

# Rite of Baptism for Children: Critique and Prospects

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Frank Henderson's Page on Liturgy and Medieval Women  
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The entire Winter 1999 issue of *Liturgical Ministry* is devoted to Infant Baptism. Other articles include:

The References to the Holy Spirit in the Liturgies of Baptism for Children,  
James. A. Schmeiser  
Baptismal Imagery: The Meeting of Two Worlds, Michael G. Witczak  
Baptism and Sunday Eucharist, James Challancin  
Music for the Baptismal Rite, Mary Alice O'Connor

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The principles and practical suggestions considered here are expressed in concrete liturgical form in two model liturgies posted on this website:

[Baptism and First Eucharist: A Model Liturgy](#)  
[Christian Initiation of Infants: A Model Liturgy](#)

## Introduction

The rite of baptism for children (RBC) was among the first Roman Catholic liturgies to be revised after Vatican Council II. The *Ordo Baptismi Parvulorum* was published in 1969, and the English translation became available later the same year. A second, slightly revised edition of the Latin text was issued in 1973; this is presented in the 1989 edition now in use in English Canada.<sup>1</sup>

We have had almost thirty years of pastoral experience with RBC and possess a wealth of commentaries on it.<sup>2</sup> RBC expressed a radical shift in thinking and practice away from the tridentine rite that preceded it. For example, RBC moved away from the centuries-old view that parents and godparents are proxies for the infants; it moved away from the view that baptism is a battle between God and Satan for the soul of the infants; and it moved away from the view that baptism is independent of word, eucharist, Sunday, and the local liturgical assembly. It is apparent, however, that some of these changes were not carried to their logical conclusions, and that some revisions were not implemented as well as we might expect today.

We also have the rite of Christian initiation of adults (RCIA), associated commentaries and studies, and considerable pastoral experience with this extended liturgy; these have provided a new way of thinking about Christian initiation.<sup>3</sup> The application of some features of RCIA to the baptism of infants has been widely considered.

In addition, we have also had thirty years experience with the postconciliar liturgical reforms as a whole. Further, as new rites and new editions have been published, there have been developments with respect to such matters as language, ministry, options, addition of newly composed texts, and presentation. Other churches have also prepared revised liturgies of baptism.

All these considerations suggest both a need and an opportunity to reevaluate and improve RBC. In presenting a critique of RBC, I do not intend to be negative, but rather seek to improve a rite that has served the church these last thirty years.<sup>4</sup>

Though RBC itself is the main starting place, two other presuppositions also shape this critique. First, I take the position that complete Christian initiation (baptism, confirmation, eucharist) is appropriate for infants and ought to be included in any revised rite. I also take the position that the liturgies for the Christian initiation of infants and of adults should be distinct, each taking into account the life experiences and spiritual needs of these different types of candidates. Thus I do not subscribe to the view that the adult rite alone is “normative” and that rites of infants need to be derived from those for adults. At least, I raise this view as a hypothesis and seek to test it. The present study, then, may also be considered a response to the question: If there *were* to be an baptismal liturgy for infants that is not simply derived from the adult rite, how might we think about this and what might it look like? This does not mean having two entirely different theologies of baptism; this would not be possible. Christian initiation is a many-faceted gem whose riches cannot fully be expressed in any single liturgy. Some of its rays shine more brightly when adults are being initiated, and others when the church celebrates the baptism of infants. I will not argue this position here; reviews of the relevant literature are available.<sup>5</sup>

I first ask certain general questions regarding RBC as a whole: What theology of baptism does it express? How does the rite consider the infants, parents, church and God? I suggest criteria (stated as questions) by which the liturgy might be evaluated and then apply these to RBC. I then go on to consider individual parts of the rite in the order in which they appear in RBC; the nomenclature of RBC is used throughout.<sup>6</sup>

## Understanding of Baptism

**Is the rite's understanding of baptism informed by a wide range of biblical texts and teachings?** RBC refers to the following biblical stories as images for baptism: the creation of water, the flood, the Red Sea, the baptism of Jesus, the water and blood that flowed from Jesus' side, the death and resurrection of Christ.

In addition, the following theological motifs are included: cleansing and freeing from sin; participation in Christ' death and resurrection; newness of life; divine life; everlasting life; new birth or rebirth in water and the Holy Spirit; becoming a new creation; adoption and becoming God's children; being enlightened by Christ; being clothed in Christ; being chosen by God; incorporation into the church; God's kingdom; being strengthened; God's gift; faith. Quantitatively, four themes predominate: cleansing and liberation from sin (10 times); newness of life (9 times); being reborn (9 times); and participation in the death and resurrection of Christ (5 times).

Despite this richness, the rite could be improved by the inclusion of additional narratives, for example the waters of Mary's womb, the Samaritan woman at the well, the blind man at the pool of Siloam, Pentecost, the baptisms of the Ethiopian and of Lydia. In addition, it is unfortunate that there are no references to Gal 3:28 and 1 Cor 12:13, which proclaim the radical equality of all the baptized and the transcending of social, ethnic and biological barriers. It is also too bad that the images of "chosen race, royal priesthood, God's own people" of 1 Pt 2:9 are not included.

**Is the rite's understanding of baptism informed by contemporary ecumenical dialogue and by contemporary theological developments?** Composed as it was in 1969, RBC of course cannot meet this criterion; a revised rite should do so, however.

The 1982 Faith and Order document, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* comes immediately to mind.<sup>7</sup> It considered baptism under five headings: Participation in Christ's Death and Resurrection; Conversion, Pardoning and Cleansing; The Gift of the Spirit; Incorporation into the Body of Christ; and The Sign of the Kingdom. While all of these are included in RBC, the motifs of Gift of the Spirit and Sign of the Kingdom are weak. RBC would be improved by attention to this and other ecumenical studies of baptism.

"Communion ecclesiology" is another contemporary theological development. *Koinonia* means participation, communion and sharing; it is a trinitarian approach and promotes justice. The following understanding of baptism from the perspective of *koinonia* might well be taken account of in any revision of RBC. Baptism is entering deeply into solidarity with Christ, whose life, death and resurrection are life-giving, empowering, liberating events. Baptism is entering deeply into the empowerment of the Spirit, who urges us to move into a future that is different than the present; baptism calls us to a particular (not exclusive) opportunity to live in the Spirit. Baptism is accepting that we are image-and-likeness of God, and that for wholeness we need to turn way from neglecting all we are called to be. Baptism is entering into a new network of companions on the journey, into a new community of radical equality, into life-giving relationships with others with a shared vision and commitment.

