

Catechesis and baptism in the early Christian church

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Abstract

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*This article which originated as a background study for what Augustine says about his own baptism, presents the facts, as far as they could be ascertained, on practices concerning catechesis and baptism in the early Christian church down to about 400 AD, without going into any doctrinal issues. Public confession of faith and baptism was preceded in the early church by lengthy preparations: catechetical, liturgical and ascetical. Baptism was also followed by mystagogical instruction. All of these are set out concisely, based on a number of primary sources, namely some writings by Augustine, Ambrose and Tertullian, the *Traditio Apostolica* by Hippolytus and the *Didache*. A number of secondary sources are also cited. Attention is drawn to the significance of the custom to baptise at Easter. This explains why Easter was seen as the climax of the church year in the time of the early Christian church.*

1. Introduction

1.1 Preamble

Baptizati sumus et fugit a nos sollicitudo vitae praeteritae (Conf. IX.vi.14).

[We were baptized and the anxiety about our former lives fled from us.]

After a lengthy narrative on his inner struggle and conversion, Augustine recounts his baptism in this almost abrupt sentence, without giving any further details of what must have been a momentous occasion for him. This was the fourth century AD and being baptized was an event preceded by much preparation and associated with numerous rituals.

In this article I have set out to present the facts as far as they could be ascertained, on practices concerning catechesis and baptism in the early Christian church down to about 400 AD. There is no intention whatsoever of entering a doctrinal debate on baptism and I am convinced that the information presented here is interesting to scholars and believers of any Christian background,

irrespective of denomination. The article is not concerned with the views held by Augustine or anyone else on the meaning of baptism.

1.2 Sources

As primary sources for this study I have used *Traditio Apostolica* by Hippolytus (dated round about 215), references from Augustine's own writings *Confessiones*, *De Fide et operibus* and *De catechizandis rudibus*, Tertullian's *De Baptismo*, Ambrose's *Explanatio Symboli*, *De sacramentis* and *De mysteriis* and the *Didache*.

The text of Hippolytus is a jigsaw puzzle, since only a few fragments of the original Greek text survived – fragments which have no bearing on catechesis. There is a single sixth-century manuscript containing a Latin translation of the major part of the work. The second best manuscript is a Coptic (Egyptian) translation, also incomplete. Whatever reservations may be held on this work, it is still most probable that it describes something very like what must lie behind third- and fourth-century practice. The principal section on *catechumeni* – chapters 15-20 – is missing in the Latin and therefore depends on the Coptic translation. I have made use of the translations by Cuming and Dix. The reason why this source was used in spite of the problems with the manuscript is simply because it furnishes the reader with so many detail on the subject.

1.3 Augustine on his own baptism

Augustine, bishop of Hippo and prolific writer of the fourth century, mentions baptism at two stages in his autobiographical work, *Confessiones*. Even though his mother Monnica was a devoted Christian, Augustine was only baptized after his conversion and public confession of faith. The first mention he makes of baptism is in *Confessiones* I.xi.29 where he relates an illness he suffered as a child. He tells how he suffered from severe stomach ache and was near to death and that he himself wished to be baptized. However, he recovered rapidly and his baptism was put off.

1.4 Augustine's conversion and retreat to Cassiciacum

Many years later when he was thirty-two, after a prolonged inner struggle, while working as a teacher of rhetoric in a state school in Milan, Augustine was finally converted and embraced the Christian faith. This was in 386, and the year was drawing to a close. It was a few days before the summer holidays. He now started the preparation for his baptism by retreating to Cassiciacum, the estate of his friend Verecundus (probably in the vicinity of Milan) in the company of his mother – who had followed him after he had taken up his position in Milan (*Conf.* VI.i.1) – and a few young friends, as well as his friend Alypius and his fifteen

year old son, Adeodatus. (Augustine had never married his son's mother, and had at that stage already sent her back to Africa [not without sorrow on his part] some time before his decision to join the church [*Conf.* VI.xv.25]. He was eighteen when the boy was born at the time when he was a student in Carthage – Sizoo, 1948:190.)

