

Getting Back into the Baptizing Business

Fr. Anthony R. Lusvardi, S.J.
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In the late 1960s, Fr. Richard McBrien, future president of the Catholic Theological Society and long-time Chair of the Department of Theology at Notre Dame, declared that **the Catholic Church had gotten out of “the salvation business.”** Though most people wouldn’t have put it so crudely, McBrien was expressing a view that remains enormously influential in Catholic theology and pastoral life. In my own theological education, I often found that the question **“What is the mission of the Church?”** provoked waffling or embarrassment.

Attempts at an answer haven’t been lacking. **Heirs to Karl Rahner’s Anonymous Christianity** have argued that the Church’s job is merely to point out a salvation that already exists in whatever state of belief or unbelief people find themselves. Others, skirting talk of the supernatural or of Heaven, have insisted on a primarily political, or at least social, mission.

But the Church – with her sacraments, scripture, and tradition – hasn’t proven particularly well-structured for any of these new missions.

A muddled sense of purpose is a grave problem for any organization, and the history of Catholicism since the late 1960s has been marked by a decline in everything from Mass attendance to vocations. This decline has been most pronounced in those parts of the

Church that have more fully embraced McBrien’s line of thinking. Sociologists of religion Roger Finke and Rodney Stark concluded in 2005 that the **crisis of vocations reflects “the deep erosion of the power of traditional Catholic symbols and sacraments.”**

Finke and Stark are right, I think, to identify ambivalence toward the sacraments as the heart of the matter. **The sacraments give Catholicism its distinctiveness; they are what initiate and form us in the faith. According to the Second Vatican Council, the liturgical life of the Church makes us active participants in the Paschal Mystery.**

While one can draw social implications from sacramental symbols, these are always secondary – and a bit of a stretch if one doesn’t first believe in salvation. As theologian Romano Guardini puts it, **“liturgy must chiefly be regarded from the standpoint of salvation.”**

The difficulties the Church has faced over the last several decades are many and varied, and it’s always a mistake to imagine that a single element can explain – or fix – a multi-layered problem. Nonetheless, ambivalence about the relationship between the sacraments and salvation is a core issue.

So how did we go wishy-washy on the sacraments? The Church Fathers clearly believed that baptism was necessary for salvation because it meant participating in the dying and rising of Jesus (John 3:5, Mark 16:16, Romans 6:3-5). **Baptism was understood to be so necessary for salvation**, in fact, that when Christian societies emerged from the wreckage of the Roman Empire, babies were baptized as soon as possible, often within hours of birth. But in subtle ways that eventually came to be reflected in theology, when baptism became universal it started to be taken for granted.



The Baptism of Christ by Domenico Tintoretto, c. 1585 [Museo del Prado, Madrid]

Certain strains of scholasticism, in fact, took a rather minimalistic approach to the sacraments, which in some cases were treated almost as a formality. I once heard a homily in which the priest compared baptism to getting a birth certificate.

None of this registered as a problem in the faith-saturated cultures of medieval Christendom. **But when the anti-sacramental philosophies of Kant, Rousseau, and other Enlightenment thinkers began to emerge at the beginning of the nineteenth century, sacramental theology had grown too complacent to mount an adequate response.**

Moreover, **with the Church's social and political standing in the world under threat, theologians and popes tended to focus on the necessity of the Church as an institution rather than the sacraments specifically.** Given the theology of the time, it was possible to see baptism as a kind of legal formality for Church membership – and, therefore, salvation.

Twentieth-century theologians, understandably, were eager to shake off this legalistic understanding of the necessity of the sacraments, but often enough they **relied on souped-up legal loopholes** themselves. **Invincible ignorance, for example, was treated by some as if it were a more effective savior than Christ.** This is the background to McBrien's desire to divest Catholicism of its salvation franchise.

Much more can be said about this history – and I do say much more in my book **Baptism of Desire and Christian Salvation**, including debunking the popular myth that the 15th-century discovery of the New World led to the abandonment of belief in the necessity of Christianity for salvation. I also argue that an **ecclesial going-out-of-business sale is premature.**

Concerns raised by progressive theologians such as Rahner and McBrien about the salvation of non-Christians are legitimate. But Catholic theology must address these concerns in a way that does **not undercut the Lord's command to go forth and baptize all nations (Matthew 28:19)**.

In the ancient doctrine of **baptism of desire** – which traces its origins to St. Ambrose and St. Augustine – the Church has a way of treating such thorny questions, which remains tightly bound to the sacraments. This doctrine has not been much in vogue over the past several decades for all of the reasons alluded to above. When it is remembered, **it is often in such a breezy way as to involve neither baptism nor desire**.

Recentring discussions of salvation on baptism of desire won't check all the sources of ecclesial driftlessness, but it does have the advantage of keeping the sacraments at the center of the way we think and talk about salvation. Most importantly, it avoids **the chief pitfall of twentieth-century approaches to salvation – implying or even promising some alternative pathway to blessedness, resulting in watered-down or bloodlessly abstract notions of what salvation is**.

When we are asked what one must do to be saved, we cannot hesitate to join St. Peter's response to the residents of Jerusalem on Pentecost: "Repent and be baptized every one of you." (Acts 2:38)

Whether sales are up or down, the Church has no business offering cheap substitutes for salvation.

Anthony R. Lusvardi, SJ

BAPTISM OF DESIRE
AND CHRISTIAN
SALVATION



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