**Are the central images of the rite oriented to the baptism of infants?** The theme of participation in the death and resurrection of Christ is not only a twentieth-century focus of much Roman Catholic theology but also one that is especially appropriate for the initiation of adults; however, it is prominent in RBC. The idea of cleansing from sin can apply to both infants and adults, depending on how sin is thought of. Other predominant themes such as newness of life and rebirth, with resonances in John 3:5, are most powerful when most paradoxical, hence with adults.

Mark Searle has suggested some ways of thinking about baptismal images in relation to the initiation of adults and of infants.

Adult baptism, the economy of the 'twice born,' tends to draw to itself the vocabulary of regeneration as opposed to generation; of brothers and sisters rather than sons and daughters; of voluntary decision rather than divine vocation; of change rather than faithfulness; of breaking with the past rather than growth towards the future; of death and resurrection rather than adoption and filiation. The language of infant initiation, on the other hand, is inclined to speak in terms of the womb rather than the tomb, of election rather than choice, of loyalty rather than commitment, of the preconscious operations of grace rather than of personal convictions, of nurturing the life of faith rather than of passing from unbelief to belief. In Jungian terms, a regime which attaches importance to infant initiation gives a larger role to the 'feminine' aspects of Christianity, while adult initiation displays the more 'masculine' elements of Christian imagery.<sup>8</sup>

The idea of baptism as adoption by God (cf. Rom 8:14-17, Gal 4:4-7) has recently been considered at length by Karl Stasiuk.<sup>9</sup> He sees the following as principal themes: "Adoption speaks first of the initiative of God, and portrays the utter benevolence of grace in a particularly articular way; Adoption is deliverance and liberation; Through the Spirit, Christians address God as 'Abba;,' Adoption is given as gift, and as gift it can be accepted or refused. Adoption speaks of the enduring faithfulness of God's saving design."<sup>10</sup>

These considerations should be taken into account in any revision of RBC.

**Is the rite's understanding of baptism contemporary in content and language?** In general, RBC is satisfactory from this point of view. However, as mentioned earlier, a major understanding of baptism in the tridentine liturgy was as a battle between God and Satan for the soul of the individual. Though much of this language has deleted, this idea is still present in the prayer of exorcism, the renunciations, and perhaps elsewhere; these texts need further revision. At a more general level, sin and evil need to be understood and expressed in ways that are suited for our own times.

## The Infants

**Does the rite show the infants as participants in the liturgy?** In having the presiding minister address the infants directly six times, RBC affirms their role as participants in the liturgy. In addition, I have always understood the "for" in Rite of Baptism for Children to mean that the infants are participants; "of" in this title would suggest a more passive role.

Of course, the infants' modes of participation are different than those of adults. When addressed, the infants will not respond in adult speech; their responses may be entirely nonverbal, and verbal responses may or may not be intelligible. This is also the case when the infants are bathed and anointed. In home life we are used to speaking directly to infants and do not expect adult responses; this should also be the case in the church's liturgy.

In contrast, rubrics consistently, and liturgical texts occasionally, speak of "the children to be baptized," a construction that denotes passivity and lack of participation. It would be better if this were balanced by constructions such as "the infants who will celebrate baptism."

RBC also suggests that infants be taken out during the liturgy of the word, clearly indicating that their

participation is not expected. In RCIA the intercessions are placed after baptism and confirmation so neophytes can participate in these for the first time; they are prayers of the baptized. In RBC they are placed before baptism, hence the infants are prevented from participating in them. In addition, the infants are ignored during the liturgy of the eucharist, even during the special introduction to the Lord's Prayer.

The rite should view the infants as participants from start to finish; thus the infants should stay with the assembly during the liturgy of the word and liturgy of the eucharist (unless, perhaps, they themselves voice strong objection). This is the beginning of a lifetime of participation in the Sunday liturgy; it is the start of their Sunday after Sunday "training in the practice of the faith."<sup>11</sup>

**Does the rite value the infants as children here and now?** Again, the answer is both yes and no. On the positive side, the church shows respect and honor to children precisely in this liturgy; most of what is said about baptism honors the infants. It spends time with them, they are the center of attention, they become members of the family of the church, they are called temples of God's glory, dwelling places of the Holy Spirit, members of the Body of Christ. The church has to accept and accommodate itself to the infants' agendas: to cry or smile, be hungry or go to sleep, wave and turn, urinate and defecate.

However, the rite would be improved by referring to Jesus' love for children, his placing them in the center of the community, and his making them models for discipleship; Jesus' words, "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" are never quoted.<sup>12</sup> For example, the assembly might say, "We commit ourselves to follow the example of Jesus who put children in the center of his community and made them models of Christian discipleship."

Contemporary theologians such as Nathan Mitchell, Mark Searle, Karl Stasiuk and Karl Rahner have written eloquently regarding a theology of childhood.<sup>13</sup> Their contributions should be attended to in the revision of the rite of baptism for infants.

**Does the rite value the infants as future adults?** For the most part, RBC speaks of the life of the baptized in general and theological terms. However, it also refers to "the practice of the faith," "proclaiming one's faith," "keeping God's commandments to love God and our neighbor," "being a faithful follower of Christ," and "being a witness to the gospel." The rite could be improved by being more concrete. An epiclesis might say, for example, "Pour out your Holy Spirit that through these baptismal waters our children may be empowered to preach good news to the poor, proclaim release to captives, and set free those who are oppressed."

## The Parents

One of the radical features of RBC (and one I endorse) is that parents are not proxies for the infants. They are not exactly sponsors or catechists either, and not simply caregivers who transport their offspring to the church for baptism. But what is their role now, and how is their identity expressed in the rite?

**Does the rite foster the full participation of the parents?** RBC does indeed recognize not only the presence but also the active participation of the parents in several ways: the presider addresses them directly on several occasions, questions are asked of them, and they are asked to state their intentions regarding the baptism of their infants. In addition, they are specifically recognized in the intercessions and in the blessings.