While they stayed on this estate Augustine wrote a few books (mentioned below) and these also give us an idea of how their time was spent there. He calls himself and Alypius *catechumeni*, which means they were receiving instruction in the gospel. Part of the day was devoted to study. He still had two young pupils with him whom he taught. When the farm work was done, they gathered for philosophical discussions, sometimes outside, sometimes around the bath. The notes on these discussions were used by Augustine for his books *Contra Academicos*, *De vita beata*, *De ordine*, and *Soliloquia*. We also learn that at night he spent time in prayer and repentance, and reading the psalms of David (Sizoo, 1948:185-6).

1.5 Augustine becomes a *competens*

By the end of the summer holidays (according to Sizoo, [1948:189] towards the middle of October) he returned from Verecundus's estate, announcing that he would no longer fill his post. The reason why he felt compelled to do this, is probably the fact that emerges from several writers (e.g. Hippolytus) that people who approached the church were questioned on their lives, and specifically on their occupations. Those doing work that was unacceptable to the church were told to desist. Among these were teachers of pagan literature, and presumably of rhetoric, too. (Sizoo [1948:189] remarks on the fact that no "notice" was given, but offers no further explanation thereof, except that it seems not to have been required. As this point is of little consequence for the main thrust of this article, no further research was done on it.)

Together with Alypius and Adeodatus Augustine now started a period of intensive catechesis before the baptism which was to take place at Easter according to the custom at the time.

2. Catechesis

At the beginning of the Christian era many people were baptized directly after being converted and having confessed their faith, often on the very same day. This is evident from the narratives in the Acts. One outstanding example is the eunuch from Ethiopia (Acts 8). There is also evidence that children were baptized (cf. Hip. *Trad. Ap.* 21.4 and Acts 16.15). Walker (1970:87-88) sums up the evidence we have about infant baptism, but does not mention Acts or Hippolytus. He regards the first reference to it, albeit obscure, as Irenaeus,

Haereses 2.22.4. Tertullian mentions the practice, but discourages it. He even regards it unwise for the unmarried to be baptised in a hurry! (*Bapt.* 18.6). Origen regarded infant baptism as an apostolic custom while Cyprian favoured its earliest possible reception.

Towards the end of the second century the number of believers increased greatly, but not everybody adhered to their faith, especially not during persecutions. This led to the church giving more structure to the catechesis preceding baptism in order to give believers a better preparation for life amidst persecutions and a great number of heresies.

The necessity of producing behavioral and cultural change in those converted in increasing numbers from paganism demanded more than an intellectual exposition. It required an environment suitable for conversion and growth into Christ (Mitchell, 1981:49).

This opinion is underscored by Walker's explanation that "the catechumenate lost its significance when the whole population had become supposedly Christian" (Walker, 1970:152).

Catechesis involved a three-pronged preparation for the newcomers, namely *catechetical*, *liturgical* and *ascetical* (Cabié, 1987:27). Each of these will be examined in some detail. Leo Magnus (400-461 – thus slightly later than Augustine) – lays down (*Ep.* 16.6) that the *competentes et exorcismis scrutandi et ieiuniis sanctificandi et frequentius sunt praedicationibus imbuendi* (should be tested by exorcisms as well as sanctified by fasts and instructed by frequent sermons – quoted by Cabié, 1987:27).

