

The place where the church meets the world most often, and often most painfully, is where people come for infant baptism. In fact, in the past the church has encouraged people to come. In the early nineteen sixties, the Mothers' Union of the Anglican Church produced information for women in the church which read "If you know of any one who has had a child, visit them, and encourage them to bring the child for baptism as soon as possible". It was commonly said that if a baby died without being baptized, it would 'go to hell', and to this day, many requests for baptism are based on such fears.

In the Church there exists an almost unconscious or inexpressible double bind. At one level we know that the sacrament of baptism is not a sacrament that welcomes a new life into the world, but a sacrament that gives expression to 'that which by nature we can not have, life with Christ.' We know that baptism is a sacrament of 'new life'. We know that Baptism is a sacrament of 'initiation' not just 'welcome'. On the other hand, the Church has for a long time left the business of initiation to others. The Masons do it, the Scouts do it, Boarding Schools and the Army do it: But for a long time, the Church has not really had the knowledge of how to initiate people into the way of Christ. And how could it? When the Church is 'society at prayer' then the notion of initiation into it is ludicrous; all that is needed is to get people to 'come to pray'.

Times are changing, and we know we can not longer go on making promises we can not keep, but at the same time, making the changes to a truly 'evangelising, catechising and baptising' Church puts us in the position of the 'bad guy', making 'nice things' (like baptisms) harder for ordinary people to get access to. We want to be the 'good guys' wearing the white hats and being good. It is difficult to be labelled as 'tough'.

It is also very understandable that parents, and grandparents who want to do the best for their young children come and ask that the Church be involved in honouring their intention to 'do the right thing'. Often however, a lot has gone on in the life of the Church since such parents were last there, and it comes as quite a shock for them to hear that what they thought was a 'good thing' is now considered somewhat difficult. What used to be a lovely occasion on a Sunday afternoon, now comes trailing the need for attendance at Church, and classes, and getting up on a Sunday morning for the event! People come asking for what they know, only to be told that everything is different. They come asking for what they think is bread, only to be offered what looks like a stone! (But which those offering think really is bread!)

This place, where the desire of well meaning parents meets the Church's struggle to recover the significance of a distinctive Christianity is a painful meeting place. People want 'god', or 'spirituality', but not necessarily 'Christ' or 'The Church'. We know that there *can* be no having of God without Christ or the church, but are ashamed of what the church has become. We want to be open and hospitable, yet at the time when we want to be open the most, we wrestle internally with the question of how to uphold the integrity of baptism. We are in difficult, transitional times!

The question of 'what to do' becomes more complicated when we try to take into account the basic attitudes which congregations and those seeking baptism have toward one another.

Congregations tend divide themselves into two groups, either 'compliant' or 'resistant'. In compliant congregations, the worst thing to say is 'no' or to require anything from parents asking for infant baptism. Their main concern is to show God's all embracing love, and to heal the hurts that the church has inflicted upon many. On the other hand, 'resistant' congregations secretly hate the people who come. They resent the intrusion into their lives by people who do not care about them, they resent the fact that they may do their best for a 'baptism family', never to see them again! Resistant congregations set up high walls and difficult hurdles for those coming for baptism, and so show their resentment in their structures.

There is a similar divide between 'compliant' and 'resistant' applicants. Compliant parents will jump through all the hoops, simply to get what they want. There is no real engagement (and so no

satisfaction for the Church either), but a simple obedience, which the applicants know will please the Church, and despite what they really think, will get them what they want.

Resistant applicants treat the Church as a 'shop'. "You are here to provide me with the religious goods and services which I decide are good for me". Any deviation from this 'consumer' view of the church brings a loud and angry cry "He would not baptize my baby !!!!"

