) are to accept this “mission impossible” again and again, they cannot go it alone any more than did Jesus’ disciples whom he sent out together. To discover to whom and to where they are sent and why, the baptized best do at least some of that deep reflection and connection-making in group processes of catechetical and mystagogical reflection related to the liturgy of the church and the liturgy of the world in which baptismal life exists.

Communal experience of baptism, communal renewal or affirmation of baptism, communal prayers for people in all walks of life, communal action on behalf of the suffering, and communal reflection on how we all are sent forth “to walk in newness of life” and to be everyday “good newsmen” of Jesus the Christ wherever we may walk—these opportunities offer the stuff of life-ong mystagogy. In the midst of the “Gifted We,” we can individually and corporately celebrate, preach, reflect upon, and express publicly the fruits of this discernment. For, it is in the midst of a liturgical assembly, in the sharing of a faith formation gathering, in the poetic association-making of a mystagogical reflection, and in the living of the Christian life daily, that our “invisible” baptismal promises might just possibly become more . . . and more . . . and more visible.

## NOTES

1. “Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation (Easter Vigil),” *The Rites of the Catholic Church Volume One: Study Edition* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990), 165.

2. “Baptism for Children,” *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, 359-466.

3. “Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation (Easter Vigil),” *The Rites*

of the Catholic Church Volume One: Study Edition (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 148-167.

4. In the *Missale Romanum*, the Latin title for this ritual is *De renovatione promissionum baptismatis*. The Vatican Sacred Congregation of Rites released, as an experiment, a restored and revised Easter Vigil in 1951. *Rubricae Sabbato sancto servandae si vigilia paschalis instaurata peragatur*, was promulgated after the decree of February 9, 1951, *Dominicae Resurrectionis vigiliam*, on the restoration of Easter Vigil, AAS 43 (1951) 130-137.

5. *Liturgicus Hebdomadae Sanctae Ordo Instauratur*, AAS 47 (1955) 838-47; English translation: R. Kevin Seasoltz, "The Restoration of the Holy Week Order: Decree and Instruction of the Sacred Congregation of Rites, November 16, 1955" in *The New Liturgy: A Documentation 1903-1965* (New York NY: Herder and Herder, 1966), 209-18.

6. *Liturgicus Hebdomadae Sanctae Ordo Instauratur*, AAS 47 (1955), 838-47; English translation: R. Kevin Seasoltz, "The Restoration of the Holy Week Order: Decree and Instruction of the Sacred Congregation of Rites, November 16, 1955" in *The New Liturgy*, 209-18, 215.

7. Anthony J. Gittins, *Called to be Sent: Co-Missioned as Disciples Today* (Liguori, MO: Liguori, 2008), 41.

8. William E. Reiser, "Baptismal Promises: Making the Words Bite," *America* 154, no. 7 (February 22, 1986), 133-34.

9. *Ibid.*, 133.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 133-34. Reiser went on to write a book, *Renewing the Baptismal Promises: Their Meaning for Christian Life* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1988).

12. Reiser, "Baptismal Promises: Making the Words Bite," 134.

13. *Ibid.*

14. For insight into the process by which this innovation entered the Episcopal prayer book, see Ruth A. Meyers, *Continuing the Reform: Re-Visiting Baptism in the Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Publishing, 1997), 205-06.

15. *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 292.

16. Besides Easter Vigil, prescribed occasions for celebrating baptism in the Episcopal Church USA are Sundays and feasts, especially the feasts of The Baptism of the Lord (the First Sunday after the Epiphany), Pentecost, All Saints, and on any other Sunday on which the bishop is present. Even when no baptisms are celebrated on these days, the assembly still renews its baptismal covenant. See *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 312.

17. *Ibid.*, 304-05.

18. See Fredrica Harris Thompsett, "Baptismal Living: Steadfast Covenant of Hope," *Anglican Theological Review* 86, no. 1 (Winter 2004), 9-18.