The rite could be improved, however, by making the dialogues between presiding and parents more authentic in

form. Real dialogue involves mutuality, more or less equal participation, and listening as well as speaking on the part of both parties. The liturgical dialogues of RBC, in contrast, are one-sided; the presider does almost all the speaking and has all the significant language; the parents mostly respond “We do” or the equivalent. More equal dialogues would require that parents as well as presider read from books or participation aids; the godparents could hold either the text or the infants. The present unequal dialogue could easily be changed to give the parents the greater voice, for example as follows. *Presider*: “You have asked to have your children baptized. Do you appreciate what you are undertaking?” *Parents*: “Yes, it will be our joy and privilege to nurture N. in the faith and life of the Christian community, and by our prayers, our teaching, and the witness of our lives to bring him/her up to keep God’s commandments as Christ taught us, by loving God and our neighbor.”

The rite would also be improved if the parents could speak their own words, at least occasionally. RBC even now makes some provision for this, although I have never heard it used. Rubrics state, “In the second response the parents may use other words, e.g., “faith,” “the grace of Christ,” “entrance into the Church,” “eternal life,” [instead of “Baptism”].

This idea could be taken a step further, asking the parents to say why they have chosen that particular name and inviting them to say something of their hopes and dreams for their child.

### **Does the rite value them as human parents, that is as those who give life and nurture their children?**

This aspect of parenting is indeed referred to in several of the blessings. As a liturgy of initiation and not of birth this theme need not be emphasized in the liturgy of baptism. Separate liturgies before and after childbirth that focus on mother, infant and the entire family are to be encouraged.

On a negative note, some mothers feel that the themes of new birth and rebirth seem to lessen the wonder and significance of the natural birth of the children, the mother’s experience of childbirth, and all that this means for the family.

**Does the rite value them as Christian parents?** This is a major emphasis in RBC. It is stated particularly in the opening dialogue and introduction to the profession of faith, when parents accept the responsibility of “training” or “bring[ing] them up in the practice of the faith,” “bringing them up to keep God’s commands as Christ taught us...,” “seeing that the life God gives them grows always stronger...” This idea is also implied in the rite of the lighted candle when the presiding minister says “They are to walk always as children of the light and keep the flame of faith alive in their hearts.” Finally, in the blessings the parents are described as “teachers of your children in the ways of faith, bearing witness to the faith by what you say and do....”

The actual wordings of the opening dialogue and introduction to the profession of faith leave much to be desired, however. Though the facial expression and tone of voice of the presiding minister can make a big difference, these texts can be heard as paternalistic and condescending, or as unpleasant interrogations in which the integrity of the parents seems to be viewed with suspicion. The presider asks, “You have asked to have your child baptized. Do you clearly understand what you are undertaking?” Christian parenting is expressed as “duty,” “responsibility,” “constant care,” “keeping safe;” parents “must do” some things and “see to it” regarding others. Christian parenting can seem to be a heavy and demanding burden, which is left to the parents alone. The faith as well as the intelligence of the parents appears to be demeaned by having the presider say the text of the profession of faith, with the parents merely saying “I do believe.”

The rite would be improved if, in the opening dialogue, the parents could respond along the following lines: “Yes, we want to be good Christian parents. We will do our best to nurture N. in the faith and life of the Christian community, and by our care and love honor him/her as a beloved child of God.”

Finally, although baptism is not a sacrament for the parents as it is for their infants, it is surely sacramental. It is an affirmation of their ecclesial vocation and ministry as Christian parents. Unfortunately, RBC does not refer to this at all. The rite would be improved by incorporating the following kind of language: “Do you accept the ministry of Christian parents...? We accept the gift and ministry of Christian parenthood....”

**Does the rite value their households as domestic churches?** RBC does not consider this aspect of Christian parenting; it could be referred to in the intercessions and at the profession of faith, for example by saying something like: “May your faith continue to grow, and may your families be households of faith, domestic churches.” The rite of baptism needs to focus simultaneously on the infants and on the parents throughout. It needs to connect with and model life in the parochial church and life in the domestic church. Thus parents will bring their children to the Sunday eucharist, listen and respond to the word of God with them, together pray the intercessions and the eucharistic prayer, share communion, and ask God’s blessings. In their domestic churches - their homes - they will read and reflect on God’s word in scripture and in life, pray for those in need, give thanks around their domestic tables, share nourishment of all kinds, and bless each other. Clearly, the rite needs to be improved in these respects.

## Other Persons

**Does the rite show the role and significant of the godparents?** If the godparents are no longer proxies for the infants (with the parents), and if they are no longer potential foster parents (if the parents die), then what are they? RBC states that they are to “help the parents in their duty as Christian parents.” Beyond assenting to this in the opening dialogue, they accompany the parents through the rite (though they are ignored in the blessings) and profess their faith and the faith of the church together with the parents. The precise relationship between their liturgical roles and their responsibility to help the parents is left vague, however, and in part the place of the godparents in RBC is simply a carry-over from the tridentine rite.

The rite would be improved by connecting the godparents with the infants as well as with the parents; surely they have a relationship with the children too.<sup>14</sup> In addition the rite would be improved if the role of the godparents were seen as a ministry in the church and if their relationship to the family as domestic church were expressed more clearly.

**Does the rite recognize other persons who are or will be significant in the lives of the baptized infants?** RBC views the family as consisting only of parents and one child. Frequently, however, there are older siblings, and sometimes cousins, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and perhaps others who play important roles in raising the infants and in their developing life as Christians. The rite could be improved by recognizing some of these persons, for example in the processions at the beginning and end, and perhaps in the intercessions. Especially, the rite might recognize the role of siblings who are old enough to speak for themselves in an opening dialogue; these children might also help fill the font, if this is done.

## The Church

Baptism is celebrated by the church - the local liturgical assembly and its ministers; the infants are baptized in the faith of the church and through baptism they become members of the church. How does RBC describe this church, its role in baptism, and the role of baptism in its life?

**Does the rite show a church in which all the baptized participate actively?** Full, active and conscious participation is the basic principle of the contemporary liturgical renewal. Furthermore, this is a right and a responsibility based in baptism; it is important that such participation is expressed in the liturgy of baptism itself.