What is missing from both the compliant and resistant stances is the ability to engage one another, and negotiate! Much of our religious life is lived at the level of our childlike longings to be seen and heard and recognised. Such longings do not know about negotiation or 'working through to a win win' situation'. As any one who has been around a two year old knows, frustrated desire results in a tantrum! In adult life, these longings are transferred our adult transactions, and we see repeated the two year old responses of compliance, resistance and tantrums. Confused understanding about what baptism is, combined with the individual concerns of parents, and the Church, mixed in with poor negotiating skills makes for a very difficult situation.

### **Is Baptism special?**

What follows is an account of how we at St. Timothy's try to deal with these difficult times. Before we start however, it is necessary to make a few remarks about the sacrament of baptism and why it should be singled out as needing special attention.

In the days when everyone was a member of the church by virtue of their being a member of a Christian country, and the church was 'society at prayer', baptism could be easily linked with marriages and funerals as a 'pastoral' office. The formation of a Christian identity was done subliminally, and almost constantly, by the values and rituals of society at large. Grace was commonly said before meals, bible stories were read in schools, and at home, and prayers were regularly said before bed time. Christianity came 'with mother's milk'. In such a situation, any special attention to the 'initiation' of Christians in baptism made no sense. A baby was baptised as soon as it was born because it was being shaped in Christian ways, as soon as it was born.

These days, things are different. Such formation as a Christian is not taken for granted. As a consequence, it will become ever more true, that linking 'birth rites' (whose job is to celebrate a new life) with baptism, whose task is to help *change* the identity of the candidate, from an 'natural' one to a 'Christian one' will also be less and less taken for granted. It is one thing for a priest at a wedding to say "We are here to bless this marriage in the name of the Christian God (however you understand God)", but quite another for a person to say "I want to become a Christian and live my life in that way".

Baptism is not a pastoral office like other 'pastoral offices' but a rite of initiation. Although at any one time a person who makes contact with the church might be invited to renew their faith, it is a different matter when a person approaches for baptism. Then, although they may not themselves think so, they are asking to be initiated into a new way of life 'which by nature they can not have'. It is for this reason I believe that it is right not to call baptism a 'pastoral office'.

### **But Can you judge another's faith?**

This attempt, to heighten the significance of the 'initiation' quality of baptism often brings with it the charge that we are 'judging' the faith of another. By asking applicants to participate in some form of formation so that they might take seriously their promises as parents, we are accused of devaluing the faith that the applicants already have. Instead of accepting them 'where they are', we devalue their faith by asking them to participate in some process of formation. Such people, it is argued, may *have* faith (however unformed). To ask them to participate in some form of activity which is new, judges the level of their faith as inadequate; something that we ought not to do.

As far as this argument goes it is fine, but like most less than adequate arguments, what is wrong is not what is *said*, but what is *not* said. What is *not* said here is that the sacrament of baptism itself contains the element of 'change and transition'. It is a sacrament of 'dying and rising', it is a

sacrament of 're conception'. If there is no opportunity for either the candidate or those who are answering for the candidate to participate in such an experience of 're conception' then the 'outside' of the sacrament (the words and symbols of dying and rising which we employ) will bear no resemblance to the inner reality of those participating in it. As a result we find our selves saying "This sacrament has no meaning for me. It is empty. The things we do and talk about are not happening for me! What is the use of it?" Baptism is a sacrament of *change*. To expect that people *will* change is not to deny what faith they have, but simply to be true to the nature of the sacrament itself.

As well, baptism is not a 'family sacrament', in that it only involves the family or inner circle of those who apply. Baptism is a church affair. If there are people who are not members of a congregation who come for baptism, it makes sense that the church has something to say about what the sacrament means, and how it ought rightly to be performed. While to some degree, it may be quite legitimate with 'pastoral offices' for participants to say "Its my wedding, and I'll have what I want to" (especially with weddings, where the man and woman are the 'celebrants' and marry each other), in Baptism, a person is being initiated into the Church. Ought not then the church be expected to be a party to the negotiations?

At St. Timothy's Anglican Church, where I am vicar, we continually struggle with how best to work with this question. Here is our story so far. Each encounter brings new insight for me, so this story is not yet complete , but I offer it as a contribution to the ongoing conversation about the church, and the sacrament of Baptism.

