

In Front of the World: the Birth of the Subject

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Abstract. *In the Orthodox Church, we often assume that some customs have only ritual significance, such as Baptism. It is somehow self-evident that the value of this custom belongs to our tradition, nation, or even superstition. For example, we tend to overlook the importance of Baptism in an ontological sense as a significant development of our own self-consciousness. Instead of being understood as the birth of the subject, the majority understand Baptism as primarily concerned with an immersion into a collective identity. This paper deals primarily with the emancipatory dimension of Baptism, which encourages the development of a responsible subject that is an active participant in life and history.*

Keywords: *Baptism, subject, Eucharist, responsibility, identity.*

1. Entering the Church - From Challenges to Custom

Today, it seems that Baptism is just another custom, and that its essence and value were exhausted long ago. The significance of what Baptism used to represent not only in the religious but also in the cultural milieu of past times seems to have lost its relevance today. Baptism has become a custom which is taken for granted, primarily to better incorporate us into traditional society. It is finally detached from its essence so that today even declared atheists baptize their children to follow cultural norms.

In Early Christianity, Baptism was an essential event for those who wanted to be incorporated into the Christian community. The Sacrament itself shaped the worldview of the newly baptized person. Therefore, the very entry into the Church was a revolutionary break with the mentality of rural Judaism and the Imperial culture of dividing people by their social value.

Baptism was imposed at the first apostolic council in 49AD instead of circumcision, leading to its later abandonment. Circumcision as a visible sign of belonging to the people of God was no longer obligatory, which made it easier for pagans to be religiously and socially integrated into Christianity. Importantly, Baptism also abolished the formal distinction between men and women before God. Circumcision itself was a sign of exclusivity because it concerned only men and was not open to women, thus excluding them from the inner Jewish life for more than five centuries.¹ Circumcision among the Jews as a visible sign of the covenant with God was intended primarily for men, indicating their importance. Baptism abolished

¹ Harry W. Eberts, "Plurality and Ethnicity in Early Christian Mission", in *Sociology of Religion* 58 (1997), no. 4, p. 314.

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this distinction. In a relationship with God, gender no longer plays a role as a barrier in relationships.

After Baptism, the entrance to the Church was sealed with the anointment. In previous times the anointment was only given to emperors. Prophets and priests anointed the Jewish kings. However, in Christianity, every baptized person was anointed. In other words, entering the Church through Baptism and anointment, Christians from different cultural and social standing became equal in the community, i.e., they became kings and emperors – royal priesthood; “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1Peter 2:9). Their social differences lost their ultimate significance in the community of Christians. In Eucharistic meals, there was no place for discrimination or humiliation based on their social standing.² Social differences could not be erased or destroyed in the wider society, but they could become irrelevant in the events of Eucharistic meals. Thus, it was indicated in early Christianity that entering the Church through Baptism and anointment brought an entirely new ethos that Christians were supposed to witness. The entire value system is thus called into question before the new law of Christianity. Social and sexual differences became relative through the entrance into the Church.

As we have tried to show only briefly, Baptism was anything but a custom for the early Church. It gave rise to the first “revolution” in the Church because it led to the abandonment of circumcision as an exclusive male custom. Furthermore, the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles fifty days after Christ’s resurrection brought different languages. The collective Jewish identity of the apostles was de-centralized, i.e., their identities were defined in the context of their various locations and people they would meet in their mission. There is no more central place, no more language, no more authoritative seat of power, not even in Jerusalem. The old centers: the Torah, the Temple, the Sanhedrin, etc., were deconstructed, and the center of Christianity is no longer in the maintenance of Jewish identity but in the affirmation of a new personal Christian identity. This new identity is a dynamic one, expressed through the manifestation of spreading a Gospel through various languages. There is no single primary language, but each has become an authentic translator of the Christian message. No language has become the absolute norm for a new Christian identity, but all have been affirmed. In the same manner, no one nation was seen as superior, but rather every nation was valued. In other words, Christianity did not abandon ethnicities. Rather, it confirmed them as an inclusive concept in the context of the new faith.

² Rastko Jovic, “Η «περιορισμένη επανάσταση» του Παύλου”, in *Θεολογία* 86 (2014), p. 149-169.

Therefore, by entering the Church, a newly baptized person was supposed to abandon his old worldviews. It was a challenge for everyone who was baptized and the Empire itself because a different ethos spread within the official cultural policy. Even when imperial politics led to the official recognition of Christianity in the late fourth century, the masses of Christians were still questioned before their Baptism about their faith. The questioning of faith was not reduced to uttering any theological definitions, but the ultimate criterion was Matthew 25. Those ready to get baptized received queries in line with Mt. 25: Do you help the poor, widows, the sick, etc.,³ or simply put: how much do you make of Christ's "living presence" in your life.

"But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 'For I was hungry, and you gave Me [something] to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You drink?