2.1 Catechetical preparation

The converts presenting themselves to the church were called *catechumeni*. These were taught for quite some time, some even for several years. Hippolytus (*Trad. Ap.* 17.1) states three years as a guideline, but makes the concession (17.2) that "if a man is keen" (Gr. *spoudaios*) the teaching period could be shorter. The teaching was done by bishops and priests as well as by other believers (Cf. *Hip. Trad. Ap.* 19 serves as testimony that laymen also acted as teachers of *catechumeni*.) Hippolytus is not explicit on the nature of the instruction given to the *catechumeni*. Augustine in his *De catechizandis rudibus* which could be translated as *Instruction for beginners* gives advice to the deacon Deogratias of Carthage who had to instruct people coming to the church for the first time. What is remarkable about this treatise is that it contains no worked out schedule of lessons as the title would have one expect, but an injunction to Deogratias to be sensitive to the needs of the specific person(s) before him and to encourage these newcomers. He then speaks at some length about the feelings of the teacher and encourages Deogratias who suspects that his pupils are bored.

Finally he does give a kind of model for this kind of instruction which is revealing. He himself divides it into three main points, namely that the instruction should be short but contain all the main points, secondly that it should be in the form of a *narratio*, telling the mighty acts of God from creation to the present, and in the last instance that it must end with emphasis on the love of God. It seems as if the purpose of this first interview is not so much to instruct as to convert and to motivate the convert to enroll as a *catechumen* and begin the more formal instruction.

It was only when the *catechumeni* took the next step by giving note of their desire to be baptized, that the *catechumeni* were called *competentes* (those who were asking [for baptism] – Van der Meer, 1959:75). Mitchell (1981:51) states that the name *competentes* belongs to later Latin authors (which he does not name) and is not mentioned by Hippolytus. We do find it used by Augustine, however. In *De Fide et operibus* he writes how intently they concentrated when they were taught at the time *cum fontis illius sacramenta peteremus, atque ob hoc competentes etiam vocaremur* (when we were asking for the sacraments [sic] of that fountain and for this reason we were also being called *competentes* [*De fid. et op.* 9, fourth sentence. Translation: MEN]). The term *competentes* is meant to signify a group separate from those who were only listening (*audientes*). *Competentes* were taught intensively, daily for the seven or eight weeks preceding Good Friday (i.e. more or less for the whole of Lent).

In *The Traditio Apostolica* we find three stages of catechesis outlined. These stages include general instruction in Christian living for those who come to hear the word. This general instruction implies also some biblical instruction. More intensive instruction, described as hearing the Gospel in the period of immediate baptismal preparation represents another stage. Finally, at the time of baptism, sacramental instruction, or mystagogy is included. We find this pattern of instruction also in the writers of the fourth century, as well as in the records we have of the instruction given by Clement in the catechetical school of Alexandria. After Clement's school had been destroyed in 202 instruction was given by Origen who restored the school with the support of the bishop (Mitchell, 1981:53). Since this school at Alexandria was more of a Christian academy meant to provide a type of higher education, and since the list of items taught reflects Origen's own interests and the controversies in which he was engaged, we cannot take it as a curriculum for an ordinary class of would-be church members.

We have another account of catechesis, namely as it was done in Jerusalem by the bishop Cyril, handed down in the journal of Egeria or Etheria, usually described as a Spanish nun who visited Jerusalem in the 380s. In Jerusalem also those preparing to be baptized were catechized for three hours daily for a period

of 40 days preceding Easter. We also have a complete set of catechetical lectures thought to have been delivered by Cyril of Jerusalem in 348. A combination of these two sources provides us with a detailed picture of the catechetical instruction given in Jerusalem in the fourth century. The candidates initially received biblical and then credal instruction, with great emphasis on practical morality. After baptism, instruction in the meaning of the sacraments and the Lord's Prayer was given (Mitchell, 1981:58-63).