### **An attempt at "Win Win" at St. Timothy's Bulleen**

The phone in my study rings "St Timothy's vicarage, Paul Dalzell here." "I'm ringing to see if you will christen my baby." Says the voice on the other end of the phone. "Yes" I reply "I would be happy to have a talk with you about your baby. Would you like me to visit you, or would you like to come here?"

This first conversation is vital. I make it a policy never to say anything except 'yes' to a person making a request. My aim is to keep as many channels of communication open as I can, and to help the caller to feel positive about their first experience with the church, until they meet me and see what kind of a person I am, and hear my 'account of where the congregation is up to and what may be possible.'

What I am saying "yes" to is not necessarily the question that has been asked, but to something deeper. I want to say "yes" to their desire to ring, I want to say "yes" to a meeting, I want to say "yes" to a good relationship with them. If I express any doubts about this over the phone, at the first contact I have with those who call, then the job of negotiating what has to happen next is likely to be much harder. The job I have to do on the telephone is to begin the relationship and keep the situation open.

When the couple arrives, it is important for me first to get to know something about those who are new to me . This is not simply being polite. Every one comes with a story of what has brought them. I want to begin to build a relationship of friendship with those who have come, and to do that means not necessarily getting down to business straight away. If the relationships are right, the business will look after itself to some degree.

I learned this lesson from Tracey. I met her because I had received a call from a social worker saying "Tracey wants her children baptised, can you see her?" "Yes" I said, so we met. As Tracey came into my study she began her request "I want the children baptised, can you do it?". She looked upset and nervous, and I wondered what that was about. Maybe Tracey was asking about baptism because it was what she thought she was allowed to ask for. As yet I did not know, but I felt uncomfortable. I replied

Me:            There have been a few changes in the church over the last little while, so I don't feel comfortable just spelling them out before we are friends, because they might sound a bit foreign to you. You look a bit upset.

Tracy: Oh I am Father, my husband is sick, and we are short of food. I just don't know what to do. Life has been so hard lately. I promised not to leave him when he came through his illness the last time, and he is so proud, that he is working day and night, but it is so lonely and I don't know where to go to get food.

Me: Don't worry. We have got some food in our collection basket, and I can let you have a little bit of money. It's not much but it might help.

Tracey: Thank you, it would be good.

We go to get some food, and I make a time to check with her in the next couple of days. This, I hope, is the start of a friendship. What ever happens about her children will be easier to negotiate because it will happen in the context of a relationship of trust and mutual respect.

So the first step for us is to establish a relationship which transcends the 'consumerisation' of our dealings with one another. Once I feel happy enough about the relationship I have established, I offer an account of where the church is up to during a subsequent meeting with the parents. For the purpose of this case study, I will relate what I say verbatim, and make comments about it as we go.

Me: What I would like to do first is to fill you in on what the church has been thinking about in the last little while. You know there are people who may not have had a great deal to do with the church since they were in Sunday school for example. They come back when they have children, and are a bit shocked by what they hear, because they expect that things are going to be the same as when they left. The amount of change is disturbing. So I'd like to take a bit of time to bring you up to speed about what the church has been thinking.

Couple

Yeah, OK, that would be nice.

With this opening sentence I am trying to prepare the couple for the fact that they are likely to hear something that is new, and different from what they might have expected. I try too, to present it in a way which sends the message "Here is the truth of your situation, you have been away for a while, but I would like to bridge the gap for you. This is a kindness."

Me:

In the early days of the church, becoming a Christian was a dangerous thing because people were persecuted a lot, and so a person had to be very serious about whether or not they wanted to be a Christian. As well, they had to undergo a long period of being formed as a Christian, because if they were going to be killed for the faith, they needed to know that it was really the right way for them, and that their faith could sustain them through the trials that would come. After they had done this, which took anywhere from one to three years, they would be baptised.

