



The Font

Baptism is one of the most revered and significant actions of the church. It is clearly rooted in Jesus' own baptism by John and grounded in the theology of Paul: "Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." (Romans 6:1-4)

The earliest evidence of special places for baptism is in a third-century house church in what is now Syria. In the fourth century, buildings called *baptistries* were provided for baptism. The container or *font* was large enough for an adult to be baptized by immersion. (To baptize means "to dip." "Immersion" means that the one being baptized stands or kneels in inches or feet of water while copious amounts of water are poured over his or her body.) It is unlikely that these early fonts were large

enough for submersion, that is, the whole body going under the surface of the water. Eventually, as infant baptism became the norm, the font became smaller and moved from the baptistry into the church.

With the revised rites for the celebration of baptism for infants (1969) and adults (1972 and 1988), and the earlier reform and restoration of the Easter Vigil (1951), the font is regaining its place.

Baptism is celebrated at the threshold of the life of faith, so it is appropriate for the font to be near the entrance of the church in an atrium or chapel. This would provide ample space for funeral processions to pause beside the font for the blessing of the casket. The design and scale of the font must clearly reflect the significance that the church attaches to initiation, to the mystery of incorporation into the eternal life of Christ that it celebrates.

The sign of baptism, however, is not the font, but the water in it. The abundant water speaks of the generous, life-giving grace of Christ poured over and into those who are "called by name" to put on the new life of Christ. The church, acting in Jesus' name, must show by its gestures and symbols fullness of hospitality toward all those initiated.

The font is the place for memorable rituals marking births and deaths, and the blessings of many spiritual journeys. The water of this font calls all who enter it, or touch it or are blessed by it, into that transformation whereby "we are alive for God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:11).