In RBC the assembly is directly addressed in the introduction to the prayer over the water and in the introduction to the Lord's Prayer; it is prayed for in the intercessions, and it is blessed. Verbally, the assembly frequently says "Amen," and less often, "Lord, hear my prayer" and "Pray for us. It may sing or say "Blessed be God" several times during the prayer over the water, and may sing an appropriate short acclamation after the baptism. Though nowhere indicated in RBC, it is the custom in some places for the infants to be taken around and signed with the cross by members of the assembly.

In my opinion, however, RBC shows a church that is relatively passive and where participation is not as full, active and conscious as it should be. The greatest activity is shown by the presiding minister, hence an image of church is projected that is clerical and male.

Possible improvements with respect to participation by the assembly might include the following: including an opening dialogue in which the assembly would state its relationship and commitment to parents and infants; being invited to silent prayer before the prayer over the water to indicate that it is a prayer of all; using more active responses in the rites after baptism; speaking a blessing. Increased participation might also be expressed musically: singing an antiphon before baptism and always singing an acclamation afterwards; singing the litany of the saints; singing the acclamations in the prayers over the water; adding a sung acclamation in the first prayer over the water. Of particular concern is how the assembly professes its faith; issues around the profession of faith will be considered below.

**Does the rite show a church in which all the baptized exercise ministry?** In baptism and as members of the Body of Christ, all share in the priestly, prophetic and pastoral ministries of Jesus Christ. As a general liturgical principle, leadership ministries are shared and all do just what they are supposed to do. In RBC, only the presiding minister (presbyter, deacon) exercises a leadership ministry, hence the active and ministering church is again depicted as clerical and therefore male.

There are several possible ways in which lay ministers could participate in the rite: they could lead some of the opening dialogues and the litany of the saints, issue invitations for the profession of faith, and lead some of the rites following baptism.

**Does the rite show a church that lives out its baptism in its daily life?** The life of the church is expressed in texts that speak of the church and in those that speak of the future adult life of the infants who are celebrating baptism. The most commonly stated characteristic of the church is "holy" (5 times); it is also a community that is characterized by faith and unity. The adult life of the baptized is characterized as practicing and proclaiming the faith, witnessing to the gospel, being a faithful follower of Christ, and loving God and neighbor. These of course are quite proper; they are also rather vague. The rite could be improved by asking God, for example, to "empower us to live out Christ's ministry of love, peace and justice" and to "empower us to live as [Jesus] did, preaching good news, comforting the afflicted, reconciling and healing."

**Does the rite show a church that is inclusive?** One of the characteristics of Jesus' ministry was inclusiveness: he embraced everyone. Here we might ask if RBC gives importance to the inclusion of youth, of women, of peoples all around the world, of the dead and of members of other churches? Mostly, the answer is no.



Though the church attends to infants at the time of their baptism, are infants, older children and adolescents respected and included all the time? Is their full participation fostered Sunday after Sunday?

Though the church baptizes girls and women, are women really included all the time? As already considered above, the predominant image of the church is male. In view also of the historical marginalization of women in church and society, it would be particularly appropriate to include Gal 3:28 and 1 Cor 12:13 in the liturgy of baptism and live according to their messages. In particular, women could assume ministerial roles; women might be named (in roughly equal numbers with men) in the litany of the saints; biblical women and men might be named in the prayers over the water and in the rites following baptism.

Reference to the church around the world would be a way of including baptized persons of all peoples, nations and races. Reference to the communion of saints would include baptized persons who have gone before us. The rite could also refer to the church ecumenical and to baptized persons who are not members of our own church.<sup>15</sup>

**Does the rite show a church that takes baptism seriously?** This criterion would be met by consistently celebrating baptism in the context of the Sunday eucharist. RBC at least always includes a liturgy of the word. However, it also says, “if possible, baptism should take place on Sunday.” It goes on to add, “It is fitting that baptism be celebrated during the Sunday Mass so that the entire community may be present and the necessary relationship between baptism and eucharist may be clearly seen;” these desiderata need to be made the norm.

Ideas that baptism should always be a challenge to the church to attend to its own continuing conversion and that baptism should always celebrate the continuing initiation of the church are absent from RBC. It does, I believe, expect that the liturgy be done well, and its choice of immersion as the first choice for baptism speaks well for its concern for the authenticity of symbols. Authenticity also applies to the anointings, which in practice are often done in a minimalistic fashion.

**Does the rite show a church that enters into relationships of mutual responsibility with parents and infants?** RBC puts all the onus on the parents, telling them of their responsibility and duty and questioning them about their intentions and understandings. The rite would be improved if the assembly also assumed a responsibility for continuing care and support for the infants and the parents. In such a case the raising of the children would be seen to involve not only the parents, but also the godparents, the local church community, and God. It might also refer to the church as a covenant community, implying mutual relationships among its members as well as with God.

## God

**Does the rite present a consistently trinitarian view of God?** Certainly the baptism in water, the profession of faith, prayers over the water and anointing after baptism are trinitarian. A few other texts refer to God and Christ only. Still other texts refer to Christ alone: signing with the cross, intercessions, anointing before baptism, white garment, lighted candle. It may be noted that the frequently used expression, “water and the Holy Spirit” (quoted from Jn 3:5) is really an equivalent for “baptism” and says little about the Holy Spirit. Clearly the rite needs to be improved in this regard.<sup>16</sup>

**Does the rite include names and images of God that are appropriate for the baptism of infants?** RBC’s language about God is relatively flat, most often referring simply to God, Christ, Spirit or Holy Spirit. “Father” and “Son” are used in some texts, even outside of the trinitarian formula. The most frequently used

image is “almighty” and occasionally “Lord.” The only somewhat unusual images, used mostly in the blessings, are God of mercy, God the source of life and love, God who loves all people, and God who is love. Christ is sometimes referred to as Savior, and once as priest, prophet and king. “Father” is related to baptism through the motif of adoption.

**Does the rite speak in appropriate ways of the relationship between God and the baptized?** In RBC the newly baptized infants are adopted children of God the Father, temples of God’s glory, and God welcomes them into the church; they receive God’s divine life. They are claimed, strengthened and enlightened by Christ and clothed in Christ. The Holy Spirit strengthens them and dwells in them.