Then the emperor Constantine got converted, and the whole of the Roman empire became Christian, and so it was now no longer a problem to be a Christian. In fact it was a benefit. But of course, now all the preparation for becoming Christian was not needed because the society as a whole supported you in the faith instead of persecuting you. This is where we get to with the church of England. Everyone in England was baptized because to be born English was to

be Christian and a member of the Christian church.

Now days, this is not so much the case. No one is twisting anyone's arm to be a Christian, and in fact lots of people are saying 'no I am a Muslim, or a Buddhist, or a Jew or nothing' I do not want my child to be baptized as a Christian.

At the same time, people are staying away from church because they say "The church is full of hypocrites". Well we are trying to *reduce* the amount of hypocrisy in the church by taking

seriously the business of being baptized.

There was a time when people could come into church and make promises they did not keep, and we did not worry, and the congregation made promises they did not keep, and we did not worry, but we felt like hypocrites. We are trying to reduce that now, because we do not want people to say "The church is full of hypocrites". If you look at the actual service it asks you to make certain promises about how you will bring the child up, and what your own faith is. If you do not think you can say these promises without crossing your fingers behind your back, then there are other options we can discuss that might suit you better.

The other thing that is worth saying about baptism is this. The sacrament of baptism is the sacrament that makes a new Christian, and it is like a three legged stool. It has three bits to it. The first bit says "Before you do anything about your relationship to God, God is in there loving and caring for you. It is to give expression to this truth that we baptize babies. The parents act on behalf of the baby to show that God is involved in everyone's life long before they can choose for themselves.

The second leg of the chair is this. No one is ever touched by God without being changed. Sooner or later everyone must say yes or no to God, and saying 'yes' means learning to live a different kind of life. This means a change. This is why we put both babies and adults *under* the water. They die to their old self that doesn't care about God, and live to their new self that wants to be a follower of Jesus, and who wants to let Jesus influence, and care for them. That's why we have the water, to make a symbol of this change.

The third leg of the chair is this. The people who want to follow this way of being with God are called 'the church'. It makes sense for those followers of Jesus not to be alone, but to meet together to support each other, and to remind each other about and to practise and celebrate the kind of life they are living.

Now, here at St. Timothy's we have four baptism days a year (Easter, Pentecost, All Saints (1st November) and The Baptism of the Lord (first Sunday in January). If you would like your child baptized, can I suggest that you prepare for it by thinking about your own Christian faith between now and the next baptism day? We will provide you with companions and between now and then you can have some new experience of these three legs of the 'baptism chair'. You can see how God has already been active in your life, look at how you might deepen your faith, and get some experience of the congregation by coming to Church to meet us each Sunday between now and the next Baptism day. That way, when you make the promises, you will have had experience of all three legs of the 'baptism stool' and be able to make them without having to cross your fingers.

After that, although we would love to keep in contact with you, our bargain for this part of the deal is finished. The rest is up to God.

Now, I'm not expecting you to make a decision now, feel free to think it over, but if you come to the conclusion that you do not want to go ahead with this plan, then there is 'option two'. Many people say "We want our baby to be blessed, and to have a name, and to say 'thankyou' to God for our baby. We want to make sure that if anything happens to us we have god-parents who have promised to look after our child. We want to make some promises as parents ourselves.

Now if this fits your situation, we can do all of this but there is no need to go through all the preparation needed for a baptism. In this second option we are not saying "We want to be Christian and have this baby grow up Christian' but are saying "We want to say 'thank you' for the birth of our child before God, without becoming involved in the congregation." All this is possible. You do not have to come on a Sunday morning to have it done, we can do the blessing and thanksgiving any time that is convenient to you. You can make your own promises up, and write them in the order of service. We have done this with several families now and I have enjoyed the process a lot. One set of god-parents even gave a baby safety capsule to the child that we blessed as a sign of their wish that the baby be kept safe. It was great. If you

choose this option I am happy to spend as much time as you like with you preparing the order of service. I have it on the computer and it is easy to produce customised versions of it for your needs. (An example of a 'Blessing and Naming Ceremony' appears in appendix 1 )