'And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? 'And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, [even] the least [of them,] you did it to Me.' Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me [nothing] to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.' Then they themselves also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?' Then He will answer them, saying, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matthew 25: 31-46).

1. After Baptism – "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword"

³ Николај Афанасјев, *Ступање у Цркву*, Краљево, Епархија Жичка, 2008, p. 110.

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Instead of being ultimately dependent on its cultural or ethnic identity, the baptized Christian acquired a relational and challenging relationship with the broader community. Even more, faith became a personal effort and not something given or imposed by family or other collective entities.⁴ Moreover, Baptism became a call for each and every Christian to step into the world of responsible subjects. Predominant collectivistic understanding of faith in Judaism at the time would not allow the development of individuality. In other words, dependence on the family develops a person to become more conformist to its family.⁵ Conformism to the family does not allow any change in one’s life, which disables the possibility of individual development.⁶ As an exclusive part of collective identity, the Christian faith is in danger to reduce itself into customs, traditionalism, and exclusiveness.

Already in the Gospels, we are warned to avoid a spirit of collectivism in order to work on strengthening human subjectivity. The emergence of subjectivity can be found in Christ’s words, “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10:34). Whenever it is necessary to justify war, divisions, conflicts, and violence, this Gospel quotation comes as an excellent excuse for any of mentioned topics. In the context of non-violence in which the entire New Testament is immersed, it seems a great injustice when the words of Matthew 10:34 are interpreted as a justification of a physical violence.

“For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s enemies will be the members of his household” (Matthew 10:35-36).⁷ At the time of Christ, for Jewish believers, abandonment of their religious inheritance could have death as its consequence: Acts 6:11-14, 8:1-3, 21:20-21, 21:27-36, 23:12-15.⁸ The significance and meaning of faith have been blurred and drowned in the intertwining of family relations. Strong family ties could not significantly spread Christ’s message among the Jewish population, especially in rural areas. The tradition, which was shaped and kept in the family (household) and which allowed the survival of the people as the people of God, became a double-edged sword. The tradition in the Jewish context, maintained by the family, with its folklore and rituals,

⁴ Растко Јовић, *Динамика хришћанског идентитета*, Београд, ПБФ, 2018, p. 66.

⁵ Θάνος Λίποβατς, *Φανταστική και Αληθής Ελευθερία*, Αθήνα, Πλέθρον, 2008, p. 55.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 56.

⁷ Safrai S.& Stem M., *The Jewish People in the First Century - Historical Geography, Political History, Social, cultural and Religious Life and Institutions*, Volume II, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1976, p. 748.

⁸ J. D. G. Dunn, „The Incident at Antioch (Gal. 2.11- 18),“ *JSNT*, 18 (1983), p. 34.

became more and more an obstacle to Christ's message.⁹ In all its forms, the spirit of collectivism shaped the limits of faith, which became a list of established rules and customs. The customs of eating, the observance of the Sabbath, and circumcision only supported the idea of Jewish election and preserved their sense of uniqueness.¹⁰

Faith became the property of community which expresses it through the adherence to the long-ago established customs. Deviation from this adherence means a betrayal of the family, and even more, the chosen people. Thus, the individual member has been reduced to an object within the collectivistic safeguarding of religion. Therefore, Christ attacks religious routines that became more important than human beings - "*The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath*" (Mark 2: 27). He eats with sinners, violates the rules of cult purity, works on the Sabbath, and as the culmination of his confrontation - dies on the cross (tree) as a cursed person according to the rubrics of the Law (Deuteronomy 21:23).¹¹ "He made Him who knew no sin [to be] sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." (2 Cor 5:21).

2. Personal Love

The novelty of faith that Christ brought to humanity requires love, and to love means that faith requires a person. The sanctification of the subject begins with Christ's command, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Loving one's neighbor implies that a person loves himself to start with, and that is undoubtedly a sobering and challenging path of growing up and developing self-awareness. Personal faith is a liberating message because we are not subjugated by the faith that our family or any other community sometimes wants to impose on us. Still, we are called to take a step into the world of personal growth. As Christ's call to the true faith, the emergence of the subject results in a call to build a new quality of relationship within the human community.

Christ's message to love our neighbor as ourselves is found in the Old Testament (Gen. 19:18), but what was revolutionary in Christ's message is its inclusive interpretation. More than clearly, through the story of the

⁹ Dunn J.D.G., *The New Perspective on Paul*, Michigan/Cambridge, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2008, p. 109.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ This is later repeated by the Apostle Paul in Gal 3:13: "Christ has redeemed us from the curses of the law have become a curse for us, for it is written: Cursed is every one that hangeth on to the tree."

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Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 29-37),¹² Christ shows that the neighbor is no longer just a member of the chosen people¹³ but every human being.¹⁴ His message of love for one’s neighbor, regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation, pointed to a new humanity and abandonment of the previous worldview in the form of a division into “us” and “them” as the basis of a collective narrative. The person is not invited anymore to love because of belonging to the same group of people. The person is asked to love other humans inclusively, whether or not they belong to the same cultural or ethnic background. The Story of the Good Samaritan is an invitation for members of the new faith to cross the borders of their respective collective identities into the space of conscious subjectivity.