19. Nancy Ann McLaughlin, *Do You Believe? Living the Baptismal Covenant* (Harrisburg PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2006), 104. The Canon to which she refers is, "Title III: Ministry, Canon i: Of the Ministry of All Baptized Persons, Section 1," *Constitutions & Canons*, 203, 59.

20. McLaughlin, *Do You Believe? Living the Baptismal Covenant*, 105.

21. "The promises were thought to be too familiar and thus were domesticated. Fr. Bob continued to share that what he likes about the way [the parish] states them is that the promises are 'stretched out,' calling our attention to them and to the implications of what is being promised. The added words helped with stressing its importance since the renewal of baptism is the finale of the Lenten journey. The purpose never was to replace the vows in the Roman Rite, but to give people a deeper understanding of the promises that have become domesticated through many years of monotonous presentation." Brian Michalski, "Reflecting on the Renewal of Baptismal Promises" (May 2010), unpublished paper for W4200 Sacraments I: Initiation and Reconciliation at Catholic Theological Union.

22. Included in this excerpt are only the affirmations not usually in the ritual and none of the renunciations.

23. Michalski, "Reflecting on the Renewal of Baptismal Promises," 1-2.

24. The first version of the Lutheran "Affirmation of Baptism" came out in its 1978 ritual book, *The Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1978). In 1979, the Episcopal baptismal covenant first appeared in that denomination's *Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979).

25. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Pew Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 236. This latest version modifies promises provided in "Holy Baptism," 121-22, and "Affirmation of Baptism," 201, in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*.

26. Explained Frederick R. McManus: "The Restored Vigil is made popular in the best sense—by the introduction of the baptismal promises, by the considerable part assigned to the faithful, and by the observance of the vigil in the night hours when people can be present more easily." Frederick R. McManus, *The Ceremonies of the Easter Vigil* (Paterson NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1953), viii.

27. Godfrey Diekmann, *The Easter Vigil: Arranged for Use in Parishes* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1953), 3: "Especially noteworthy is the eagerness of the Holy See to encourage the intelligent and active assistance of the congregation. It is for this reason that most of the changes have been introduced: all are to receive and hold the flame from the Easter Candle; all are to join in the responses and in the Litany [of the Saints]; all are to hear and understand the readings; all are to renew their baptismal promises; the services are so arranged in the sanctuary that all may see, etc."

28. See examples of this liturgical action in the video documentaries *This is the Night* (1992) and *The Liturgies of the Triduum: Easter Vigil* (1999) produced by Liturgy Training Publications. While no longer sold, copies of these videos might be available for borrowing from diocesan or seminary libraries.

29. Robert W. Hovda, "The Renunciation of Evil and Profession of Faith" in *Commentaries on the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, James A. Wilde, ed. (Chicago IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988), 99-104.



30. Ibid., 103.

31. Joseph Feeney, "The Renewal of Baptismal Vows" in *The Easter Vigil, National Liturgical Week, Cleveland, Ohio, August 19-21, 1952* (Elsberry, MO: The Liturgical Conference, 1953), 102.

32. In 1972 a renewal of baptismal promises, in the interrogatory form of the Apostles Creed, became a ritual element in the "The Celebration of Viaticum," 852, in the "Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum," *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, 759-908.

33. If baptisms were regularly celebrated in parish liturgies on Epiphany/ The Baptism of the Lord, Pentecost, and All Saints, all those baptized on those feasts would have an annual occasion for publicly celebrating their baptism by re-lighting their baptismal candles, renewing their baptismal promises, and reflecting upon their own "baptismal living."

34. Joseph Feeney, "The Renewal of Baptismal Vows" in *The Easter Vigil*, 102-03.

35. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Pew Edition*, 234.

36. *The Book of Common Prayer*, 312.

37. "The Rite of Baptism for Children" in *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, 369; emphasis added.