Augustine assures his readers several times that he was baptized by Ambrose, who was bishop of Milan at the time of his conversion. We are fortunate to have three writings of Ambrose which are catechetical in nature, namely *Explanatio symboli*, *De sacramentis* and *De mysteriis* (Mitchell, 1981:72 seqq.). He tells us that he gave daily instruction to the catechumeni *de moralibus* during Lent at the time when the lives of the Patriarchs and the precepts of Proverbs were being read. A reference in *De Abraham* indicates that these sections from Scripture were preached to those preparing for baptism. We learn from Ambrose (*Exp. ev. sec. Luc. IV.76*) that the enrolment of *competentes* took place on Epiphany on which day he extended an invitation to the *catechumeni* to enrol. The creed was taught to the *competentes* on Palm Sunday only, although the exact time differed from place to place. In his *Explanatio symboli* Ambrose gives details of how he conducted this ceremony. It seems as if this ceremony followed the scrutinies and exorcisms and public examination of the candidates and clearly represents a peak in the preparation. The candidates were given the creed (*traditio symboli*) and expected to commit it to memory in order to recite it publicly at the *redditio* which amounted to their professing their personal acceptance of the faith that had been handed to them. The *Oratio Dominica* was likewise the object of a *traditio* and a *redditio*. In his post-baptismal lectures Ambrose says that it would not have been right to give a reasoned account of the sacraments at an earlier stage because faith must precede reason (*quod inopinantibus melius se ipsa lux mysteriorum infuderit, quam si eam sermo aliqui praecurrisset* – because the light of the mysteries flows into the uninformed more easily than it would if an explanation had preceded it [*Myst. 2*]). This approach we discover in all sources on catechesis and baptism. An explanation of the sacraments is regarded as *disciplina arcana*, and this cannot be dealt with until after pupils have been initiated through baptism, and have first experienced and seen the sacraments with the eyes of faith (Mitchell, 1981:73).

2.2 Liturgical preparation

As was mentioned above, this time of preparation consisted not only of being taught but was also marked by several liturgical and ascetical acts (Cabié, 1987:27). The liturgical acts include the following:

- * Hands were daily laid on the *competentes* and they were exorcised (Hip. *Trad. Ap.* 20.3). This may sound strange to modern Christians but these ceremonial acts were an integral part of life in the early church. For converts coming from a pagan society there was of course a greater need to make an ostensible break with everything associated with idols and demons, and to commit themselves to the Christian lifestyle. Exorcism expressed the contest between Christ and Satan for the soul of the believer and was therefore repeated throughout the time of instruction (Deddens, 1976:47). Cyril of Jerusalem compared this act of exorcism to the refining of gold ore (Deddens, 1976:48).
- * The *competentes* had to receive a few grains of salt (cf. *Conf.* I.xi.17, which proves that this action took place more than once.) In his commentary on this statement from the *Confessiones* Sizoo (1948:43) quotes from another work by Augustine (*De peccatorum meritis et remissione* II.xxvi.42) where it is explained that the salt was distributed to children and the unbaptized in lieu of the bread of communion, and also signified purity and holiness (*quamvis non sit corpus Christi, sanctum est tamen et sanctius quam cibi quibus alimur, quoniam sacramentum est* – although it is not the body of Christ, it is nonetheless holy and holier than the the food by which we are nourished, since it is a sacrament).
- * *Competentes* were also given the sign of the cross on the forehead. This action which seems to have been repeated often, signified Christ Himself taking possession of the person. The signing directly after baptism had been undergone was particularly seen in this light (cf. 3 below). According to Deddens (1976:52) Cyril of Jerusalem attached great importance to this ceremony and called it an indelible holy sign without which the kingdom of heaven will not be entered.

2.3 Ascetical preparation

This preparation consisted of fasting which was started even before the final stage of catechesis. In the *Didache* it is proposed that other Christians fast with the candidates (Cabié, 1987:33) who were constantly supported by their sponsors, till the actual baptismal ceremony. Other ascetical practices were mainly prayer, also specifically nocturnal prayer and the confession of sins. Tertullian (*Bapt.* 20) says:

Ingressuros baptismum orationibus crebris, ieiuniis et geniculationibus et pervigiliis orare oportet cum confessione omnium retro delictorum.

[Those who are about to receive baptism should pray with frequent supplications, fasts and kneeling down and night watches combined with the confession of all sins of the past.]