Now, last of all, I know that the times we are in are not fixed. There is still lots of fluidity of practice around, and so if you still wanted a baptism I would be happy to ring up another person I know who would be able to do it for you differently , and probably easier from what I have said here. At St. Timothy's we are trying out this way of operating, and I hope we can do a deal, but if you are not able to say 'yes' to any of the two options I have outlined, then I will be happy to help you find a person who might be able to help you. If the times were more settled, then everyone would be doing the same thing, but as it is there is lots of variation and so I accept that, but here we have to be true to what we think is a fair thing.

That is the end of the 'account' I give about what we do at St. Timothy's, and why. In our experience, most of the people who come are happy with the explanation. They understand that not everyone has to be a 'Christian' (including being a member of a congregation). They do understand that now, no one is 'going to hell' if they are not baptized. They do understand that they can express some very significant things about how they feel about having a new baby, without having to have a baptism.

This method of working seems to draw people into relationship with me and the church at what ever level they feel able to participate. It does not ask of them that they be further down the track than they really are, but it does not say either that a baptism is an appropriate ceremony for every one who comes. The difficult part of the process is trying to communicate these differences in such a way as to value those who come, rather than let them feel as though they are getting a second class option, if they do not wish to explore the option of a serious and longish baptismal preparation.

### **Trying it out on my friends:**

I have tried out this 'account of how we work' on a number of colleagues from time to time. At gatherings of clergy the issue of how best to do infant baptism is always a 'hot' issue. In general conversations go something like this

Priest 1 Well at St..... we do this (explains the policy)

Priest 2 But what if they don't want what you offer, or say "X?"

Priest 1 Well we do this (explains the option)

Sooner or later the questioner brings the expounder down to the point at which he/she can not in all conscience go on. They say "Well then, if what you're saying is the case I'd have to say 'No.'" At this point his/her whole case is lost. Every one knows that saying 'no' to people is the thing they can not do, which makes them hate themselves the most, and opens them to the charge from the couple 'He would not baptize my baby!!!! He refused me the sacrament!!! The church is supposed to be caring!!!" ...and so the tirade goes!

My experience in relating what we do at St. Timothy's, is that the offer to accept the diversity of practise for the time being, while affirming that we want to hold to a certain way of doing things, allows the couple room to move. At no time have I said "No". Instead I have said "This is what we think is important, but I accept that you might not agree, and I can help you to find other options". In the days to come when Christendom finally falls away completely, all churches will be united again in their practice and see the need for thorough Christian formation again. When that happens those who come will understand this to be the same kind of cultural norm as baptism of everyone was in previous times. If they do not, then the common practice of the church will mean that there is no alternative to a thorough preparation to be had in any congregation. My belief is that this change will happen slowly and almost naturally if our reading of the times is correct. Till then I must be content with a plurality of practice, and continue to argue the case for what I think is right with those who do differently.

There are two further arguments which need to be canvassed about the sacrament of Baptism. One is known as 'the evangelistic opportunities of the occasional offices', and the other is known as 'the Anna King-Murdoch Factor'

### **“The Evangelistic opportunities of the occasional offices.”**

There used to be an old saying in the church which encouraged clergy to make use of the “evangelistic opportunities of the pastoral offices”. This meant that at weddings, funerals and baptisms it is possible to preach the gospel to unchurched people and then leave the rest to the Holy Spirit to move them to take the matter of their faith further. There are those who argue that baptising infants is a good opportunity to preach the Gospel to those who are unchurched.

