

Review of biblical sources and the teaching of the church on baptism, in the absence of express legal provision

[9] Baptism in running water, or naturally collected water, is familiar to us from sacred scripture, including the baptism of Our Lord himself in the river Jordan, and various accounts in the Book of Acts. The New Testament's use of the Greek verb 'βαπτίζω', a post-classical intensification of 'βάπτω', suggests immersion: the latter word includes many senses of dipping in water, whereas the former definitely implies submersion. On the other hand Latin Fathers, including Tertullian in his treatise *debaptismo* (c 203) and *Lactantius* in the next century use the verb 'tingo' which carries a very much less specific meaning ranging from wetting or moistening up to and including immersion. References in various texts to 'going down into' water do not of course by themselves demonstrate immersion rather than standing in water while the officiant poured water over the candidate, as seen almost universally in artistic treatments of the baptism of Christ.

[10] Other early sources permit the use of water that is not running water, and permit baptism by affusion, that is to say by pouring water on the candidate's head without immersion. The *Didache*, (probably first century; certainly, no later than second century AD) clearly and specifically permits baptism to be administered (1) in running water; or (2) in still water; or (3) by pouring water over the head of the candidate three times (*Didache* 7). The clever Greek palindrome, νίψον ἀνομήματα, μὴ μόνον ὄψιν, attributed to Gregory of Nazianzus (c 329-390) means 'wash the sins, not just the face', and clearly indicates baptism not by immersion. It appears on a number of fonts.

[11] Although some major churches, in particular some Italian cathedrals, have arrangements for baptism by immersion, the provision of fonts in churches throughout the Middle Ages clearly shows wide practice of baptism by means other than immersion, certainly for adults: even for babies, most fonts are not calculated to allow the immersion of the candidate.

[12] The prescription of baptism by affusion as equivalent to baptism by immersion is often attributed to a canon of the Second Council of Ravenna (1134), which has been and is in some quarters the subject of heated controversy and vituperative assertion, undertaken apparently without any reference to the text, which is as follows:

Rubrica XI: De sacramento baptismi, & forma conferenda

Cum sacramentum baptismi omnium sacramentorum sit principium & fundamentum, & ideo propter summam necessitatem forma ejusdem, a Christo instituto[r]e tradita a nullo fidelium maxime debeat ignorari: ipsam formam, quae infra scriptis verbis completitur, recensemus: Petre, vel Maria, ego baptizo te in nomine Patris, & Filii, & Spiritus Sancti, sub trina aspersione, vel immersione, nihil interposito, vel detracto. Quam siquidem formam, sacros canones imitantes, mandamus & praecipimus de caetero ab omnibus baptizantibus irrefragabiliter observari:(Labbe & Cossart, *Concilia* (1671) vol xi (ii) cols 1584-5)

[13] The form there set out is the use of the words 'Peter, or Maria, I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' accompanied by triple aspersion (that is to say sprinkling of the candidate's head with water) or immersion. There is no suggestion that either aspersion or immersion is preferable or (in particular) that either is necessary, to the exclusion of the other. Although the words used after setting out the form are prescriptive ('we order and direct this form to be used by all those undertaking baptisms'), the provision in general is not in the language of the creation of a new rule or practice. On the contrary: in requiring this form 'we' are 'following the provisions of canon law'; and the form itself is merely being

restated (*recensemus*) in order to exclude other possible practices, especially inserting anything else, or leaving anything out (*'nihil interposito, vel detracto'*).

[14]. In short, it appears that the Ravenna provisions were not novel. They were merely a firm restatement of the then orthodox practice as the only means of baptism. It looks as though baptism by aspersion was established in the practice of the church at the time. Whether or not that is right, there is no doubt that baptism by aspersion or by affusion, without immersion, has at all subsequent times been regarded as canonical and effective by the whole of the Western Catholic church, including that reformed part of it comprising the Church of England.

[15]. This position appears to be confirmed by the Rubric in the Book of Common Prayer in the office for the 'Baptism of such as are of riper years' (ie old enough to be able to answer for themselves): 'Then shall the Priest take each Person to be baptized by the right hand, and placing him conveniently by the Font, according to his discretion, shall ask the Godfathers and Godmothers the Name, and then shall dip him in the water, or pour water upon him, saying [the words of baptism]'