Augustine relates (*Conf.* IX.vi.14) how his friend Alypius went barefeet in the cold North Italian winter – a remark which leaves the impression that Alypius did this as a form of penitence. *Competentes* were encouraged to abstain from wine, food, the baths and, if they were married, to practice continence (Cabié, 1987:33). Light is shed on the injunction to abstain from the baths by Tertullian's explanation in *Orat.* 25.6. It seems as if he regards the bath as invigorating for the body and as such to be put off until time has been given to prayer which he calls *spiritus refrigeria*, i.e. a refreshing of the spirit (Nelson, 1979:91).

Not only did their obedience in these matters serve to show that they were in earnest, it also served as training for the struggle of Christian life as I indicated above.

During the ceremony when demons were exorcised the *competentes* wearing sackcloth were required to stand barefeet on animal hides. These ceremonial acts were intended to symbolize the *competentes'* heathen past (Van der Meer, 1959:76). Arms were held up which was the usual attitude of prayer (Cabié, 1987:30).

2.4 Final preparation for baptism

Towards the end of this period *competentes* were expected to confess their faith in public by reciting the creed. (Cf. *Conf.* VII.ii.5 on the public confession made by Victorinus. This reference also offers the interesting information that those who were very shy and nervous [*qui verecundia trepidaturi videbantur* – those who seemed likely to be nervous because of their bashfulness] were allowed to do this quietly by themselves.) They were also required to say the Lord's Prayer. Hadidian (1982/83:134) expresses the opinion that this use of the *Oratio Dominica* is closely linked to both sacraments. This use is linked to the sacrament of baptism because of the implicit link in Luke 11:13 between praying and receiving the Holy Spirit, something that was strongly associated with baptism. The link to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper becomes evident in the petition "give us this day our daily bread" which was felt to allude also to the sacrament, apart from its allusion to everyday material needs.

Apart from the *redditio symboli* which constituted a public confession of faith as mentioned above, there were some other rites associated with the final stage of preparation directly before baptism itself was administered. These seem to represent a wide diversity between churches, so that the information has to be considered according to the place of its origin. As a background study for the baptism of Augustine in Milan, I have concentrated on information from the West not later than the fourth century.

2.4.1 The Effata

This rite was only exercised at Milan and Rome. We have a description of this rite by Ambrose himself (*Sacr.* 1.2), the man who had baptized Augustine. Ambrose calls it the *apertio aurium* (the opening of the ears): He reminds the members of his congregation how the priest touched their ears and nostrils and said: *Effata*, the Aramaic word for 'be opened', referring to Christ healing the deaf mute (Mark 7:34). Obviously the candidates were addressed like this with the prayer that their ears would be opened for the Word of God, and their lips would be able to witness the works of God. It is not clear whether this rite should be linked with the one recorded by Hippolytus when the forehead, ears, and nostrils were signed (*Trad. Ap.* 20) or whether a fusion of rites occurred later on (Cabié, 1987:35).

2.4.2 The renunciation of the Devil and acceptance of Jesus Christ

The renunciation of Satan was practised in all churches. According to Hippolytus this act of renunciation took place in the baptistery after the candidates had removed their clothes (*Trad. Ap.* 21), whereas in Tertullian it seems to be repeated: *bis idolis renuntiamus* – twice we renounce the idols (*Spect.*, 13.1). Ambrose says in *De Sacramentis* 1.5: "*Quando te interrogavit: Abrenuntias diabolo et operibus eius? quid respondisti? Abrenuntio*" ("When he asked you 'Do you renounce the devil and his works?' what did you answer? 'I do'"). The exercising of this rite should not be taken as an indication that the *competentes* were considered to be demon possessed; it rather falls in line with the intimation of an intention to follow a Christian lifestyle. In Rome this was the point when the creed was repeated.