This has several serious problems associated with it. First of all, experience shows that unless there is some pathway which allows the congregation to capitalise on the good will created by a baptism, those who have enjoyed it will go away and say ‘that was nice’, and do nothing further. If this argument is to be used, then such practice must be accompanied by a follow up mechanism to capture the enthusiasm generated by the preaching of the gospel. To leave the matter to the Holy Spirit is to believe in magic, and to apply a standard of faith in the Holy Spirit’s action baptism which is applied no where else in Church life. My guess is that invoking the Holy Spirit at this point is an excuse for not making the hard yards that a follow up to those attending a baptism might mean.

The second is a more serious objection. No one, for example, would consider visiting a prostitute in order to use the intimacy of the occasion to ‘preach the gospel’. The suggestion is ludicrous because we acknowledge that the intimacy of love making ought to come at the end of a long process, and not be the means by which a relationship is begun. For the church, baptism is the most intimate of sacraments. It is a sacrament that marks the end of a period of formation and initiation into Christ. To use baptism as the means by which the gospel is preached is to ‘cast pearls before swine’, and to misunderstand the nature of the sacrament itself.

While baptism is understood as a ‘nice thing that we can do for babies’ and at the same time take the opportunity to preach the gospel, we mis read the seriousness of the danger the church is in. We are at risk of becoming an empty shell, an institution that has forgotten what the gospel is, and which carries on being nice. We are becoming like a marshmallow chocolate having ‘hard edges’, but ‘soft centres’. Baptism belongs not at the edge of church life but at its centre, since baptism is the means by which people are united to Christ, and the mode of life (dying and rising) by which we live. If the church is to survive in anything like a Christian form, we need to begin to take seriously again the processes of Christian initiation and begin to put baptism not at the fringe of our life, but at its heart. Doing this takes Bonhöffer’s suggestion seriously, that the church not offer ‘cheap grace’, and that we recover something of the preciousness of that which belongs to our centre, such that it is not just open to everyone.

### **The “Anna King Murdoch Factor”:**

At one time the Melbourne ‘Age’ newspaper carried a series by their staff journalist Anna King-Murdoch. She had approached a local congregation about the baptism of her child with great trepidation, deciding after a long absence to give the church another go. Instead of being welcomed, she was written a long letter explaining the requirements of baptism in that congregation and why it would not be possible to baptize her baby. She felt hurt and rejected. She had given the church a second ‘go’ and it had not come through for her. This story has become quite significant in the debates over baptism of infants in the Melbourne Anglican scene, but what is it really about? One possible response would be to say “Well what a stupid thing for that priest to do. The church is not like that”, and move on. But this story has touched a deeper chord.

The first argument runs thus “No one is twisting any one’s arm to become a Christian and so when people like Anna King-Murdoch return to the church to ‘give it another go’, we need to understand just how difficult it is for them. The implication in this comment is that it is better to baptise the baby (at the risk of cheapening grace) than it is to risk alienating those who have expended a lot of energy and

courage to approach the church. If there has to be compromise and imperfection it is more important to respect the cost to the person coming than it is to respect the integrity of Baptism as a sacrament.

About this there are two things to be said. The first is that only two options are presented. There is only 'respecting the courage of the people by doing what they want', and 'not respecting the courage of the people by not doing what they want'. I am arguing for a third way; a way that *invites* those who come, into a relationship of friendship which transcends the consumer approach to the church, so that what happens, happens in the context of a genuine relationship.

This is what I value and what happens in my daily life all the time. The shop where I buy my fruit and vegetables is not the cheapest shop I know. I keep shopping there because of the relationship I have with the fruiterer. My relationship with him transcends the buying and selling transaction. The problem with the argument in the Anna King-Murdoch story is that the options are put in an 'either or' way. No where is there a case made which is not 'either you give her what she wants or you reject her'. There is no opportunity to say "Listen Anna, what is your story? How have you come here? What is it you are really looking for?" If people have expended a lot of courage to approach the church then what they will appreciate is not simply that we do what they want, but that we respect their story, take time to hear it, and offer them the possibility of taking the next step on the journey of faith, whatever that might mean for them. What God offers us is not 'doing what we want', but the possibility of a transforming relationship. Any one who does not want a transforming relationship, does not in reality, want the Christian God.