The most commonly used term is “faith,” but this is used in several ways and its meaning is not always clear. Phrases such as “training in the practice of the faith” refer to the behavioral dimension of faith. RBC also refers to “faith in Christ Jesus,” “the faith of the church,” and “your faith;” the Creed is “the faith in which these children are about to be baptized.” These seem to refer more to the doctrinal content of faith and not to the baptized person’s relationship with God.

All in all, RBC’s language about God is unimaginative and weak.

## **Individual Parts of the Liturgy**

I will now examine individual parts of RBC and make suggestions for improvement. Certain criteria stated above will be applied without restating them: full participation, sharing of ministry, musicality, authenticity, contemporary thinking and expression. In addition, the rite should use language that is respectful, inviting, evocative and memorable; didactic language is less appropriate. In general, texts should accompany actions. The structure of the rite should be clear, and the more important elements should appear to be so. Finally, inspired by RCIA, it should be possible to celebrate the rite in stages, that is, some parts might be celebrated before and/or after the core of the liturgy of baptism (or of complete initiation).<sup>17</sup>

**Opening Dialogue.** In the RBC the presiding minister addresses three questions to the parents and godparents; these ask the name of the child, what the parents seek of the church, and their willingness to accept the responsibility of Christian parents. The godparents are then asked if they accept their own responsibilities. Finally, the minister addresses the infants, welcomes them, and signs them with the cross; the parents and godparent may do the same.

Suggestions for improvement have been made above, under “The Parents.” In summary, the parents could speak in their own words, the text referring to responsibilities could be made a more authentic dialogue which would also promote the fuller participation of the parents and use more inviting language. A variety of alternative model texts could be provided. These dialogues might also be celebrated earlier, for example as part of baptismal preparation. The dialogue with the godparents should establish their relationship to the infants as well as to the parents. An optional dialogue could recognize the role of siblings in the life of the infants. The assembly should also be addressed, asking first them to accept their ministry to uphold the parents, and then asking them to accept their ministry to the children. The assembly’s response should be more substantial than simply “We do.”

Ministry should be shared; some of these dialogues should be led by a lay minister. As an option, the now expanded first two dialogues could be replaced by the question that now precedes the baptism itself: “Is it your

will that N. should be baptized?” The present position of this question is inappropriate; if it is not used here, it should be deleted as repetitious.

**Signing of the Children with the Cross.** This should be made trinitarian in orientation rather than purely christological. After welcoming the children, the minister might say something like “In baptism you enter into communion with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit; God has freely chosen you to receive this special gift of love.” The signing would follow.

**Opening Prayer.** The two texts in RBC are brief and theologically thin; new texts should be provided.

**Liturgy of the Word.** Inspired by RCIA, the liturgy of the word might begin with the presentation of Holy Scriptures to the parents. This gift might be accompanied with words such as these: “It is your ministry as Christian parents to listen to the word of God in church and at home, and to teach your children to value the Scripture as they mature.”

The infants would stay with the parents, godparents and assembly during the liturgy of the word. Because the intercessions are the prayer of the baptized, they should be moved from the end of the liturgy of the word to the end of the liturgy of baptism (following ephphetha or confirmation).

**Liturgy of Baptism and Its Structure.** RBC divides the baptismal rite into two parts, “Preparatory Rites” and “Celebration of Baptism;” the later includes a major subtitle, “Explanatory Rites” following the immersion in water. For the sake of clarity, I would place everything under one title, “Liturgy of Baptism;” within this section individual actions and texts would simply be named descriptively.

RBC does not include an introduction to the liturgy of baptism. Instead it has one “brief address” before the prayer over the water and another address before the profession of faith; the first is addressed to the assembly, the second to the parents and godparents. The rite would be improved if the liturgy of baptism as a whole had an introduction addressed to all, which would speak briefly about the meaning of baptism; the present texts would be omitted or changed in orientation. Several alternative texts might be prepared, some of which could be dialogues between minister and the rest of the assembly.

**Prayer of Exorcism and Anointing before Baptism.** RBC designates these as “Preparatory Rites” because they are celebrated before the baptismal party, minister and others process to the font (assuming that there is such a procession). They are thus separated spatially from other parts of the liturgy of baptism.

It is helpful to recall that in the tridentine liturgy, the corresponding prayer and anointing took place “outside the baptismal gates” and while the priest was wearing a purple stole. In addition, the renunciations were part of this complex of elements.<sup>18</sup> Note also that even in RCIA, the anointing before baptism can follow the renunciations.<sup>19</sup>

The tridentine prayer, “I expel thee, every unclean spirit...” has been replaced by two alternative texts still called prayers of exorcism. In content these texts represent the “battle against Satan” view of baptism, and both make a point of mentioning original sin.<sup>20</sup> The same theology is also expressed in the renunciations. In the anointing before baptism Christ strengthens the child, though this makes no sense within a modern understanding of baptism. This anointing may be omitted for pastoral reasons.

One way to improve the rite as a whole would simply be to delete the prayer of exorcism, anointing, and renunciations: they are vestiges of the ancient catechumenate for adults and hence are not relevant to infants,

their content is inconsistent with the theological perspective of the rest of the liturgy, and their connection with the rest of the liturgy is not clear.

A second course of action would be to reorientate these elements and use them as separate stages. The RCIA might help us in this regard. Thus the stated purpose of the so-called Minor Exorcisms is to “draw the attention of the catechumens to the real nature of Christian life....”<sup>21</sup> Thus a new “prayer for strength” might name the basic goodness of the infant as created in God’s image and likeness, recognize that the children shares the frailty of the human condition and will sin, name the reality that the children will also be sinned against, and pray for God’s continuing presence and help. This, with or without an associated anointing, also “for strength,” might perhaps best be celebrated in connection with first penance.

The anointing before baptism, dissociated from the prayer of exorcism, might be reoriented in yet another way: it could become a rite of protection of the infants against violence. This most likely would be celebrated before or after the liturgy of baptism, as a separate stage.

If retained, the renunciations need to be reworded as, for example, other churches have done. As texts addressed to the parents and godparents and not to everyone, however, they might name ways of acting that would harm families and infants.

**Procession to the Font and Litany of the Saints.** RBC places the litany of the saints at the end of the intercessions, as the conclusion of the liturgy of the word. It has no separate title, the text given is insubstantial, it is not sung, it is not associated with any action, and it has no obvious purpose.