38. "Wherefore the people are to be admonished, that it is most convenient that baptism should not be administered but upon Sundays and other Holy-days, when the most number of people may come together: as well for that the congregation there present may testify the receiving of them that the newly baptized into the number of Christ's church; as also because in the baptism of infants every man present may be put in remembrance of his own profession made to God in his baptism." "Of the Administration of Public Baptism" in *The Book of Common Prayer, commonly called the First Book of Edward VI* (New York: Church Calendar Press, 1881), 232. <http://www.archive.org/details/bookofcommonprays00chur> (accessed December 23, 2010).

39. See the video documentary, *New Life: A Parish Celebrates Infant Baptism*, a production I co-produced for Liturgy Training Publications and Tabor Publishing (1996), that features this parish and its baptismal practices.

40. Justin Martyr, Chapter 65, "Apology I" in Lawrence J. Johnson, ed., *Worship in the Early Church: An Anthology of Historical Sources, Volume One* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009), 67.

41. "Remind us day after day of our baptismal call to serve with joy and courage" is a line from the opening prayer of a pastoral letter from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium," 1995, page 1 of 10. This document does not use article or paragraph numbers. <http://www.nccbuscc.org/laity/calleden.shtml> (accessed November 16, 2010).

42. Ibid., paragraph 8, page 2 of 10.

43. Clifford Howell, *Preparing for Easter* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1957), 6.

44. Ibid.

45. For example, see the role of the laity in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963); *Lumen gentium* (1964), especially Chapters 2, 4, and 5; *Apostolicae actuositatem* (1965); *Gaudium et spes* (1965); Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975), especially no. 21; John Paul II, *Christifideles laici* (1988); U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Called and Gifted: The American Catholic Laity" (1980); U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium" (1995); U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry" (2005).

46. No. 34, *Lumen gentium* in the "Revised Translation in Inclusive Language" edition of Austin Flannery, ed., *The Basic Documents: Vatican II Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations* (Northport NY: Costello Publishing, 1996), 52.

47. Matthias Schärer and Bernd Jochen Hilbereth, *The Practice of Communicative Theology: An Introduction to a New Theological Culture: An Introduction to a New Theological Culture* (New York: Crossroad, 2008), 45.

48. Ibid., 94.

49. Options as indicated in the Order of Mass of the 2010 Roman Missal. [https://wikispooks.com/w/images/6/63/2010\\_Order\\_of\\_Mass\\_Final\\_US\\_color.pdf](https://wikispooks.com/w/images/6/63/2010_Order_of_Mass_Final_US_color.pdf) (accessed December 16, 2010). Options for the dismissal at liturgies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America include: "Go in peace. Serve the Lord," "Go in peace. Remember the poor," "Go in peace. Share the good news," and "Go in peace, Christ is with you." *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Pew Edition*, 222.

50. Benedict XVI, no. 51, *Sacramentum caritatis* (February 22, 2007). [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_exh\\_20070222\\_sacramentum-caritatis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis_en.html); (accessed December 14, 2010). Also see John Paul II, no. 25, *Mane nobiscum Domine* (October 7, 2004): "The Eucharist not only provides the interior strength needed for this mission, but is also—in some sense—*its plan*. For the Eucharist is a mode of being, which passes from Jesus into each Christian, through whose testimony it is meant to spread throughout society and culture. For this to happen, each member of the faithful must assimilate, through personal and communal meditation, the values which the Eucharist expresses, the attitudes it inspires, the resolutions to which it gives rise." [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_20041008\\_mane-nobiscum-domine\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20041008_mane-nobiscum-domine_en.html) (accessed December 14, 2010).

51. Gregory F. Augustine Pierce, *The Mass is Never Ended: Rediscovering Our Mission to Transform the World* (Notre Dame IN: Ave Maria Press, 2007), 38.

52. Ibid., 39.

53. Gittins, *Called to be Sent*, 40.