The second thread in the Anna King-Murdoch story has to do with our pain and embarrassment about the church. Here I have a particular sympathy for the situation of the nineteenth Century theologian Frederich Schleiermacher. As a Christian his heart went out to those people who in fact were his friends, but who despised his faith. His book, "Speeches on Religion to its Cultured Despisers" was an attempt to make the connection between his faith and his friends. His friends liked him, but despised the faith he stood for. This conflict caused him great pain, and gave us the book.

My guess is that much the same thing is happening with the Anna King-Murdoch story. Many clergy identify with the 'cultured people' outside the church. They wish that these 'cultured despisers' could also be drawn in to seeing the value of faith in Christ. A painful irony is at work. Those clergy who consider themselves to be able to be both 'in the world' but not 'of the world' find being in the church an embarrassment. Their friends (represented here in the person of Anna King- Murdoch) are outside the institution. If only they could be brought to faith, then the church would be a much more lively, faithful place.

As it is, such clergy feel lonely because they are both isolated from their congregations (which they fear are inward looking and insular) and isolated from their cultured friends in the matter of faith (who reject the church because it is inward looking and insular!) How can the passion they feel for God be communicated to those friends who despise the Church and religion? The Anna King-Murdoch story brings to the surface all the pain that goes with being in the church, yet at the same time seeing the church to which I belong act in a way that alienates the people I would most like to have in it! The option to 'give her what she wants' gives expression to the desire that the church stop being legalistic, insular, and alienating.

The problem is that being the church is about much bigger realities. If we continue to water down what the church offers when it is its best self, then when the time comes for people to get that 'best self' we will have forgotten how to it, and will let people down when it counts the most. If we attract people because they are not offered the whole gospel, then when they need it we will fail them. The Church is for 'those who would true valour see', it is a mistake to begin in a way that does not make that clear from the outset. As Bonhöffer reminds us "When Christ calls a person, He bids them come and die".

Again, this offer of the heroic quest of Christian life, which the church has as a treasure in an earthen vessel, can not be made outside of a living relationship which is strong enough to hold such an offer. The failure in the case of Anna King-Murdoch was not in the refusal or otherwise to baptize her baby, but in the failure of those concerned to see that the issue of baptism can not be discussed outside of

a relationship of trust which needs to be built and strengthened first, in order that the depth of the sacrament and the love of God may be contained in a strong vessel of loving relationship.

### **Infant Baptism and Parents**

At St. Timothy's we are also conducting the Adult Catechumenate (a way of forming adults in the faith prior to baptism, or renewal of their baptismal vows that takes about a year to complete). This process is also open to anyone who wishes to have their child baptised. The option we offer for infant baptism is a modified version of the Catechumenate. It is modified because it takes into account that couples will come for infant baptism at any time of the year. At this stage in the Church's history we do not think it is fair to ask those who come for infant baptism to undertake a full Catechumenal process, especially given the cultural context of infant baptism in which we now find ourselves.

It is clear that we live in difficult times, and that these difficulties centre around the task that the church has to take up again: the task of forming and initiating people into the life of Christ, through living congregations. To this task there is resistance both from within congregational membership, and clergy, and from the community at large. To take on the task is to be lonely, and in conflict, but it is through this conflict that I believe we will come to an understanding of our situation and penetrate beneath the surface to deeper nuances of meaning which cluster around the sacrament of baptism.

Appendix 1.<sup>1</sup>

Sample "Blessing and Thanksgiving Service"

*When all have gathered the priest says*

Priest:

Dear friends: the birth of a child is a joyous and serious occasion in the life of a family. It is also an occasion for rejoicing in the community. I ask you therefore to join [Name] and [Name] in giving thanks to God our heaven Father, the Lord of all life, for the gift of their son/daughter.