2.4.3 Anointing

There is ample evidence that oil was used in the liturgy of baptism, certainly from the third century on. Reference is made by Ambrose in *De Sacramentis*, 1.4 to the anointing of the *competentes*, over the whole of their bodies with the oil of 'exorcism' before entering the water, 'like athletes who were about to do combat in this world' (*unctus es quasi athleta Christi, quasi luctam huius saeculi luctaturus*). An interesting aside here is a remark found in the *Didascalia Apostolorum* which is of Syrian origin, where it is stated that the anointing of women was done by deaconesses (quoted by Cabié, 1987:40). The Syrian source also gives a description of how the women were to stand behind a veil while the priest only touched their heads (Cabié, 1987:43). This matter was researched by Christiansen. See below.

3. The baptistery

In the days of the early Christian church the last part of the normal church service when the Lord's Supper was taken, was only for the believers who had publicly confessed their faith and had been baptized. Before the congregation started on this part of the liturgy all the unbaptized were sent away and the doors were closed.

In the early centuries the church building was called a basilica. Next to or near each basilica in the cities was a separate octagonal building, covered by a small dome, and called the *fons* (a reference to the fountain of life). Inside a burning lamp hanging down from the dome was usually found. This was the *baptisterium* or baptismal chapel.

The symbolic meaning attached to the octagonal form is explained by Van der Meer (1959:79): From sermons by the church Fathers we know that the octagonal ground plan was chosen because of the role played by the number eight in the number symbolism which was practised at the time even by learned Christians, and in which they liked to involve liturgical numbers as well. The point of departure was the seven days of creation as given in the Scriptures. Six was taken to be the sign of the creation in which God worked, seven of the rest of God and eight of the New Creation which is to come into being on the second coming of Christ. For this frame of thinking, eight was a sign of the kingdom to come, and of eternal life. Thus people thought it fit to give an octagonal structure to the font where the origin of eternal life was sacramentally enacted. Van der Meer (1959:79) quotes Ambrose as well as Augustine as sources for this view, but gives no exact references.

The water in the baptismal font was always running water (Van der Meer, 1959:61, 75; Christiansen, 1981:3, 7; *Didache* 7.1 – *en hudati zonti*), often streaming down from the mouths of lions or deer (a reference to Ps. 42) into a pool (*piscina*) into which one had to descend by way of three steps. (*Didache* 7.3 does also state the possibility of pouring on water instead of immersion.) The walls of the baptistery were often decorated with mosaics. Behind drawn curtains those who were sufficiently prepared by catechesis were baptized in the Easter Night. This time was chosen because the *competentes* were seen as entering a new life in the night of the resurrection of Jesus (Van der Meer, 1959:76).

4. The baptismal ceremony

Augustine gives no detail of his own baptism, probably because the particulars were common knowledge to the believers of his time for whom he was writing. To students and believers today this is a vast field of interest.

According to Hippolytus (*Trad. Ap.* 21.1) when the cock crowed (i.e. at dawn) on Easter ‘the prayer over the water is to be said’. Tertullian (*Bapt.* 4.4) sees this as the moment when the Spirit comes down to sanctify it (*supervenit enim statim spiritus de caelis et aquis superest sanctificans eas* – forthwith the spirit comes down from heaven and stays on the water, sanctifying it). This view is also expressed by Ambrose (*Sacr.* 1.15): *Non sanat aqua nisi spiritus sanctus descenderit et aquam illam consecraverit.* (Water heals only if the Spirit descends upon it to consecrate it.) Cabié (1987:44) formulates the meaning of the water in the baptismal rite as follows: “The dominant theme in the blessing of baptismal water is, therefore, the baptismal font as a maternal womb that is impregnated by the Spirit.” The idea of new birth is also borne out by the symbolism of the water as the image of the grave. As Christ rose from the grave to live again, so the baptized emerge into a new life (a paraphrase of Romans 6:3-11).