Medieval precedents clearly show that the litany of the saints is meant to be sung during the procession to the font. The listing of saints in the litany should reflect the composition of the church and the communion of saints: women and men, laity and clergy, religious sisters and brothers, deacons, presbyters and bishops, wealthy and poor, simple and learned, from every part of the world. Traditional forms of this litany are inadequate because they are unbalanced in favor of males and clergy.

But what should be done if there is no procession to the font - that is, if the font is right where the rest of the liturgy is celebrated? One possibility is to delete the litany. Another is to take the infants around and among the assembly at this time, to be signed with the cross; they then return to the front (where the font is). The litany is then sung during this “procession.” A third would be to sing the litany anyway in remembrance of the communion of saints, into which the infants are to be baptized.

**Prayer over the Water.** RBC places the prayer over the water before the profession of faith, but either could go first; I personally prefer the reverse order. Three alternative prayers are provided; the second and third include acclamations which may be said or sung by the people.

This part of the liturgy of baptism could be improved in several ways. First, there could be an opportunity to pour water into the font; older children could help with this. Second, there should be an invitation to prayer and a period of silence so everyone can contribute to the prayer; after all, it is supposed to be a prayer of the entire assembly. In addition, perhaps this prayer should begin with the preface dialogue as is the case in the Episcopal/Anglican liturgy of baptism.<sup>22</sup>

The actual text of the prayer could be improved in several respects.<sup>23</sup> I suggest that it should be modeled, at least in a general way, on the berakah form of prayer. Thus it should be a prayer of thanksgiving, praise and blessing to God. It should tell of God’s wonderful works involving water in the history of salvation, in creation

and in human life. It should be consistently trinitarian, include a clear invocation of the Holy Spirit, and speak appropriately of baptism and the life of the baptized.

**Profession of Faith.** In RBC the profession of faith has two parts, the renunciations and the profession itself. As already indicated, the renunciations should be deleted or be revised. The text of the profession of faith is a shortened version of the Apostles Creed, used in the form of questions with the presiding minister saying the text, “Do you believe in God...” and the parents and godparents responding “I do.” The rite would be improved if the parents and godparents said the text of the Creed, following an invitation by the minister.

In saying the Creed (in whatever manner), the parents profess their faith as individual Christian parents and they profess the faith of their domestic churches. It is appropriate for the rest of the assembly to affirm this action through some kind of acclamation. In RBC the presiding minister speaks such an affirmation, to which the assembly adds “Amen.”

A further intention of RBC is that the parents and godparents profess the faith of the entire church and hence of the assembly. This too is affirmed in the same text of the minister and the same “Amen” of the assembly. This shows great respect to the parents and gives them an important responsibility. However, this two-fold action and intention is not always well understood by parents, presider or assembly; it is perhaps too subtle.

In addition to a natural inclination (or habit) to want to speak the words of the profession themselves, the assembly may intuit that the infants are to be baptized in the faith of the church and feel that this would be better expressed if everyone spoke with their own voice. In other churches the assembly and parents say the full Creed together, and this certainly sometimes happens in Roman Catholic communities as well. I personally favor distinguishing parents from the rest of the assembly in order to give them greater honor and responsibility. Again, RCIA provides some help. In its rite of Christian initiation of children the parents, godparents and all present give example to the children by professing their faith first; the children then profess their faith in the usual way.<sup>24</sup> In the context of the baptism of infants, the assembly might give example and support to the parents and godparents by professing their faith, after which the parents and godparents might profess theirs. Either the first or second profession might use an abbreviated or adapted text.<sup>25</sup>

**Baptism.** RBC does well in preferring immersion over pouring, and not mentioning sprinkling at all. In practice this priority is still a goal, not yet fully achieved. The actual immersion in water is brief and sometimes is not seen by all; sometimes the words of the trinitarian formula cannot be heard either. This part of the liturgy could be improved in several ways: First, the traditional question, “Is it your will...” should be deleted or relocated. Problems of visibility and audibility need to be addressed at the practical level. The centrality of this rite, both in significance and position within the liturgy of baptism, could be heightened by singing an appropriate antiphon or Alleluia before the baptism, and an appropriate acclamation afterwards; the latter is suggested by RBC.

**Confirmation.** If the rite is to become one of complete Christian initiation, it will have to include confirmation. The present Roman Catholic rite of confirmation might be adapted by omitting the introductory brief address. In addition, no “Amen” from the candidates would be expected after “N. be sealed...” and no “And also with you” would be expected after “Peace be with you.” The rite could begin with the invitation to prayer, or directly with the prayer for the gifts of the Spirit.

The incorporation of the rite of confirmation into the liturgy of baptism is not a simple matter, however. RCIA provides one model, in which confirmation is placed at the end of the liturgy of baptism (following the ephphetha) and the anointing after baptism is omitted. A second possibility is to place confirmation immediately following baptism in water, replacing the anointing after baptism (which again is omitted).

The addition of confirmation and the omission of the anointing after baptism raise several issues.<sup>26</sup> Thus the present liturgy of confirmation is very much focused on the Holy Spirit; it is not fully trinitarian. If the liturgy of baptism were to refer to the Holy Spirit only minimally (as indeed is the case with RBC), then there is a logic to this pneumatological orientation of confirmation. If, however, as proposed here, the entire liturgy of baptism/initiation is pneumatological and trinitarian, it would seem unnecessary (and perhaps undesirable) for confirmation to be so exclusively pneumatological.

As well, much would be lost by the omission of the anointing after baptism, which is christological in orientation. It is the closest that the rite comes to naming Christ as the Anointed One, it names the ministry of Christ as priestly, prophetic and kingly, and it implies that the infants have been baptized into the continuation of this three-fold ministry. In addition, the anointing after baptism has a strong ecclesial dimension, whereas confirmation does not; it is more individualistic.

Still other questions have been raised regarding the present form of the liturgy of confirmation. Which is the “real” laying on of hands, the extension of hands over several candidates or the touching of each candidate with the thumb while anointing? Exactly how should the anointing be carried out, and with what words? And what does confirmation really mean in this context?

The text of the anointing after baptism itself could be improved in several ways: Christ should be named explicitly as the Anointed One; the image of “king” might be replaced by “pastor” or “shepherd;” other images of Christ might be added such as Servant, Wisdom and Beloved. One wonders how “king” is understood by people today, and if Christ as “priest” is understood in relation to all the baptized or more narrowly associated with clergy?