Priest:

Hear these words from St. Mark:

They brought children for Jesus to touch. The disciples scolded them, but when Jesus saw this he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; and do not try to stop them; for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you, who ever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it. And he put his arms around them and laid his hands upon them and blessed them. Mk. 10:13-16

Priest: Let us pray

God our Father,  
maker of all that is living,  
we praise you for the wonder and joy of creation.  
We thank you from our hearts for the life of this child  
for a safe delivery, and for the privilege of parenthood.  
Accept our thanks and praise through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Giving of a Name:

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<sup>1</sup> The Rev'd David Rathgen has produced a range of similar services for use in blessing and thanking God for the new life of infants. They can be found in "Doing the Right Thing" Self Published 1996. At the time of writing, David Rathgen was vicar of St. Mary's Camberwell in Melbourne.

Priest: [Name] and [Name], What name have you given this child?

the family, holding the child responds.

We have named you [NAME]

The family may wish to explain the choice of a name,

[Godparent] Says:

On behalf of the godparents, I give [Name] this gift as a symbol of our love

The Promises of the Parents:

[Father] Says:

As [Name's] father it is my promise to do all I can to provide for *her*, not only for *her* physical needs, but with time, and caring, and with support through difficult times. I promise not to choose favourites between my two children. Because I have been taught that love is the most important thing in life, and because I am glad to have the chance to share my love with my family, as so many can not, I promise never to turn my back on [Name], what ever *she* may do.

Priest: May God give you the strength to be true to your promises.

[Mother] Says:

From the inseparable bond between mother and daughter, a bond I felt before she was born: I promise to love and support Jade as long as I live. I promise to teach her to know, and choose the good. While my first role is to be Jade's mother, my hope is that I will be the kind of person whom [Name] can trust and confide in, and that we will grow to be friend. I promise to be a 'Good Enough Mother'.

Priest: May God give you the strength to be true to your promises.

[Mother] and [Father] say together.

We thank God for the gift of our daughter and ask for the strength to keep our promises.  
We ask you, our friends and family also to support us in the promises we have made.

The Promises of the Godparents:

(the God parents, holding [Name] say)

[The Godparents say]:

As Jade's God parents we promise to support Steve and Sandy in the bringing up of [Name].

Female godparent:

Dear [Name],  
on this day, I give these words to you "love" and "hope". I will try to support you in all the choices you make through out your life. When life gets you down I would like to be a shoulder to cry on or the ear that listens with no prejudice or condemnation. I promise I will always love you.

To [Name]:

As you travel along the pathway of life, may all your dreams come true and your woes fade quickly. Love Aunty [Name].

[The other god-parent couple]:

[Name] and [Name] have prepared promises which they have had inscribed on a plaque.

Giving it to [the parents], they make their promises as God parents.

Priest: May God give you the strength to be true to your promises.

#### Prayers and Response

Priest: [let us pray]

Priest: Bless the Lord all creation

All: Sing his praise and exalt him forever

Priest: Bless the Lord all men and women

All: Sing his praise and exalt him forever

Priest: Bless the Lord all young ones and children

All: Sing his praise and exalt him forever

Priest: Bless the Father, Son and Holy Spirit

All: Sing his praise and exalt him forever

[Parents] Say:

God our Creator, thank you for the waiting and the joy, thank you for new life and for parenthood, thank you for the gift of Jade, entrusted to our care. May we be patient and understanding, ready to guide and forgive, that in our love Jade may know your love. May she learn to love your world and the whole family of your children. Amen.

Priest:

Heavenly Father, whose blessed Son shared at Nazareth the life of an earthly home : bless the home of this child, and help all the family to live together in your love. Teach them to serve you and each other and make them always ready to show your love to those in need. For the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Father in heaven, bless these God parents that they may cherish this child. Make them wise and understanding to help Jade as she grows and surround her family with the warmth of love; Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Priest: The Lord + bless you and keep you,  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you,  
the Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you  
and give you peace,  
and the + blessing of God Almighty,  
the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be upon you and remain with you always. Amen.