Apostol Paul reminds us, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:2).” His invitation to Christians to reject conformism to this world means to be against collectivism because we need to be conformist only to Christ.¹⁵ In essence, this conformism to Christ means the birth of a new identity, which brings a critical relationship to the reality in which we live. “Identity development is a process... it is a lifelong process, if one is open to learning, identity is in constant evolution.”¹⁶ The Church’s mission should be in the constant identity development of believers; Her imperative is to make an effort to be a community composed of responsible and inclusive personalities, subjects of history who, in the best way, could be able to “iconize” the Kingdom of God in history.¹⁷ Despite the clear awareness that the Kingdom “cannot be realized on earth as a secular creation,”¹⁸ this does not need relativization of our efforts to go in that direction today.

¹² Choosing to portray the Samaritan as good among the Jews, he was extreme an example used by Christ, given the well-known intolerance between the Jews and the Samaritans. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1972, p. 204.

¹³ John E. Hartley, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 4: Leviticus*, Dallas, Word Books, 1998.

¹⁴ Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 33b: Matthew 14-28*, Dallas, Word Books, 1998.

¹⁵ Kathy Ehrensperger, “Be Imitators of Me as I am of Christ: A Hidden Discourse of Power and Domination in Paul?” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 38, 2003, p. 256.

¹⁶ Donna Hicks, „The Role of Identity Reconstruction in Promoting Reconciliation,” in *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy & Conflict Transformation*, ed. Raymond G. Helmick & Rodney L. Peterson, Philadelphia & London, Templeton Foundation Press, 2003, p. 131.

¹⁷ Cf. Rastko Jovic, “Delusion of Truth: Church as Community,” *Astra Salvensis* VI (2018), no. 12, p. 477-483

¹⁸ Александар Шмеман, *Дневник оца Александра Шмемана 1973-1983*, Београд/Требинье, Епархија захумско-херцеговачка и приморска, 2015, p. 111.

The life of Christ was a call to imitate faith as an action, the good news that truly brings joy to its fruits (heals the sick, the poor, gives hope to sinners, comfort to the forsaken). The tradition whose bearers are family members (father, mother, mother-in-law) somewhat disables the spreading of Christ's good news, which relies upon conscious individuals. The Christian faith, therefore, far exceeds the rules of the collectivist spirit of religiosity.

Perhaps in that sense, the words of Christ are getting more obvious for a different interpretation: "For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household" (Mt 10: 35-36). Christ suggests that we must go through a painful separation from the group identity on the path of faith. i.e., to awake our responsibility. The Lord's sword cuts off exclusivity and barriers that isolate human beings, separating the subject from the subjugation to the collectivistic yoke.

Epilogue

As Apostle Paul once tried to unite and include people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, he expressed and witnessed the Eucharist as a gathering in the Kingdom of God. It is precisely in this inclusive fellowship that Christ offered Himself as remission of sins. The effectiveness of the Eucharist has been in its inclusivity. Consequently, the inclusive identity witnessed and proclaimed in Lord's Supper truly is a genuine community and, at the same time, an event of forgiveness. Forgiveness will not be given to us if we cannot express the inclusivity of the Christian identity witnessed in the Eucharistic gathering.

The incarnation of Christ enabled the unification of every human being with God; human nature was brought in and anchored in the arch of the Holy Trinity. The event of the Eucharist is a local event, which means that it is conditioned by the language, the people, the culture of the given space. In union with Christ, every particularity is introduced and ascended into an event of cosmic dimensions. Moreover, Christ saves every particularity, individuality, every locality from the danger of closing in itself, isolating itself from the rest of the world, or translating it into fundamentalism and fear, the rejection of the other.

Entering the Church through Baptism and anointment advanced the essential sanctification of the subjectivity. A human being stands alone in front of the cosmos, born in Christ. A newly baptized person no longer loves their family for the reason of biological dependence, but because they become aware of the Christian imperative to "consciously" and "critically" love and value them. In other words, a human person can say, "I don't like my family for the reason of biology, because that's how I have to do -

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unconsciously. Suddenly, I love because I am conscious of my identity, my role, and my being in the context of salvation – I am becoming aware of my subjectivity.”

The Church has this enormous message that can unlock the possibility for a person to be not what it is, but what it can become. In the context of the importance of a new Christian/Orthodox identity, a constitutive element should encourage the responsible and inclusive freedom of believers. Orthodox identity is called upon to witness the authentic experience of what it is to be Orthodox, i.e., the identity which respects and accepts particularity as a base for the universality of its mission. It is a lifelong process to develop this new identity in which the Church needs to play the most prominent role being truthful to Her eschatological image.