Without making this part of the liturgy too long or complex, both christological and pneumatological perspectives need somehow to be brought together.

**Explanatory Rites.** Immersion in the name of the Trinity is followed by four other rites: anointing after baptism, baptismal garment, lighted candle and ephphetha; RBC collects these under the title “Explanatory Rites,” a term which I find excessively didactic. These continue, expand on and express further the celebration of baptism, but they do not “explain” it. Two of these (anointing, garment) are more closely linked to the water rite because they assume or are enhanced by the infant’s nudity or relative undress. The other two (candle, ephphetha) are less closely related.

In form, these elements basically are actions, though accompanied by words. Three are addressed directly to the infants; lighted candle is addressed to the parents and godparents. The presiding minister does all the speaking and carries out all the actions except lighting the candle; the assembly responds “Amen.” The parents are not included at all in three; they receive the candle in lighted candle. Theologically, three are exclusively christological; the anointing is trinitarian. All speak of the future life of the newly baptized person, hence of the baptismal vocation.

These could be improved in several ways, for example by adding the ancient but non-Roman custom of footwashing as sign of the baptismal vocation to serve others.<sup>27</sup> Some could be made optional and some could be celebrated among the concluding rites rather than within the liturgy of baptism. Finally, some could be celebrated as stages, that is at one or several times following the celebration of baptism; these could mark the period of mystagogy or postbaptismal catechesis; footwashing and ephphetha could even be repeated.

Other suggested improvements include: leadership of some of these by lay ministers; dividing the text between

leader and parents; involving the parents in the actions; making the language both more biblical and more contemporary; including the Holy Spirit as well as Christ; expanding the assembly's response at least to "Thanks be to God," and singing the response.

As an example, the rite of lighted candle might be divided in this way; *Minister*: Parents and godparents (and siblings), these lights are entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will not be walking in the dark but will have the light of life." *Parents and godparents (and siblings)*: Dear children, you now live in the Holy Spirit: you are the light of the world. Your light must shine before all so that, seeing your goodness, others may praise God." A second example, for the ephphetha, names both Christ and the Holy Spirit, as well as male and female biblical persons. *Minister*: Dear children, with his ears Peter heard Jesus say to him: "Who do you say that I am?" With his mouth Peter proclaimed, "You are the Christ, the Beloved of God. Led by the Holy Spirit, you are to do the same." *Parents and godparents*: Dear children, with her ears Martha heard Jesus say to her: "Do you believe that whoever lives in me will never die?" With her mouth Martha proclaimed, "You are the Christ, the Beloved of God. Led by the Holy Spirit, you are to do the same." (Of course the appropriate actions are to be carried out.)

In speaking directly to the children about their future life as baptized persons, the minister would not only be expressing the church's expectations but also the community's commitment to help form the infants in these ways. Likewise, the parents would not only name the hopes and expectations of their domestic churches but also commit themselves to nurturing the infants to be open to the Holy Spirit and to follow Christ in these ways.

**Liturgy of the Eucharist.** RBC ignores the infants during the liturgy of the eucharist. Instead, they should continue to be considered to be participants, and this part of the liturgy should be seen as a model for their continuing growth in conscious faith and active participation. As a liturgy of complete initiation, the infants should also share holy communion; textually this is simply a matter of adding a rubric such as "The presider or minister of communion gives communion to each child in an appropriate way, for example with consecrated wine on the tip of his or her finger."

At the preparation of the altar and gifts, the children should be carried in procession as the parents and godparents (and others) bring up gifts for the poor as well as the bread and wine. In the eucharistic prayer the children should also be carried as the parents stand and participate in this prayer.

**Concluding Rites.** In two blessings, RBC speaks separately of mothers and fathers; this is open to the dangers of gender stereotyping, and it would be better to consider the two parents together, as in the case in one of the alternative blessings. There is also the problem of distinguishing the orientation of the first and second parts of the blessing (addressed to parents or to children and parents) and the third (addressed to the rest of the assembly).

The rite might be improved in several ways. First, lighted candle and ephphetha might be placed here. The blessings might also be improved: they might be addressed to parents, godparents and siblings, and assembly. Alternatively, the parents might first bless their children, the assembly might bless children and parents, and the presider might ask God's blessing on everyone. This approach would provide a model for the parents in their ministry to bless their children in their domestic churches and throughout their lives.

In conclusion, it is apparent that the rite of baptism for infants needs considerable revision. This analysis, advances in theological and liturgical perspectives, and thirty years experience with reformed rites, provide wonderful insights and many opportunities for an enriched and improved liturgy.