Hippolytus (*Trad. Ap.* 20.5-10) gives detailed instructions for the baptismal ceremony. I quote from the translation by Cuming (1976):

Those who are to be baptized should be instructed to bathe and wash themselves on the Thursday ... Those who are to receive baptism shall fast on the Friday. On the Saturday those who are to receive baptism shall be gathered in one place at the bishop’s decision. They shall all be told to pray and kneel. And he shall lay his hand on them and exorcize all alien spirits, that they may flee out of them and never return into them. And when he has finished exorcizing them, he shall breathe on their faces; and when he has signed their foreheads, ears, and noses, he shall raise them up.

4.1 Immersion

Thus in the night of the resurrection the baptism took place wearing no jewels, with loosened hair, without any clothes (thus following the custom of the Jewish proselyte baptism – Christiansen, 1981:4), as they had come into the world (*Hip. Trad. Ap.* 21.3), behind drawn curtains they descended the steps into the baptismal pool. They were required to renounce Satan by repeating a formula after the bishop (*Hip. Trad. Ap.* 21.9). The bishop held each by the shoulders under the streaming water three times and baptized them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Among the minute detail given by Hippolytus (*Trad. Ap.* 21.10-20) we find that before each immersion a part of the apostolic creed pertaining in turns to the three Persons of the Holy Trinity was said and the candidate had to confirm it by saying “credo” (this part of the ceremony is also confirmed by Ambrose, *Sacr.* 2.20).

4.2 White robes

After the immersion the *competentes* emerged once more, as if born into a new life. Each one of them received a long white robe. Ambrose (*De Sacr.* 5.14) calls the newly baptized the *familia candida* (white-clad family or household). In *Myst.* 34 he explains the meaning of this: *quod exueris involucrem peccatorum, indueris innocentiae casta velamina* (that you have taken off the cover of sin and have put on the undefiled garments of innocence). According to Deddens (1976:52) Cyril quotes Isaiah 61:10 when explaining to the newly baptized that they should henceforth always be spiritually clad in white, that their spirits should be undefiled.

4.3 Anointed

In an adjoining room the *competents* were anointed on the head by the bishop as a sign of their anointment by the Holy Spirit (Tertullian, *Bapt.* 7.1, 8.1) It seems as if in some places fragrant oil was used which reminded of course of the anointing of priests, kings and prophets in the Old Testament. This anointment was a sign of the Holy Spirit's giving these people the guidance and strength for the tasks for which they were called and it was readily applied to the lives of the newly baptized.

They were also given the kiss or seal with the words "Peace be with you" giving the reply "and with your spirit" (Hip. *Trad. Ap.* 21). These post-baptismal rites are summarized by Augustine himself in *Sermo* 224 as follows: *Baptizatus est, sanctificatus est, unctus est, imposita est ei manus* (he has been baptized, he has been made holy, he has been anointed, hands have been laid on him).

4.4 Received into the fold

When everyone had been baptized, first the children, then the men and finally the women, probably assisted by deaconesses (Christiansen, 1981:6; Van der Meer, 1959:76), they entered the basilica all together. They wore their white robes, "like new lambs in the fold of the Lord", and entered the basilica while singing psalms. Here they were joyfully received by the other believers. They were henceforth considered to be people of the light, bearing the seal of the Spirit of Christ (Van der Meer, 1959:77). They were then given places right in front in the church, and for the first time said the *Oratio Dominica* in the service (Hadidian, 1982:135 backs up this viewpoint with Rom. 8:15 and Gal. 4:6). For the first time they saw the mystery of the Lord's Supper and took part in it. This scene is what we observe depicted for instance in the magnificent apse mosaic in the San Appolinare in Classe at Ravenna where Christ is presented as the central figure with the newly baptized as white lambs on both sides.

5. Conclusion

It seems as if the rituals practised, as well as the emotions involved made baptism in the early church a much more momentous occasion than it is felt to be in most Christian churches today. For a convert who had made the decision and gone through the intensive training of catechesis, the acts of self-denial and public confession of faith, the baptism at Easter must have been a moving experience. To all believers today an understanding of this must also contribute to a greater understanding of why Easter, the Festival of the Resurrection, is the true climax of the church year.

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