## Notes:

1. The rite itself states, “The term ‘children’ or ‘infants’ refers to those who have not yet reached the age of discernment and therefore cannot profess personal faith.” Because “children” covers an appreciable age range and because a rite of Christian initiation of [older] children has also been published, I generally will use the term “infants.” Assuming the baptism of several children, I will use “infants” in the plural.
2. E.g., Mark Searle, *Christening: The Making of Christians* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1980); John H. McKenna, “Infant Baptism: Theological Reflections,” *Worship* 70 (1996) 194-210; Henry Ansgar Kelly, *The Devil at Baptism: Ritual, Theology, and Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); Maxwell E. Johnson, ed., *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995); and references cited. See also Catherine Vincie, “Gender Analysis and Christian Initiation,” *Worship* 69 (1995) 505-530
3. *Ordo Initiationis Christianae Adultorum*, 1972; first English edition, 1974; revised English edition, 1985.
4. I am aware that the International Commission on English in the Liturgy has begun the process of preparing a new edition of RBC, but I do not know any details of its work. The present critique and proposals are my own. See also Mark Searle, ed., *Alternative Futures for Worship 2: Baptism and Confirmation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1987).
5. E.g., in Kurt Stasiak, *Return to Grace: A Theology for Infant Baptism* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996); Paul F. X. Covino, “The Postconciliar Infant Baptism Debate in the American Catholic Church,” *Worship* 56 (1982) 240-260; Diane Karay, “Let the Children Lead the Way: A Case for Baptizing Children,” *Worship* 61 (1987) 336-349.
6. In the two years during which I have been working on this project, my analyses, critiques and suggestions have been accompanied by the composition of new texts and construction of a model alternative liturgy that attempts to meet my objections and implement my suggestions for improvement. After a first draft of this model liturgy was prepared, I asked for feedback from a number of parents, pastors, liturgists, sacramental theologians, students, and a poet. Their responses, together with additional reading and reflection, led to a substantially revised second version. This process in turn influenced my critique and suggestions. This dialogical process has continued up to the preparation of the final draft of this article and the final draft of the model liturgy. This *Christian Initiation of Infants: A Model Liturgy*, is being published on the Word Wide Web at <http://www.compumart.ab.ca/fhenders>. It is, of course, only one way in which the rite might be revised in response to this critique.
7. Faith and Order Paper no. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).
8. Mark Searle, “Infant Baptism Reconsidered,” in Searle, ed., *Alternative Futures for Worship 2: Baptism and Confirmation*, pp 48-50.
9. Stasiak, *Return to Grace*.
10. While this approach is attractive in part, a major drawback is that it is based on the social institution of adoption *as it was practiced in the first century*, when only male parents and male adopted children were important. It therefore promotes masculine images of God, Christ, the baptized and therefore the church: Father and Abba, Son and sonship, those incorporated into the Son’s sonship. This does not correspond to the social institution of adoption in our own day, when mothers and fathers, daughters and sons all are important. It does not respect daughters and mothers, does not acknowledge the motherhood of God that is expressed in scripture (e.g., Isa 42:15, 49:15; Num 11:12-13; Dt 32:11-12; Hos 13:8; Mt 23:37; Lk 13:34), and does not reflect the teaching of radical equality expressed in Gal 3:28. In a contemporary setting, the use of the adoption motif logically leads to addressing God as Imma (mother, mom) as well as Abba (father, dad).
11. Words addressed to the parents in the opening dialogue and introduction to the profession of faith.
12. See Mk 10:13-16; Mk 9:33-37; Mt 18:1-5; Mt 19:13-15; Lk 9:46-48; Lk 10:21-24; Lk 18:15-17.
13. Nathan Mitchell, “The Once and Future Child: Towards a Theology of Childhood,” *Living Light* 12



(1975) 422-436; Mark Searle, "Infant Baptism Reconsidered," and *Christening*; Karl Stasiak, *Return to Grace*; Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," In *Theological Investigations 8: Further Theology of the Spiritual Life 2*. Trans David Bourke (New York: Herder, 1971) 33-50.

14. See Elaine Ramshaw, *The Godparent Book* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1993).

15. Liturgies of initiation necessarily speak, implicitly or explicitly, about persons who are not Christians; in the past, at least, this has been a very negative view. In these days of increased appreciation of other religions and indeed of persons of no faith, we need to consider how our liturgies take note of such other persons. Serious conversations between specialists in interfaith relations and liturgists seem warranted; I consider this a major theological task for the future.

16. Because this subject is also dealt with elsewhere in this issue, I keep this section to a minimum.

17. E.g., Gail Ramshaw-Schmidt, "Celebrating Baptism in Stages: A Proposal," in Searle, ed., *Alternative Futures for Worship 2: Baptism and Confirmation*, 137-155; Mark R. Francis and Arturo Perez-Rodriguez, *Primero Dios: Hispanic Liturgical Resource* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1997) 21-25.

18. *The Roman Ritual*, ed. P. T. Weller (Milwaukee: Bruce Publ. Co., 1950) I, 48-51.

19. RCIA, n. 291.

20. G. M. Lukken, *Original Sin in the Roman Liturgy* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973). The actual words, "original sin" were not used in the rite until 1969; they were then used once, and a second usage was added in the revision of 1973.

21. RCIA, 90.

22. See William Seth Adams, "De-coding the Obvious: Reflections on Baptismal Ministry in the Episcopal Church," *Worship* 66 (1992) 327-338; this excellent study uses criteria of ritual congruence and ritual coherence.

23. The first of the present texts tells the biblical story, though it is not a prayer of thanksgiving and is excessively didactic; every story is interpreted for us. It has three petitions: in one God is asked to unseal the fountain of baptism, in the second the assembly prays that by the presence of the Holy Spirit God may give this water the grace of Christ; in the third God and Christ are asked to send the Holy Spirit upon the waters of the font. All this seems repetitive and unfocused. For a historical perspective on this text, see Dominic E. Serra, "The Blessing of Baptismal Water at the Paschal Vigil: Ancient Texts and Modern Revisions," *Worship* 64 (1990) 142-156.

The second text begins with three short prayers of praise addressed successively to the three persons of the Trinity. Then follow three prayers of petition addressed to God, each asking, "Make holy this water;" the second refers also to Christ and the third also to the Holy Spirit. "Make holy this water" seems a bit thin as the only petition; there really is no invocation of the Holy Spirit.

The third prayer consists of a series of statements or affirmations addressed to God and referring to Christ, the Spirit, and the church. The only petition, however is "Bless this water in which they will be baptized;" this is weak.

24. RCIA, n. 292.

25. The Roman Catholic church has always used abbreviated forms of the Creed, though the extent of the abbreviation has varied from time to time. I do not know why this practice is still in use. Might this suggest that the parents have some say in the precise form of the Creed that they use?

26. E.g., Gerard Austin, *Anointing with the Spirit: The Rite of Confirmation: The Use of Oil and Chrism* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1985); Adrien Nocent, "L'Ordo Confirmationis: Un Rituel Qui Exige de Profonds Remaniements," *Studia Liturgica* 8 (1991) 277-291; Frank C. Quinn, "Confirmation Reconsidered: Rite and Meaning," *Worship* 59 (1985) 354-370; Bryan D. Spinks, "Vivid Signs of the Gift of the Spirit? The Lima Text on Baptism and Some Recent English Language Baptismal Liturgies," *Worship* 60 (1986) 232-246; J. L. Levesque, "The Theology of the Postbaptismal Rites in the Seventh and Eighth Century Gallican Church," *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 95 (1981) 3-43; Paul Turner, *Confirmation: The Baby in Solomon's Court* (New

York: Paulist Press, 1993).

27. E.g., *Missale Gothicum*, Bobbio Missal and Stowe Missal; see E. C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy* (London: SPCK, 1960, 1970) 162, 212, 221.